

The (State Doctoral) Viva at the University of Solfege

By [T. Wignesan](#)

Maniam's incursions - I say incursions because they were really in the nature of violent thrusts (I know what you are thinking: "This guy is trying to give us something sexy!" Well, really I can't deny it, there is something of that, too.) - into the West were meant to shake the world up every time he got off the plane and laid foot at Heathrow Airport, but the truth is, he never quite made it: nothing quite like that happened. The world simply kept turning the way it did before the plane landed. If anything, I might say, there was a minor disturbance on the Richter Scale of emotions in the sleepy town of Kuala Lumpur, bogged down in the hill-locked valley where the sluggish muddy waters of the Gombak and the Klang rivers met, mixed their tin deposits and tumbled along with man-savouring crocodiles to the Straits of Malacca. Most, if not all, of his friends were quite happy to see him board the aircraft - some even took the trouble to verify this from the local boarding staff - and sit back stunned for the rest of the evening while watching the local TV networks, knowing fully well that the phone would not ring, at least, for the night, for he was on a plane somewhere over the Indian Ocean, and even if he wanted to call them from the pilot's cockpit, the Southwest Monsoon huffing and puffing through the Straits of Malacca would most probably render his voice inaudible, or at least, less intelligible than it usually was.

Murugan stretched his legs out on the cushioned rattan settee and deposited them on his wife's lap as soon as he was back from the airport which took him some two and a half hours on the road - so it was not that soon after Maniam left (he was probably over Madras by then) - and exclaimed: 'Give awful thanks to the Lord!' He belched, scratched his tummy, and cried: 'Thank all the cow-herding Lord Krishnas, he's gone!'

His demure little wife in a tightly bundled imitation jungle sari, both of whom/which he obtained from a dowry package-deal - together with a lot of little knick-knacks like the solid, at least, one pound twenty-four carat tali round her neck and the collection of coloured carved gold bangles that concealed her sleek, olivish forearms - looked puzzled, her sharp little hook of a nose and her sparkling black pupils fixed her husband's smelly feet and twitched.

'How mean this?' she said without looking up and added, 'My Lord?'

Murugan appeared perplexed. He stretched a hand out and swiped up a brandy glass half-full of Napoleon that Maniam had brought back from one of his trips to the West, his medial and ring finger caressing sensually the stem of the glass. He took a sip, then another, and murmured, 'Great!' He paused while he licked his lips, smacked them a couple of times, rolled his tongue from side to side and stroked the roof of his mouth. 'Great! Jes simply great! Mmmm, whad-'you expec' great guy: great brew!'

His wife was used to his comments, which she didn't understand anyway. So, she merely continued to contemplate her husband's toes which sooner or later she would be obliged to massage, a task she didn't mind so much if only she could find some way of stopping the stench from hitting and rooting in her gullet. Just to delay the daily chore a few minutes or even a few seconds, she said, 'Vai, Lor' Krishna?' Murugan, not deigning to look at her even once, spoke into his glass while he desperately tried to catch his image in its curvaceous bowl while holding it up and sideways.

'Of course, you nincompoop, Lord Krishna. If not for him, you thin' we 'ave planes now in the sky? Sure, you no hear of Ma'abrata!' The vehemence of his voice and jerk of his right leg that followed shook his wife up. She was now utterly terrified and lunged into the massage routine - bending, stretching and rubbing the toes and the feet while her earthly lord let out aaaahs and

oooohs. Then, all of a sudden, he said, pointing a minatory finger at the ceiling, 'Our Lord Krishna was the first to travel in a flying cart. Where d' you thin' the Americans got the idea? Huh?'

His wife kept very still, the stench from her husband's feet had now invaded her rosy insides, and she was summoning all her strength to fight back the onset of nausea and from being sick. Murugan continued, oblivious of his wife's suffering which was her private secret. She was pregnant for the first time, and it was her lord who put her in the family way, and she wanted nothing to spoil the joy she was determined to procure to the full with her expected baby. She was still thinking of her unborn baby when she was rudely taken aback by Murugan's body-quaking laughter. This gave her a few moment's respite, for Murugan was forced to sit up and then crouch from the self-induced mirth that had him in fits. When he had partially recovered, he cried out:

'I hope Maniam 'ave good sense when plane fly over Gulf. He mas shout, hah, haah...tear his shirt, beat his breast, hah, hah, haaah...walk up down aisle, shouting "Saddam-u-Akbar!" many many time. Otherwise plane take nose-dive in Gulf. Huh, huh, huh, huh! Poor Maniam, no make it to London!'

In the meantime, the local national airways jumbo jet, one of a fleet which bit voraciously, year after year, into the ageing federation's budget and widened irreconcilably its balance of payments deficit, was cruising over the Indian sub-continent, oblivious of the choking heat and swirling dust and deafening noise and stomach pains of its inhabitants: dinner was being served on board. The whirring din of the plane's engine and exhaust did not seem to bother any of the passengers since all one could hear was the clatter of metal trays on trolleys and the topmost voices in a sort of jumble of Malay, English, Tamil and several Chinese dialects. There was such a general release of energy before dinner was served that the only three European passengers had the siphoned music in ear-phones turned up to the maximum volume. Everybody was rather gaily and sedately dressed: grey, blue or dark suits of the Hector Power type, with flashy broad scabbard-based ties for the men and a brilliantly flowery equatorial display of cheong-sam(s), saris and sarong-kebaya(s) for the women. Most of the men were, however, busy craning their necks behind surreptitiously held open pages of The Times of London and the Straits Times, while from time to time rolling their eyeballs and fixing them on the hostesses in vain attempts to tear through their uniforms.

Maniam was no exception. He had quickly gone through for formality's sake three stengah(s) of Johnny Walker which he didn't much care for and was now pouring himself out a Tiger stout, to all appearances as good a replacement of engine oil as the original Guinness. He was careful enough to avoid food with sonorous post-prandial effects. So, he asked for toast, butter and cheese and the hostesses chucked in some leaves of lettuce as well in his tray. He had heard so much about his long-suffering friend's trials and tribulations at Solfège that he was not going to take any chances even for a doze-less night. A Malay government official acquaintance of his who was seated behind him and who was slurping his gadoh-gadoh with obvious relish, got up and tapped Maniam on the head.

'Vat, lah! Not hungry, ah?' Maniam caught a glimpse of him as the Malay withdrew his hand to run the back of his index finger several times under his broad nostrils. It was quite obvious

some nose-hair obstinately sticking out as though for air were irritating the dusky, obese gentleman in a metallic grey shiny suit. And then, before either of them could react, the gentleman let out a yelling-trumpeting sneeze, something like "Aiiiiiyaiah!" and brought his right hand to his mouth just too late. Maniam and two balding senior Chinese towkays who occupied the adjacent seats were well and truly showered. The Malay gentleman looked abashed, said he was sorry and stretched his right hand out in an attempt to pat Maniam probably on the shiny part of the head again when Maniam most deftly ducked it. He then turned to the imperturbable Chinese gentlemen to proffer his excuses, but they had by then begun to suavely dab their faces with paper serviettes and so paid no attention to the well-known government official's obviously embarrassing solicitations. All three victims though immediately terminated their wining and dining.

By the time the plane cruised over Saddam Hussein territory, nothing could have been farther away from Maniam's thoughts: he was watching a film set in the South Seas with Heddy Lamarr in a Hollywood version of the sarong, that is, without a kebaya, with the sarong hugging her vollschlang curvaceous hills and dales from the bust downwards. He was thinking over the eighty-two year old Sultan of Johore's proposal to make the voluptuous star a member of his harem, using as a bait a sarong of gold. Before long, the Alsace-Lorraine champagne he was sipping at, in a plastic cup, weighed heavily on his eyelids which he had a fighting time keeping raised over the headrests of the seats in front of him. The next morning, around five, and above the Mediterranean, he wasn't quite sure whether he saw the film through to the end or whether he dreamt the rest of what happened. Hedy Lamarr in *White Cargo* took such a hold of him that he didn't even bother to ogle the hostesses who were fussing around him with morning tea and coffee.

What was uppermost in his mind was the connecting flight he had to take for the Continent. This trip was special. He had made up his mind that, even if he wasn't able to get his longlost and childhood friend into the inner circle of his family, he was certainly, on this occasion, going to rope his pal's son under the same roof. He was turning things over in his mind. He had had several photos taken of his niece in various postures and dresses and saris and decors. To keep her complexion a secret and bright, all the shots were made indoors or in a studio with backdrops. That was his worry, he had to make her complexion out to be light-skinned, or else come up with a hefty sum for a dowry, something in the region of a million dollars, for after all his friend's only son was training as a specialist doctor at the Solfège. All the friends he left behind in the peninsula and the island of Singapore thought he was off again to the metropolis to rock London down to its haunches, and they were hoping he would come back again with the kind of stories of escapades and weakening weekends in the company of chorus girls to make their mouths water. Only this time, he knew, he had to make things up.

When Maniam landed at Roissy Airport and had gone through his baggage check and customs, Selvan was cruising on the A86 in the direction of N7 to Orly Airport. Selvan had timed his arrival to a half an hour after landing time. On the phone from Heathrow, Maniam was quite specific about times and flights. To the question, 'You're landing in Orly or Roissy?' Maniam didn't pay much attention. 'Yes,' he said, and thought little of it, since the last time he visited his friend, it was through Orly. Selvan didn't think either that Maniam had never heard of Roissy. To him it was Charles de Gaulle Airport. As he said later on to Selvan, 'Who would think of calling General Charles de Gaulle - Rwaiissy?'

No need to go into details about how long or how they got together after the muddle of the landing site. Maniam was well and truly sobered up - after the four-hour wait - lounging around

the arrival Porte 6, for he managed to catch several shut-eyes on one of the pumpy-seats with his luggage huddled around him, not to mention ample eyefuls of bird-watching, a favourite game of his while out in the West, which made many back home wonder if there was much truth to the stories of "incursions" he related on his return.

At first, Maniam refused to get into the seiscientos. For one thing, he said, 'for someone of my status this is surely *infra dig*.' Not that SEAT or FIAT were not good enough for him, just that when Selvan got into the driver's seat, the car sagged down to the left and nearly hit the macadam. Selvan managed to coax Maniam into getting in, on the pretext that if he did, he would help him right the car, though the chassis might be within inches of the road, and, at least, he could get home. Before they could do this, they had to get Maniam's two suitcases full of batik, pewter-ware, krise(s) - both of the wooden and pewter variety - sarong-kebaya(s), saris and cheong-sam(s), embroidery, Chinese paper lanterns, joss-sticks, oilskin decorative fans, silky baju(s) and a whole lot of Malaysian bric-a-brac into the backseat - all items that went down well in Maniam's campaign of incursions in Europe, but once the baggage settled into the rear, the exhaust pipe virtually flattened like a Hairy Pointer's tail from the fender. Maniam shook his head despondently and plopped into the concave-backed seat, his shoulders flapping over his frontal bulge, though, when he stood up, his clothes didn't give it away.

'Why don't ya buy yourself a decent car, you bugger?' he said and heaved a heavy sigh that filled the cabin with his one and a half day-old unevacuated bowel stench. Selvan quickly downed his door-window, and as that didn't make much of a difference, pleaded with Maniam to lower the side-window on his side. Maniam vehemently refused, saying he didn't want to catch a cold and be "out-of-action" when the time came.

'Why, tomorrow itself, while strolling down the Chomp-Pilisay, a lovely hot girl might smile at me, and what d' you want me to do: cough at her?'

Selvan shook his head and looked at his friend and wondered in quiet, if the dissertation he had been writing for some seven years had not made him particularly sensitive to smells of all sorts, especially the human alimentary canal kind.

'So, you're a doctor, now, eh?' Maniam tried to poke fun, just to change the subject. 'What does it feel like? Did ya get a promotion or an increase in salary?'

Selvan screwed his face up and looked at Maniam sideways. They suddenly burst out laughing. The car had to slow down on the entry to the autoroute A86. Huge fifty-ton lorries stood still like buildings on the bridge-crossing, and from time to time the buildings let out strange noises and nudged themselves into taking a few paces up the road to Paris, and other trucks quickly closed in to take their places on the crossing. There was a huge truck with a trailer on the gradient leading up to the autoroute with some ten cars double-decked on the trailer. They seemed simply to be deposited on the trailer, and the truck huffed and puffed for a whole minute before it could budge a few inches. Maniam was frightened out of his wits.

'Hey, try and get out of this mess. I'm not going to sit here and wait to be crushed.'

'There's nothing I can do, chum. The truck's in front of us and there are trucks behind us. Canons to the right of us, Canons to the left of us...and they volleyed and thundered...The only comfort is that if we get crushed by the falling cars in front of us, at least, it'll be by new cars without drivers, and with some luck, we might also get crushed from the back since the frontal

impact will drive us backup against the waiting trucks back there. Sort of a Charge of the Heavy Brigade!'

Maniam took a look at the line of traffic in the rear and fumed, and then he fixed his unamused gaze on his friend sitting plump in the driver's seat.

'What the hec, I come so far, just for this?'

'What d' you want, you want to be crushed by a jumbo jet?' Selvan raised his voice in mock anger. 'Any whichever way you get crushed, whether from the front, from the top or from underneath, it's the same: you get crushed, and when you get crushed, just imagine - what a mess of metal and bone you'll be!'

Maniam's face, taut as it was in the circumstances, could not quite hide the mirth mounting in within, but he was actually not too amused by the situation. Selvan quickly sensed his friend's discomfiture and tried to change the subject.

'So, you've been disgracing me all up and down the peninsula, eh?'

Maniam was taken aback and looked as though the erstwhile danger they had had to face had nothing whatsoever on the charge brought by Selvan.

'So, now, vat am I supposed to have done against you?'

'Nothing.'

'Vat nothing? Then why d'ya say I disgraced you?'

'Nothing much, that is!'

'So, then, I disgraced you awright?'

'Of course you did,' came the rapid retort. Maniam was quite clearly stung to the quick. Selvan looked Maniam full in the face and said, 'So, you've been telling everybody I'm a Ph.D.?'

'Of course, I have.' They looked at each other, but Selvan looked daggers at his friend whose leg he was determined to pull to the full.

'That's precisely it, man.'

'Vat d'yamean, that's precisely it. You mean because I said you are a doctor now of the Solfège, I disgraced you?'

'Of course you have.'

'Okay, okay, next time, I'll say to everybody, "No, Selvan's not a Ph.D.", er....er... what shall I say, "He's a quack doctor."' Selvan had a good laugh watching his friend getting all heated up over nothing while he completely regained his spirits. The traffic jam didn't seem to bother him any more.

'The thing is, you under-developed colonials can't think higher than a Ph.D. I'm not a Ph.D., I'm a State Dictator of arts and sciences. You know what that means? Of course you don't. You know what a D.Sc. or D.Litt. is?'

'You mean, you could be asked to take over the State in a time of need?'

'Quite frankly, I think you're not really daft after all they say of you.'

'Who? Whatdya mean?'. Maniam's usually mirthful eyes popped while he flashed his two sets of pearly teeth and sucked in his breath. 'In any case, that's different. A D.Litt or D.Sc. is conferred, but you told me you had a viva, an...an... exam.'

'Yeah, of course, I had a viva, that's why it's so different. It's not conferred. There are five kinds of doctorates here. What d' you think? My doctoral degree is called: Dictateur-of-arts and sciences.'

'Vat's that?'

'It's like a D.Litt. and D.Sc. put together. It says so: dictator of letters and sciences.'

'You must be kidding. So, you're a Dictator?'

'Why should I kid you. I simply dict and all the guys and dolls take down what I dict. That's what one becomes over here, once one has a Dictateur doctorate of the Solfège. We merely have to open our mouths and the entire academe will shut up. So, I just don't want you to go around disgracing me, calling me a Ph.D.'

'Soooooh, that's vatya mean, disgracing you!' They both had a good laugh and felt warm and pleased with each other.

The traffic on the highway seemed to be nudging along, but the line of trucks and cars, headed by the car-transport double-decker trailer truck in which the two old pals from back East were trapped, just could not make the gradient into the highway entry. Try and try as it strove, the trailer jerked and rattled, and the stacked new cars wobbled and grated. There was no way the line of traffic could back down into the nationale road as the traffic down there was fluid. The seiscientos was well and truly sandwiched between the trailer and another twenty or so tonner. There was nothing Selvan and Maniam could do but wait it out. Selvan got out to question the truck driver ahead and came back with the reassuring news that the traffic police were on the way. The truck's radiophone was on all the time.

Maniam shook his head despondently, and said, 'Unless they come by helicopter, I don't see how they are going to get here before tomorrow.' He seemed resigned to his fate now, even if it meant being buried under tons of gleaming metal. 'And even then, I don't see how they are going to get us out of this mess.' He looked up and down the gradient, then at the traffic choc-a-bloc on the highway up above and the free flowing traffic down on the nationale road. Again, he shook his head and slumped into his seat, saying, 'God, I've got to piss! Can't hold it much longer.' Selvan was amused at the situation.

'If you want to piss so badly, make it quick, before the cops arrive and drag you away for indecent exposure or attentat à la pudeur.'

'You thin' I'm going to give a damn for your cops or what ya call it: atat ai lah pyut her! Here, I've a call of Nature and I'm going to relieve myself come vatt may!'

'Hold it, chum! You're not going to wet my seat, I hope?'

'In that case, I'm going to do a Jason!'

'What's that?'

'You know the law student at Malaya Hall, he used to piss in his milk bottles.'

'Ah, that bugger, I remember him. What's he doing these days?'

'Couldn't care vatt he's been doing, jes want to borrow his technique for the moment.'

'Hey, hey, hold it. First thing, don't have a bottle in the car, much less a milk bottle of the London kind with a wide mouth...'

'Vattabout a tin or can or something: can't hold on much longer...'

'Why don'tya jes open the door and let it go? Only make sure you don't backfire at the same time...' Maniam burst out laughing, opened the door and proceeded to do just that, while proclaiming: 'As our brothers, the Bhais, say, "Wherever you go, let the air be free!"'

Selvan gave Maniam a shove, and still laughing, Maniam took off in a hurry and watered the trailer in front of them for a full five minutes.

'Hey, Mani, watch out! the car's coming loose!' Maniam looked about him and up above and continued unbothered. Selvan gave a blast of the horn, and Maniam startled, just couldn't continue. As if that was a cue, all the cars and trucks on the entrance-slope hooted and blasted

their horns in unison for a full ten minutes while Maniam made his way back, looking like the guilty child who swallowed in a hurry the sweetmeats reserved for the visiting suitor family for the hand of his sister, though obviously feeling most relieved.

'There's nothing like a slosh when you need it, man. Nothing, I say. Not even a poke!'

'So, you enjoyed it. Shame on you, a big shot back home, and here you're soiling foreign ground,' teased Selvan.

'Couldn't care less. At least, I didn't have to do it on the highway.'

Despite his friend's new-found state of mind, Selvan rightly suspected that Maniam's nerves were on edge, not least as a consequence of the nearly thirty-hour jet lag. He felt he had to do something about it, keep his friend amused or just let him go to sleep, but as he suspected, sleep was the last thing on his mind: the protein-rich and high calorie airfood served just when he felt like sleeping and the stengah(s) he invariably downed to aid his digestion, as he put it, and all the bare-thighed girls he had feasted his eyes upon - made him randy and therefore restless. The traffic hold-up on the gradient-entry into the autoroute appeared to defy any solution, especially since there was some sort of blockage - accident or something - on the nationale route below, and the rush-hour homebound traffic just piled up without warning. That was exactly the motorbike-police brigade's opinion. They had arrived in the meantime, two pairs of them in their black leather suits held together by white bands and belts. They sized up the situation, checked the moorings of the trailer and assured Selvan that they didn't envisage a pile-up of the new cars being shipped on his seiscientos, but then, they said, for safety's sake he might think of standing quite apart when the time comes for the truck and trailer to attempt to negotiate the sharp curve up to the entrance over the bridge.

'Much comfort telling us that.'

'Vatt, vatt, vatt did'e say?'

'He says it'd be better to stand aside, away from the trailer, when the truck pulls higher up.'

'Vat the hec! I told ya...So I was right: a pile up! Let's scam outa here.'

They both got out and stretched their legs. Maniam stretched his entire body, thrusting his torso in front of him, his arms in a wide curve twisting behind his body, and yawned vociferously. The passengers in a white Peugeot 504 behind the truck to their rear eyed Maniam's antics. Maniam fixed his eyes on the blonde seated next to the driver and said: 'God, if I had her now, she'll leave that guy for good or simply go wild and mad.'

'There's no harm in believing in your superhuman-ness.'

'Look! She's looking at me non-stop. Maybe, maybe she saw my dick...'

'Auh, go on you hairy ape! She's looking at me.'

They shoved each other playfully and then leaned on the seiscientos, their arms splayed on the cabin-roof. Above the din of revving engines, Maniam screwed his eyes on the near-clear sky, raised his voice a trifle higher and asked: 'Vat was the subject of your... your...thes...er...dissertation?'

'I thought you'd come round to that. What good will it do you to torture your brain. Why don't you let things well alone.'

'Auh, come on, man. Vat shit you'a giving' me! You think I'm that daft?' He raised his index finger to his right temple and made a circular motion with it. Selvan looked at him and smiled. His eyes gleamed and just for a while, his canines showed through.

'Okay, okay, you asked for it. Mine's a Dictateur d'Etat...'

'Vatt's that?'

'I explained all that to you before.'

'No, you didn't. This sounds like a Kuudeitat!'

'You're absolutely right. In my case, it was a coup d'Etat all right!'

'Don't tell me you became president of the republic, man?'

'No, I forgot to ask for it, so busy I was laying some bitches just after...' They both burst out and thumped the roof of the seiscientos with their fists for good measure.

Despite the clear skies, the air was nippy and a slight wind had picked up from the Versailles end of the nationale 186. The western horizon darkened: a huge mass of leaden clouds advanced steadily. Maniam rubbed his shoulders, his arms crossing close in front, and the two old friends got into their seats, and Maniam turned the car radio on. Selvan yelled at the FM music. Maniam retorted.

'Not that I don't like that sound. I really do, I tellya, but who can stand the yelling from the disc jockeys. My God, you listen to, say, Dire Straits, and then these dopes come on shouting their heads off and hollerin' vatt? and all you listened to is ruined. You feel bad, you wanna throttle the buggers, but you know they got good excuse. They say they work to orders or something like thaata.'

'Hey, what's this! Those are my words. Exactly what I said the last time you were down here.'

'How right yare! At least, once in your life you think great!'

'Eh, come on, what kind of dig is that?' He looked down at his friend and smirked.

'Honestly, I'm not kidding. You know who complained about the disc jockeys' yelling as well?'

'No, you tell me. Who?'

'Claude Levi-Strauss.'

'Who's thaata?'

'A very famous professor and anthropologist.'

'Thaata's vat I've been hoping would sink into your thick skull: only great minds can spot the likes!' Maniam laughed out so loud, he had to stop himself by slapping on the panel-board.

'Hey, what d' you think you're doing? Go easy on the poor old lady, man, ' cried Selvan in between guffaws.

Maniam's eyes were watering from, apparently, the intensity with which his facial muscles squeezed his eyeballs. He whipped out his handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes, face and neck. When he had finished, he whipped it open once and then carefully proceeded to fold it, before putting it back in his trouser pocket. In the meantime, Selvan stuck his head out to avoid the poustillon from the handkerchief, but it was too late.

'What the hell! Can't you keep your germs to yourself!'

'Don't worry, I didn't blow my nose with it. Vat's the matter with you? Why areya so finicky? Just think, in the Tube or the bus, how many times a day you get sprayed for free.'

'That's precisely it: that's why I drive.'

'O, come on, man, when you're riding on a pee, d'ya realise what sort of germ-stew in which you're wallowing?'

'That's different, old boy. There you do it for pleasure. Here what's the joy? Am I – oh! God forbid - into?'

They giggled for a while, and Maniam said: 'Vat happened to the...to the...to the dissertation? Spill the beans, man.'

'Oh, that, I quite forgot, my thesis was based on the home country. I know what you're thinking. This guy comes so far and yet doesn't get away from the old place. So, don't jump. I simply had no choice. I wanted to do a job on some aesthetic theory, you know a comparative study and all that, and this great big savant - you know, I then got the feeling he was some bishop of sorts - came down on me with an ultimatum: either I do my dissertation on the old country - he said he knew of my work - and that if I wanted a stipend of sorts, I'd have to do just that.'

'So, you agreed?'

'Of course, I agreed.'

'So, at least, once in your life you agreed to toe the line.'

'That's what you think. I agreed because of the money, but I must have made some mental note about doing what I wanted.'

'Did you?'

'Not really.'

'So, vat the hec!'

'I just gave them their money's worth. And that was all.'

'I don't understand that kind of talk. Anyway, vat was your subject, I mean, vat was the title?'

'A Comparative Study of Orientals' Officially National Ways and Postures of Farting.'

There was silence, a holy silence of cathedrals in the seiscientos. Maniam looked at his old-time friend sideways and wondered if there wasn't a catch somewhere in his declaration. None. He thought, as usual, Selvan was up to twisting his leg.

'You know, the old man must have got the idea from a French review about pétomanes in Japan, published by a local researcher into eastern folklore. Since the Middle Ages, there've been clubs and schools of farting...' Maniam couldn't hold himself back and burst out. Selvan continued: 'Apparently, the most famous farters come from a place called Kamishimozeki Kitayama, and they have been farting artfully right down to the exploding of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'

'The name itself sounds like a fart. Anyway, why did they stop after the bomb?' asked Maniam, his sense of innate curiosity taking hold of his obviously irrepressible mirth.

'Oh, I think none of the inhabitants must have thought it in good taste to fart after that.'

'Oh!'

'Apparently, since then, the streets of Japan are odourless. I'm wondering what they did with the clubs and what they are teaching in those schools where properly-musical and elegant farting was taught by professionals of the art. I wonder what these guys did to earn a living after that.'

'You must be kidding, Selva?' said Maniam but quickly checked himself, for he could easily see his friend was in earnest.

'You know, what this French anthropo-linguist said in his write-up? He said: "The fart, it is human warmth, (an expression of) trust with regard to the next man, an initiation towards fundamental contact...the prelude to friendly and amorous relations. In Chinese and Mongol folklore, to fart in front of somebody is to invite him or her to make love to you." So, now you know what to do if your charms don't wreak havoc with a French or Japanese girl. Just think, in English or Tamil, d' you have such a word as pétomane? Well, I know you're dying to learn a new French word, it means, an aficionado or fan of farting, like, say, a bamboo fan for sharing farting amongst guests.'

'Auh, come off it, man, d'ya really want me to swallow all that!'

'Don't swallow it, that's unrefined. Smell it and be elevated. As the erudite Frenchman says: "Of all musical instruments, the fart is king! It is better than the shamisen or koto: it has odour!" Only don't do anything - right here though.'

'To tell you the truth... I know you're probably trying to be serious... I jes can't believe all this crap.'

'Believe it or not, the Japanese made an art of it. There are rules and methods of farting, mostly melodic fashions. For instance, when you meet a friend and instead of wishing him or her the top of the morning, you are supposed to let out an elegant fart, a distinguished fart, neither too high nor too low. And if you're not able to respond instantly, you're required by the rules and regulations of the amateur and professional clubs to present yourself at the house of the offended party that same evening in order to emit a very carefully executed fart as an apology.'

Maniam was in stitches, but his curiosity got the better of him. He had temporarily quite forgotten the reason for his visit, that is, to arrange, if possible, a marriage between one of his nieces and Selvan's son.

'Well, that! As I was telling you I didn't want to do it, but the promise of a stipend to keep me going was enough of an incentive. As you know, I never had such an opportunity before. So, I plunged into it, but I had first to get my books and documents from overseas, from the old country and the Empire's metropolis. And you know what? I couldn't even get through to the people with whom I left my books and things. Finally, through the professor's friend in London, I got in touch with my brother...'

'Vat's all this got to do with your doctorate? I mean, your degree?'

'You want to hear what happened or what?'

'Jes asking, man. Don't get all heated up.'

'Anyway, I managed to get some of the books, but this savant who recommended me for the stipend wrote to the authorities saying I was lying about not getting on with my research and wanted me thrown out. He said I lied to him about knowing Chinese styles of farting as well.'

'Vell, didya?'

'No, damn hell, no. I said I had a smattering knowledge of what they do...'

'Vat, the bigshot first recommends you and then damns you in the same breath.'

'That's right. What kind of hell I got into should become clear to you, especially during the time - some fourteen years before the viva came to pass.'

'That's probably because with all the hot curries you eat your farts stung the man up the wrong way, uh?'

'You know, you got brains. I never thought of that. He probably felt I needed to be put in my place since the day he had read *The Tempest*.'

'Is that one of your works?'

'I wish it were. It's rumoured that it was written by the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. It appears that there is another guy shaking his spear at the Earl in lieu of a quill.'

'Now, vat's tha' supposed to mean?'

'Anyway, this great big know-all suddenly thought that like Caliban, the black slave, in the play, I had to be purged of - according to him and he can only always be right for he's the boss - my duplicitous ways. This is the eternal colonial conundrum, I say. So, he never failed to secretly write long letters to my employers about how great a guy he was in helping a scoundrel like me.'

'And did he?'

'Of course, he did. I couldn't have dreamed of the post without his recommendation.'

'Then, vattaa you complaining about? You get your money at the end of the month, no?'

'That's not the point. You don't help someone and then step on him.'

'So, vaat? Vattedyou care where you get your cash! As if you need an excuse for getting the white man to pay you. After all the humiliation they put you through, the least they can do is to pay you. Anyway, you pay them back with work, no?'

'Yeah, but...'

'Vat but? You're shy of getting a degree on top of that? Vaat are degrees? Degrees don't mean nothing. Okay, all this back-firing apart, you told me once it takes a long time to get the highest degree over here, no?'

'True, true, but I finished it all in half the time, that is, in seven years, despite all the private imbroglio I was contorted in inextricably. But then, before I could finish it, this savant who had in the meantime, it seems, changed his mind partially about me, was taken in a stroke during one of his habitual anger storms by an ambulance into permanent retirement, and I was left flat without any one to accept my thesis for the viva. But one dismal day, in an institute where I was teaching, the head of department who didn't like the savant who was my first dissertation director, offered – actually offered – to accept my work for the viva. I didn't quite understand the game. He had absolutely no knowledge of my work, much less of the subject nor of the languages in which I had to delve to do my research, and yet, he wanted to take over as the director, and he really did. Can you imagine a revered university awarding its highest degree through a professor who has absolutely no clue of what the candidate has done.'

'Jesus Christ! You're telling me your degree was awarded on the strength of ignorance on the part of your directors?'

'Don't jump the gun, chum. What I'm trying to tell you is that I hadn't yet discovered the practice over here. By and large, dissertation candidates get accepted provided there is something in it for the directors.'

'Vat's that supposed to mean?'

'Hold on, I was coming to that. What I mean is that your thesis director who must be a State Dictator himself and/or professor need not have anything to do with your dissertation nor need understand or have the capacity to undertake similar research. It is enough that he is a professor or associate prof. and he writes a report praising it. For the viva in a State dictatorship candidature, three favourable reports are required, and a minimum of five State dictators must constitute the jury. In my case, since my dissertation was ready, except for some language polishing – there again somebody makes money since you have to give your work to some idiot to correct – I got the jury members together myself.'

'Vat d' ya mean got the members together by yourself?'

'Good question. I have to suggest or call up and get their agreement to their willingness to be members of the jury, simply because the thesis director didn't know who was who in the field.'

'Then, I'm right, your degree was awarded by at least some who knew nothing about your subject.'

'In actual fact, yes, but then by getting one or two who know something about some part of your subject on to the jury, at least you can lessen the damage and make it look like fair play.'

'Ha, ha ha haaah! So, after all, you're not really a...what you call it, a dictator of the State?'

'Yes and no. No, because even if the rapporteurs who write reports do it for their own benefit – not all of course – there is nothing in the procedure to deny that your dissertation was not of the highest quality. The proof of the pudding is in the smelling, if you will. The ministry of education publishes it at its own expense and the informed public can judge for themselves.'

'Vat d' ya mean "for their own benefit"? Don't the profs get a salary or something? I mean, aren't they paid by the Ministry of Education? '

'Ah, that, that's what I was coming to. That's not the point, however. Of course they get paid. They get a salary fitting their status. I mean a big enough wad of notes to keep them in the upper brackets of the social strata.'

'I don't get this. If they get big pay, then they must not complain or look for "benefits" coming their way from the students.'

'You know, you're not daft after all. You make some sound statements. But I wonder what you'll do if you had a top teaching post in the Solfège.'

Maniam rolled his eyes and then cleared his throat raucously.

'Looks like your stay out in the West has knocked some sense into your head.'

'You're right. Enough sense to make out what's wrong with the kind of education being dished out. What you don't know is that a professor out here need not do more than two hours of teaching a week, that is, keep a doctoral and master's seminar going on his specialty. The courses begin some time in December and end in May; only trouble is between mid-December and mid-May there are more holidays than seminars to give.'

'Ya joking, pal. You mean these profs get a salary for not giving the course?'

'It'd look like that. There are the two-week Christmas holidays, then the February ... what do they call that: three-week, I suppose, Ski-ing holidays, then the three-week Easter holidays in April, and then the chain of Labour Day, Pentecost, Ascension and so forth May vacations. Some even manage to bluff their way through.'

'How's that?'

'These professorial seminars are not teaching seminars. You learn nothing from them. As a post-graduate student, you're supposed to read papers...'

'HAAAhh...hahahha! You mean, students read newspapers in class?'

'No, you dumb fool. Students are supposed to write academic essays on various topics that the profs require as an exercise, and they read those papers aloud to the class.'

'You mean, the students actually do the teaching, and vat does the prof do?'

'He listens,' said Selvan and held his silence, for Maniam was buckled over in a kind of paroxysm, and when he straightened up, his face appeared puffed up and tears wet his cheeks.

'So...so...ek...ek...ek...Yai am right. The teacher doesn't teach, the students do?'

'You're getting the point, though being retarded as you are, it's taking some time to sink.'

'Now I see vat yea mean by bluffing their way through.'

'I was coming to that. This one guy, head of department at that, ran a seminar for years, in fact, a lifetime, on one book published in some foreign country. His students hailed mainly from some ex-colonial countries. He timed it in such a way that every student had to write a paper on the topic of each chapter without knowing of course that there was such a book on folk lore. The book was in English, and the doctoral students read only in French.'

'Good God, you mean no one found him out?'

'How could they? for the students would disappear after they receive their diplomas, and the next batch of scholarship students would turn up and the academic musical chairs would start up again. The blacks were not interested in the teaching either. All they wanted was the Solfège seal on their diplomas. So they put up with the prof's hidden-book comments after every paper was read and swallowed it all dutifully. Some thought of course he was great.'

'Look, back in our universities, I can assure ya, they do better work than this...this...bluff stuff. And to think that our boys and girls are crying out for more degrees from foreign places.'

‘Of course not all are like that. There are some great teachers too, but like everywhere else they are rare.’

‘Vat about your own prof.? Vas he any good?’

‘Big reputation, tens of books, big head and all that but his seminar wasn’t any the better. Me and some of the students I knew came away knowing absolutely nothing of the specialty we were supposed to be studying.’

‘Crikey! Vat? Bigshot and nothing to teach?’

‘No, just that the system made it all a farce. We had each to listen to the other papers on topics that had nothing to do with our own research. So we dozed through the course. Actually, we pretended to be all ears...’

‘You mean, you learnt nothing for a year?’

‘That’s it, except for the paper I had to produce and the savant said he was writing a book on the topic.’

‘So yaim right, you do teach the profs.?’

‘Oh, comeon, who cares who teaches. The only thing that matters is the signature on the piece of paper which permits you to move on to the viva. If you are black or brown or yellow in a white world, what does it matter how you make it to be safe up there?’

Maniam was speechless for a while. Things were happening to him. He was not quite sure, it appeared, if his friend was in earnest about it all.

‘Anyway, if you think I was wasting my time, you got it all wrong. I used to position myself always behind some cute girlie and spent the rest of the two-hours taking her apart layer by layer.’

‘Crikey! I thought...I bet you’d come up with a stunt like that.’

‘Why shouldn’t I? What would you do if you were in there? Build bridges in your mind over dry beds, I suppose? At least with me, that’s the kind of exercise which improves my imagination by leaps and bounds.’

‘Do all teachers don’t teach?’

‘How should I know? I didn’t do a thesis on the subject. I suppose, there are teachers who teach, but like one of them I knew of, he got into real hot soup because of that.’

‘You mean, he taught his students and because of that he got into trouble?’

‘Right on, man. This bunch of spoilt Africans and Asians actually signed a petition of lies about the teacher’s course, maligned and defamed him on paper, and got him chucked out. And his colleagues who don’t believe in teaching just ganged up and voted him out of the faculty itself.’

‘Look, I donno vat to believe any more, even if what you say fits into the picture jes right. Just go on with the tale. No music. No bed. No lav. An’ looks like these blokes in front aren’t going to budge that truck anyway. So I may as well resign myself to your tales.’

‘What d’you mean: tales? Does all this sound like a fib?’

‘Okay, okay, don’t get all hounded up. Just go on; otherwise I’ll fall off to sleep right here.’

Selvan gave his pal a sidelong searching look and continued.

‘If your thesis or dissertation is accepted for a viva, it means that you’re going to get your degree: only the question of marks is to be settled: whether you get a distinction, a credit or a pass. Everything takes place in the intervening period. The viva gets pushed - after several promises for an early date - to as far away as possible. Time to tear your dissertation to pieces. Each member who has a right to an unpublished copy falls over himself to publish whatever he wants of your work.’

'You're joking, of course.'

'Of course I am. That's why they put the date of your viva off so often or take their own time to write their reports. In my case, I had to wait two years first, enough time for articles to appear in learned journals or teaching courses to be planned with the new material from my dissertation.'

'So, vaat you're trying to tell me is that these guys stole your stuff.'

'I don't know. Maybe not and then again, maybe not everything. I'm not in a position to go into details. That would take too long. Let me just point one story out to illustrate the sort of stuff that takes place generally. In my dissertation, given the rôle of odoriferous sonority as a cardinal characteristic of my subject, I composed a symphony for elegant farting with mainly oboes in the lead, in the andante mode mainly, and added it as an appendix to the dissertation. You know, in particular, given the five tones of Mandarin and the nine tones of Cantonese back home, I thought a symphony of Mandarino-Cantonese farting of the huao-chiao might be highly appreciated by the Europeans.'

Maniam's face was a contorted mess as he tried in vain to hold back his mirth and watering eyes and nose. Selvan, unbothered, continued. 'The first to appreciate it was the thesis-director, and some said the co-director as well. He kept writing me letters to say how he wished I had developed this aspect of my research, especially the extremely elegant turn of tones of one Chinese tri-lingual farter - you know the fella, lah, the chap who used to hang around Batu Lane and Blakan Mati at all sorts of hours?'

'Oh him, I know who you mean. vaat's his name? Nam or Lam Pooi. That's it, is it not?'

'Yaah, that's the guy alright. Stop cutting in so often. Let me concentrate and get on with the story. So, I got suspicious. What the devil he wants me to expand on the most elegant of the farters for? Then, one day it happened. I asked the director about the viva date, and you know what he said? He said: "Your handling of the Nam Pooi episode in the symphony does not come out properly. I have decided to add a couple of trumpets to the orchestration, and I am publishing it this summer." I couldn't believe my ears. All that day, I fumed. Just think, I was the guy who discovered this very elegant farter and interpreted his work in several articles, especially his very complex five-plus-nine tone farting, and here comes this turd who wants to appropriate it all by adding a couple of trumpets - which radically alters the finesse of the sounds - to the score. You know I couldn't protest. If I did, he would just put off the viva indefinitely. So, I thought of the next best thing. Why not copyright my dissertation and catch the bugger red-handed when he publishes. So, I put a bound version of my symphony in the dépôt légal, and what d' you think happens? The mss just disappeared. I was scratching my skull day and night trying to figure out how it could have disappeared when the bastard blew it all. He and his cohorts managed to withdrew the three favourable reports, and put in their place two most unfavourable reports, which meant that if I went in for the viva some day, I would become the first candidate to be asked to redo my dissertation, or rather I'd be the first candidate who'd not be called to the viva after the viva date got published in the notice-boards all over campuses in town.'

Just then, their attention was diverted. The police were busy on the autoroute. They stopped the traffic up to the point where the truck and trailer was to enter it and were giving directions to the driver to make a last ditch effort. Maniam jumped out of the seiscientos and retreated up the

slope away from harm's way. Selvan joined him. The light was getting dimmer; it drizzled intermittently.

'I better get my luggage out,' urged Maniam. 'I don't give a damn if your car gets smashed up, but my luggage's worth more.'

'As you please, but why don't you wait and see.'

Just as they were contemplating taking Maniam's luggage out, the truck surged a couple of metres, and the trailer rattled and shook itself volubly, and the front part of it got stuck in the fresh soil of the slope into which the road was cut. Part of the truck was now jutting into the autoroute and caused the traffic to be re-routed. At least, one file of traffic had to be held up while the others passed on. And this line of traffic took to protesting by blowing their horns in a melee of blasts. Then, the police stopped the traffic on the other two lanes, just to allow the irate first lane drivers to pass by the truck sticking its nose into the highway. Even as this new line of traffic emerged from the side of the truck, the drivers both men and women and young girls, too, were gesticulating and talking at the same time, both at the policemen and other waiting drivers, who then took it upon themselves to give the famous salutation: either a finger or the whole forearm pointed at the sky as though the chief offender resided in the clouds, which at that moment was of a most threatening hue, and as though to answer their insults, hailstones all of a sudden pelted down on them all. And as always, once it started to pour, traffic merely multiplied on earth. Maniam started shouting at the drivers, and Selvan had some difficulty getting him back into the car.

'These whites I don't know what gets into them once they have a wheel in front of them!'

'Don't forget, it was a huge wheel which steered Vasco de Gama and Columbus to our worlds and to our presence in growing numbers over here.'

'Damn, I wonder what a different story it would have all been. Only if...'

'That's right, only if...but that's all in the past. So, we still need their diplomas, and without a diploma from a Western university, you'd merely have to grab at the crumbs back home. Nobody would even think you could think out there. A degree, a diploma from the West does all the thinking for you back in the East.'

'How right you are, brother! So, let's hear about yours without which you'd go nuts over here, too. Anyway, vaat didya have to say so good that made them all want to give you a degree after all? In any case, how didya manage to steer clear of this thesis-director who wanted your symphony?'

'Simple enough, I had to go looking for another director willing to put up my dissertation for a viva. Many just turned me down saying they had too much on their hands. Others wanted me to rewrite the whole thing. Yet others would accept it only - without reading it - for one of the lowest degrees, and so on and on. One turd of a type actually took it and said he would first have to read it. After nearly two years, he still hadn't read it, but he was running a seminar based on material from my dissertation.'

'How long did all this take?'

'Some five years mainly because the members of the jury just refused to hand back the copies I made for them - over a thousand pages each. So, finally, when I found one prof. willing to accept my thesis for a viva in another faculty, I had to prepare further copies, all in all some dozen copies. And that too because he was himself some sort of an outcast and virtually past his retirement, but when he had heard the story of my troubles to get the necessary degree, he stuck his neck out for me. This I must say for him: he had guts. I had, of course, again to get the members together. Not that he couldn't do it himself, but that he was getting on in age, and I

didn't mind. The main reason I think why he plunked for me was that he was quite taken up with my theory. You know, I put out a theory?"

'No, I didn't. What theory? You mean, you have a theory to your name?'

'No, I have my name to a theory.' Selvan looked up the road and saw there was going to be a long wait yet for the trailer to disappear in front of them. Apparently, the police had called for a crane to unload the trailer; that's what the people from waiting cars who were walking up and down the entry-drive were saying. Selvan decided to take his time. Maniam had already pulled out of his hand-luggage some chocolate-biscuits and a couple of cans of grapefruit juice. Reinforced and his tongue well-oiled, Selvan was in no hurry, but Maniam wanted to get to the bottom of the story of his friend's skirmishes within academe which began some thirty years earlier when they both left school, armed with Cambridge Senior School Certificates.

'Look, Mani, I don't want to bore you with details. If you're really interested in my theory, you could either buy my thesis in three volumes, or just go to the national library and read it. Don't go to the Solfège library. There the second director bugger arranged to deposit my bibliography volume and have it named as my dissertation.'

'You mean anyone checking on your dissertation at the Solfège library will think you were awarded the degree of State dictator or on the strength of a small volume of bibliography?'

'You're catching on fast, man. In fact, I'm wondering if you wouldn't do well over here.'

'Vattd'ya mean by that?'

'Nothing, man, just wondering.'

'As a matter of fact, I'm wondering if you're not pulling a fast one on me...'

'If that's what you think, I'll not bother to go on with the story.' Maniam looked at his friend and seemed to wonder anew.

'Okay, okay, go on. Only tell me how the viva went.'

'To do that, I'll have to give you an idea of my theory.' They looked at each other, and they appeared in no great hurry to go anywhere, for the traffic muddle in front of them looked every inch of being a gigantic traffic muddle. Maniam knew there was no way whatsoever a crane was going to get there with all the traffic held up both on the national road and the highway. 'My theory is simple, or rather let me give you a simplified version of my theory. My contention was that a farter was essentially a clean or pure thinker compared to non-farters who kept it all bottled up in their entrails. A farter - like the Japanese farting club members - strove to clear the air that was otherwise trapped in himself.'

'Ugh! Come on, mate, you're not trying to tell me they gave you a dictatorship for that?'

'Mind you, they have given much more: doctorates, professorships and gold medals, for much less. Anyway, as I said, I'm simplifying things. Of course, I discoursed on the origins of farts, the whole question of genesis, the various kinds of farts, the noxious and the obnoxious types, entire classification tables were drawn up on the musical scales both eastern and western, human, animal and reptile farts, communicative and stealthy farts, farting for the sake of farting compared to farting as a necessity, conscious and unconscious farts, farting while being occupied or in sleep, a thorough analysis of all kinds of food and spices classed according to their fart-prone value, farting before, during and after eating, sleeping, laying, running or sitting, and so forth. I even gave a graphic sub-particle picture of the course farts took: from the source to nostrils, analysed the receptor psychology of farts, that is, why some people marry people who are compulsive farters, how are farts appreciated, and this, you wouldn't believe, I even tried to connect farting to colours through a statistical analysis of climatic conditions during which farts tended to proliferate, and so forth and so forth. In short, all the trappings of a scientific inquiry

into farting, which makes my dissertation not only an academic exercise in originality, but a compendium of farting for our region of the globe.'

'I hope you didn't put me in your dissertation.'

'No, no, no no! No fear of that. I didn't put you down by name, only in some parts of my symphony, especially in the short pungent allegro vivissimo movement, some of your talents are to be noted in the trombone and bassoon section - as far as I can remember.'

'Ta very much, chum. Then, I'm sure your symphony must be first rate, though I might say I have a liking for the shorter, more rambunctious concertos. Has it been performed already?'

'What? You mean, my symphony? I was actually coming to that, but just think of the costs involved. First and foremost, you have to get together a troupe from back home and coach them in musical notations. Some may not need any instruction being born farters. Then again, back home - again according to my sub-theory of food and farting - there'd not be much difficulty procuring Chinese, Indian and Malay cuisines. Imagine bringing a troupe of some seventy chorus members over by plane and feeding them before and after every public performance - some of them might simply break wind inopportunely and blame it all on the cold weather, so you can see the question of performance is no simple matter.'

'There I'll agree with you. I don't know why the quick changing weather in Europe seems to have a particular effect on the bowels.'

'My post-doctoral research is primarily concerned with this problem. In fact, with the creation of Europe, I'm hoping for a huge grant to undertake this project in all seriousness. Ever since Chernobyl, the Europeans are much worried about the direction winds might take. Apparently, they don't much trust the Slavs and others from the East, and these Easterners who arrive in droves now are suddenly very race conscious seeing the Asians and Black-Africans better off than they are or were. They, too, want a bite out of the cake before it all turns to wind. They, too, had heard of the former American ambassador who said: "The twenty-first century belongs to the Asians!" And the way our guys back home, following the example of the Japanese, are farting these days, they are already thinking, I'm told, of emigrating to the East. In any case, the reason why the Russians dropped communism is quite clear: they realised that farting has no colour, though I don't quite agree. I think there is such a thing as colourful farting, but this requires much down-to-earth research in the field to pin things down.'

'Vattabout the viva? Vattappened there?'

'Oh, that, that was a red-letter day in farting, I tell you. The people who strayed into my viva that day have not recovered from the experience yet. I myself, despite all the precautions I took, like the bottled scents I took along with me in my briefcase, am still a bit groggy.'

'That's vatt I thought, when I saw you first. Have you seen a doctor about it?'

'What's the use. No doctor has specialised in this form of malady. The doctors I saw just shook their heads, blew their noses rather vociferously and were generally at a loss for words. So, I'm actually seeing lawyers, now.'

'Why?'

'Why, lawyers? Well, you're not very bright, are you? When everything fails, you should see a lawyer. This is a special breed of the human species. They can think up ways and means of keeping things going, even when the universe has farted out, man!'

'Alright, alright, if you say so, but I have my doubts.'

'If you have your doubts, you'd do well to keep them to yourself. Otherwise, you might find yourself at the wrong end of the bar.'

'What's your son doing these days? I mean, has he got a girl?' Selvan looked totally stumped.

'How do I know what he's doing? Why don't you see a lawyer about it?' He paused to look at his friend and found that Maniam wasn't feeling very well. 'Hey, what's up? Aren't you feeling...'

'No, nothing. It's alright. Jes feel like a slosh, man.'

'Hey, hey, take it easy, there are so many cops around, if you tried it, you might slosh one of their boots.'

'Stop clowning. I really have to.'

'Look, Mani, hold on a bit, it's getting dark fast. Anyway, what's the matter with you? You ask me to relate my story of the soutenance, and all you do is to think of pissing.'

'Is that vattya call the word? Why can't they use the civilised Latin word: viva, like the English?'

'That's because here you have to support the thesis or dissertation from underneath, hold it up from below for everybody to see. It comes from the verb: soutenir, to support, to back up, hold up, and that's precisely what it became from all points of view in the end. First, they scheduled the viva in one of the most ceremonial halls; you know, the sort of places you enter and feel subdued for the rest of the year: gilded chairs, carved banisters, red-carpeting underfoot and burgundy-cushioning for the bottoms and backs, on the walls in between tainted locked windows solemn oil paintings of sternly robed former rectors and bishops from the revered ecclesiastical past of the Solfège, high-domed ceiling painted over in naked figures trailing through flimsy bands of lace, and at every free space, between fluffy clouds and sea-blue sky - cherubs with golden curly locks. I suppose, it would have been like holding a viva under the Sistine Chapel, under the implacable eyes of bishops and cardinals. But then, given the nature of the subject, on second thoughts the authorities thought it wise to relegate the event to a bare, basement lecture hall like a Greek or Roman pit theatre in ruins. All the ventilation it had was from the swinging cicatrised doors at the height of the auditorium. The jury fanned out behind a wooden barricade on a raised charred-timbered platform with sliding green-boards for a background, nothing so distinguished as a blackboard, and your candidate had to occupy a front seat some six feet below their feet.'

'So, who didya put on your jury?'

'First, of course, there was my thesis-director and a fellow lady member. They were just fine; serious and reliable. Knew what genesis meant and recognised originality, and though they knew nothing of the languages in which I delved to bring up the sounds and colours and structures of our regional ways and traditional habits of farting, they were at least seriously concerned, from a European point of view, of food and noises and their effects on European behaviour from the twelfth century down. In any case, one of them had even visited our area and had taken some valuable notes on our particular aptitude for gyrations during farting. Now, for the three others...'

'Vattdya mean, three others. You mean, there are five on the jury?'

'No, six, but five is the minimum. Only in my case, just before the viva took place, the president of the Solfège wrote a letter to my director saying that he would have to accept - according to some moth-eaten practice of the Solfège from the fifteenth century - the former director who tried to scuttle my viva arrangements on the jury as the sixth member and that his report on my thesis ought to serve as the third rapport. I tried to fight it, but it was of little use. He had to be the sixth member and third rapporteur. I even did some research into his past academic background and discovered to my great astonishment that there was no dictatorship dissertation to his name, neither in the university archives nor in the national ones. Yet, he was a full professor and styled himself a Dictateur extraordinaire. In one of his so-called critical pieces, he had listed a biography of a certain well-known author as his dictatorship thesis. If you look at

the same bibliography, you'll see another biography on the same author published some two years earlier, of course, in English. This guy knew an English of sorts. I was going to oppose his inclusion on the jury when my director told me to hold back. He said: "Don't do anything. Let him come. We'll cut the grass from under his feet!" I was satisfied, though, I must say, I was wondering how I might manage to control my temper. You see, Mani, almost everything is decided beforehand: the soutenance is merely an excuse to show off the knowledge of the jury members and/or the candidate. It's really a ritual, and if you don't participate in the rites, you can never be admitted to the haloed world of doctors...er...er...what am I saying, dictators. It's as if they want you to conform to their laws, customs and habits. Your dissertation or your knowledge is not called into question, just whether you have the capacity to sit through some three to five hours of hot air being brought up, and then all the rigmarole of going through what they call the *délibération*, the moment when they adjourn like the bench to decide on your fate.'

'In other words, you are judged and they are judges.'

'Only you are the guilty party, the criminal even, and they are going to see to it that you either get off clean or sullied for good. You know what I mean by that? Of course, you don't.'

'Then, why are you asking me?'

'This is what happens: if you don't get called after the *délibération* - "Most Honourable Dictator by Unanimous Decision", you know you have been shat upon for good. Even if they pronounce you a Most Honourable Dictator by Majority Decision, you may as well pack up and leave this world.'

'Why is that? A most honourable title must be a distinction, isn't it?'

'Of course, it is, but in the eyes of the authorities who decide your future academic career, you are dead weight, ballast, expendable, and you will find M.H.Dictators, by unanimous decision, bypassing you to cushy posts and salaries. That's the rub, man. Get it?'

'Yeah, I capito, but I can't see the logic in it. Seems like a waste of time, then. It sounds like the American system of *sommam con laude* or something like that, then.'

'That's right, something like that. The elite system, that is.'

'So, tell me what happened at the viva. All this sounds to me like so much shit. How didya ever get into this kind of muddle, man?'

'You don't know how right you are! The sound of shit! You want a degree, you want a doctorate, you have to shit for it.'

'And to think that you could 'ave had a better life - from every point of view - without any degree, back home!'

'Look, now, that's all in the past. If we had been enslaved for centuries, it is because we willingly enslaved ourselves. You have to admit, we have a slavish mentality.'

'Speak for yourself, if you please, Mister.'

'If that's the case, why d' you come West so often? You can't help smelling around some white pussy, can you? And that too what the American Negroes call white trash?'

'That's got nothing to do with it: everybody likes a change now and then, though you're wrong, I tellya, about whatya think is trash. Take Sonia, take Brigitte, Anne, what's that girl's name, Heidi... are they trash?'

'Maybe you're right, I don't know, and I don't want to know. Perhaps, girls back home sleep around as much as these here. I couldn't care less. When you put the lights out, you could be anywhere with anyone.' There was a moment's pregnant silence between the two while they observed the police and some road workers trying to level down some of the soil on the slope which hindered the trailer from taking the bend.

'Who were the other three on the jury?' Startled, Selvan eased himself down on the driver's seat.

'One was the guy who held on to my thesis for two years promising to organise the viva, a guy who boasted of having some one hundred and seventy learned articles published. You can imagine how he must have depleted a hundred and seventy dissertations in his charge to chalk up such a record. Mine would have been his hundred and seventy-first, of course. The other was a ...er God-knows-what woman who claimed to have farted around our region for some time, and the third was a shorty trade unionist-grubber who managed to make a career for himself in academe simply by currying favour with-and-for his fellow unionists in the so-called Left, the New Left, of course.'

'Vai didya get this last guy in then? I can understand your putting the other two on the panel, but the trade unionist?'

'I'm still asking myself why, too. I should 'ave got my head examined in a Nuclear Magnetic Resonance machine. For the life of me, he knew nothing about the subject, but then, I needed someone to write up the third report. Nobody would, except somebody like him willing to shit on anybody who wasn't a trade unionist. But then, luckily or unluckily, as you know, the former director managed to get the president of the university to oblige my faculty to accept his adverse report. In any case, either way I fell into an open trap, a trap filled by stealthy, surreptitious farting, and the price I paid for this mistake, that is, asking the unionist to become a member of the jury was purely and simply my career in academe. Since the viva, he went around boasting to everyone, including my hierarchical superiors that he was appointed by my director on to the jury, that he was entreated to be a rapporteur but he politely turned it down in favour of another more senior member and that he knew what a waste of time it was and that just to give me a hand, he voted to give me a distinction and so on.'

'Is that true?'

'Of course not! He did everything in his power, after plotting with that Mung-bean lady, to precisely avoid such a result, but my director fought valiantly during the *délibération* to counter his unionist tactics – all outward-looking sincerity of proletarian brotherhood - and only just succeeded in roping the other guy's vote in my favour.'

'So, you got a distinction by majority decision.'

'You're latching on, man.'

'Vaats the difference? A distinction's a distinction. Who the hell cares vat the rubbishy bugger did!'

'Precisely, other rubbishy buggers do.'

'So, what! Do people come around asking, "So, you're a Most Honourable State Dictator, but are you a Most Honourable State Dictator by Unanimous Decision?" It's not as if you had a country to run or a colony to govern. Anyway, tell me what took place: that's what I want to hear. Didya give th'm hell?'

'You mean, how they gave me hell, of course. Don't you see, the *soutenance* is one hell of a set-up. The cards are totally stacked against the candidate. All you can rely on is your thesis-director. If he's not made of fire and brimstone and ready all the time to fight for you tooth and nail, you can kiss your dictatorship's tail for good. Luckily for me, since he was once the head of the faculty as well, he imposed his will as the chairman of the jury. The beginning is always somewhat tepid. The candidate has to rant about his own thesis, make as if no one in the hall had ever heard anything at all about the subject. He has his back to the audience, which makes it easier for him to hide his shame whenever he's attacked which is almost all the time. When I had

finished my exposé, the chairman asked the sixth member - the former director - out of courtesy to begin his questioning. He was a man of a mean height and build, by which I mean, he looked sinister, his face covered with scraggly stained yellowish beard, an extension of his lifeless mop of hair. You couldn't see his eyes for they slipped sideways and backwards behind huge gold-tinted glasses. The rest of his anatomy was always packed under rolls and rolls of fur, but you could tell by the way he dragged himself, he was trying hard to nurse a flabby belly, his flannel trousers fell knotted on his knees and ankles. As soon as he got the cue from the chairman, he coughed and cleared his throat as though he was asked to sing an aria. I didn't look directly at him, for he was seated at one end of the jury table. Then, he took a long sip out of a tall glass. Everybody was waiting for him to start. Suddenly, the chairman raised his voice.

"We have only permission to occupy this hall until eight this evening. If you need more time, or if you're not prepared with your questions, I suggest you speak last."

"No, no, no, nooooo! I'm well prepared, though I must say I have already been invited to dinner this evening, and I shall not be staying on for the reception..." The Chairman interrupted him.

"That's all right. That would leave more of all the delicious oriental goodies for us."

"What's he talking about?" asked Maniam.

'You're right to ask. You're not that daft after all. Even a Sancho Pantha wouldn't be able to do better.'

'Who's that?'

'Never mind! You see, the candidate has to offer a reception of thanks to the jury, the invited guests, and the audience after the viva, you know, actually engage a caterer to supply and serve all sorts of drinks and food and sweetmeats. There'd of course be the usual gatecrashers, but that's a relief compared to the faces one has to look up to for the four or five hours previously.'

'Lucky thing you don't have to offer the goodies before the viva. Anyway, it sounds much... much... like bribery to me.'

'Worse than that, the candidate himself has to worry about all the details before and after the viva and see to it that the place is as spick-and-span as it was before. Otherwise, he would have to pay for cleaning the place, if some muncher lets some juice from the curry puffs ooze onto the carpet or what have you.'

'You mean, the reception takes place in the hall itself?'

'Yes, yes, in the hall, in the entrance to the hall, mainly, with some room closeby serving as the kitchen, temporarily.'

'My God, how d'ya manage to keep your mind on the subject, then!'

'That's the trouble. Besides, you're supposed to let it out about the menu, making sure you're going to be lavish about the champagne and the choice sweetmeats. Otherwise, none of your colleagues and friends would turn up, and you might find yourself speaking with an empty hall behind you, and you might get massacred by the jury since there'd be no one to witness the ordeal.'

'Jesus Christ! What kind of friends are these guys!'

'Anyway, the bugger decided to have his say. First of all, he said he didn't feel quite well. His bowels were bothering him ever since he attended a soutenance reception the day before that day. He said, in any case, he would try to do his best. At that moment, the chairman got mad and told him, though quite politely, that those present were not quite interested in his own bowel history, and that the distinguished assembly - actually the hall was filling up behind me without my knowledge - present then was certainly more concerned about the Eastern region's particular

mode of bowel behaviour, and then he nodded in a direction to the left of me, rising slightly as though curtsying in a sitting posture. I learnt later that that gesture was for the Ambassador and his retinue from our place, lah.'

'You mean Tengku Mustapha was there, too?'

'I've no idea. I was told he left in a huff sometime during the session. Anyway, to get on with the story, the bugger's face turned all red, and he clapped his usually churlish mien on his face from then on like a horror mask, his voice an arrogant drawl kept escaping from the sides of his mouth. To tell you the truth, I was a bit worried about what the bugger might say. You know, the candidate would be foolish to contradict the members of the jury. One needs all the tact in the world. Just imagine a criminal in the dock shouting out all sorts of abuses at his judges. Well, that's the picture. So, I looked down at the bound volumes of my dissertation while he talked. He said he was not happy at all with this thesis. It was not up to mark. It was too short, the main text - over five hundred pages - didn't merit being accepted for a State Dictatorship degree. However, he continued, it was not his responsibility if others were willing to lower the haloed standards of the Solfège. The chairman interrupted him again to say that it was not the juror's duty to chide his peers, that he knew what he was doing when he accepted my dissertation, that the quality of a researched job didn't depend necessarily on the number of pages, and so on. So, the bugger didn't know what to do. He hemmed and he hawed, cleared his throat some fifty times, and I was wondering if the hall was not going to be infected by his bowel-germs, of which he was complaining. The peevish bugger then began anyhow. He said he was only interested in making some comments on my huao chiao symphony. He said he was not going to have enough time to tear it to bits, but he would nevertheless make a big hole in it.

"Look now - listen to me - on pages three-hundred and twelve to twenty-five, this is the andante section while the parliament is in session. Nothing changes. Suddenly, the King arrives! Nothing changes. Now, I say, what sort of symphony is this: a monarch arrives in parliament and the passage goes - prrrrt prrrrt prrrt prrrt! This does not make sense."

"Is that all you have to say?" queried the chairman.

"That's enough. I don't have to say much more, except that this section should have been put in allegro con brio movement, fit for a king, like this: prr rrr prr irrr root root ro ro root, and the candidate should have introduced trumpets here in a fanfare," came the curt answer. I could see that my director was furious. He looked at me and bade me reply.

I said, first and foremost, it should be remembered that this dissertation put forth a theory of farting, which is more than all the dissertations having for their subject mere biographies of individuals. Then, I said: "Let's take the parliament section of my symphony. If I stressed the adagio and andante mode there, it was because the majority of the elected and appointed members of parliament back home were hardly capable of walking, and they were put there by people who didn't understand the democratic system: no one in elected office thought that he could debate the issues before the house. Just like those who voted for them, they thought they should put up their hands or press some button as soon as their party whip made the necessary covert sign to vote for or against."

'You mean like some secret society meeting then?'

'You know, you're latching on fine. Anyway I told them: "The point here is quite simple. I had no intention of maligning the honourable members of the house. I have to take into account the actual state of affairs in the region. All the honourable members over there were usually so subdued in the hushed, air-conditioned atmosphere that when they farted, they did it with great discretion, for fear of being thought men of the 'ulu. That's the main reason for the general

andante mode. Next, it must be remembered that the king is not really a king. If he was a real king, that is, descended from an age-old dynasty, I would have put his entry into parliament in the allegro con brio key. He is elected to be king for a certain number of years, and then the vice-king takes his place for an equal number of years. It would be wrong to think that I was composing an Emperor Concerto. It'll look funny if a fanfare was blown for someone who was not descended from a long line of kings and emperors. Besides, there never were kings in the region. This is a point that is easily forgotten. I was trying to be faithful to the milieu. If I didn't do so, you would all accuse me of writing something fictional with a double aim: Dictatorship of Philosophical Science and the Goncourt Prize."

'Vat did'ee say, you know the bugger, lah?'

'Him? Well, he twisted and turned in his seat and then held still like he was preparing for something alarming, and he suddenly jumped up, pushing his chair backward, and right at that moment - one of my colleagues who was seated right opposite him later told me he heard a distinct tune like a bunch of tiny Chinese crackers going off - he yelled he was not able to hold on much longer and left by a backstage door without much ceremony. I distinctly remember that the proscenium was suddenly invaded by an odour which made everybody in its vicinity fidget and blow their noses. The chairman looked somewhat at a loss. He quickly conferred with his colleagues on the panel, and said: "There's no harm in this disturbance, I'm told. The sixth member apparently can be done away with, though I must say I'm not sure of the legality of the situation. I might have to take it up with the Scientific Commission of the Solfège." I was rather put out. I looked up at the chairman. He was not his usual self. I thought What if the president of Solfège who is a close buddy of the sixth member declares my soutenance null and void? I was actually worried. Perhaps, the bugger came to the soutenance after having conferred with the president, and they would have no difficulty in bringing up some ancient precedent for this from their ecclesiastical past, written out in Latin on multicoloured illuminated parchment? I looked hard at my director. He obviously wanted to console me. So, he said: "The quorum for the jury is right. If any member present wishes to leave, I'd rather he or she left right now. If within a minute, no one does, I'll take it that all are in agreement with me to continue the soutenance." He looked hard to the left and to the right of him, and finding that no one stirred - there was however some stirring going on behind my back (I later found out that the Ambassador left in a huff but gave much chase after the sixth member) - peremptorily asked the Mung lady to proceed with her questioning.'

'What d' ya mean by Mung lady? Surely, she must've a country or a race to her name?'

'Precisely, but I'm afraid in this case, I just couldn't find out. She didn't look like one of our indigenes, aborigines or bumiputra(s). She just didn't have much of looks to be placed anywhere properly. She wasn't either one of our stunning Eurasians. To look at her, you'd think she came from nowhere, except from one clue, and that's what I'm coming to. Her questioning of my thesis boiled down to my "culinary-tables" that I had added on to my first volume, you know, the relationship between foods and farting, the type of fart produced by various vegetables, eggs and meat, etc., and their grading according to quantity and quality, especially by the manner of cooking with or without fats and spices. In short, a compendium of farts in our area according to the cuisine in practice in our region. My director once told me how useful this addition to my dissertation was, that it might very easily start a fashion of sorts in hotelry and cuisine courses and serve to avoid unnecessary unpleasantnesses especially during State dinners and royal functions. He said he had attended a few such ceremonies and was really disgusted by the choking stench that issued from both ends of the alimentary canal. He said it was a pity I didn't

live in the fifteenth century in Europe. I might have averted some of the worst wars between nations which were certainly caused by offensive smells. That's why the members of the Church wore soutanes, you know the kind of bell shaped overalls that dropped to the feet: it had the virtue of trapping the foul air from the belly down until the clergy took it upon themselves to ascend or descend stairways, like those metallic twisting stairs in old-time libraries that look very much like our muruku. Well, there, in such an event you had it, if you happen to follow them. Now, I can see the reason why the Spaniards made up their saying about their clergy. It goes like this: In Spain, you follow a priest either with a candle or a stick! Anyway, to cut the story short, this lady - you know I invited her on to the jury only because she claimed she knew the local folk tunes and melodies in our region...'

'Is that true?'

'As true as her manner of speaking.'

'Vat d' ya mean by that?'

'Her language was made up of syllables, mostly mono-syllables, which kept bursting from her lips like bubbles forming, expanding and exploding in a humid and putrescent swamp. The air that this habit liberated, I leave you to guess the extent of the damage it wreaked in polite society. She was seated next to my director, and I was feeling very sorry for him, for he looked like he was about to conk out several times during her intervention. Anyway, he was lucky because her questioning was limited. She said the tables were too long. They could not be read in one go, and why didn't I write it all out horizontally. I said: "Tables are tables, they have to be dressed down!" She couldn't quite understand what I said. So, she went on to her next question, and this is how I associate her with Mung. She said my tables didn't give much attention to the variety of farts produced by mung beans, and that this was a great lapse in my dissertation. I said: "If you look carefully under the section for beans on pages...(er... I forget the page numbers...), you'll see I deal with all manner of cooking with lentils, blackgram, garden peas, chick peas, beans, and mung beans, etc." She let out a few more monosyllabic bursts: "You didn't treat mung beans as a generic class of beans. These have great reputation from where I come for producing the longest lasting farts, though much would depend on the size and colour of the beans." I could see how much my benign and ageing director was put out. So, I just didn't bother to contradict her, which she took as a sign of my ignorance and therefore, as she wrote later in her report, a total lapse in the comprehensibility of his argument.'

'You mean, she didn't read the rest of the thesis?'

'Of course not. Why should she? For even if she did, d' you think she would have understood what she read?'

'Really, Selva, I really wonder why you accepted to go in for the viva. What's the bloody use doing a dissertation if it's not even read or understood by the jury!'

'Then, my director quickly, without any words of transition which is usual on such occasions to give the whole affair an air of ceremony and pomp, called upon the member of the panel who had kept my dissertation for two years under the pretext of accepting it under his direction. He was the type who oozed a kind of kindness which you could easily mistake for kindness; you know, the sort who was all smiles and confidentiality, concern and co-operativeness, but, as soon as your back was turned, strove with great diligence to run you down by all the means at his disposal, which, in his case, was quite considerable: he was tall, flabby and thick in the abdomen and chest. He was the kind who knew how to nurse a grudge for a very, very long time, even if the grudge he turned over and over in his flabby mind was ill-founded. One might say that, as he occupied a rather high position in a certain secret society - which it would not be politic to

mention here for, how do I know, you, too, might be a fully paid-up member from our national branch back home...'

'Aauh! Come off it, I refused to join them.'

'You mean, you were invited by them to become a member?'

'Of course, I was, but I told them: "thank you", but that was not the best moment to accept, and that I'd get in touch with them when the propitious moment arrived.'

'You're trying to tell me you really refused?'

'I didn't refuse.'

'What's the matter with you? You are not one of them now, are you?' Maniam held a fretful silence. 'Well, are you? D' you realise they cannot be refused. Since you refused, you're bound to get into serious trouble, man. It's like the Mafiosi making you an offer you can't refuse.' Maniam looked straight ahead at the elaborate operations the police had deployed to disentangle the trailer mess in front of them. It had gotten dark, and the place was lighted up by all sorts of yellow and amber traffic-and-police lights and the car lights reflected on the metal of other stationary vehicles.

'Look, I couldn't care what anyone says, I'm off for a slosh anywhere I can.'

It was a full twenty minutes when Maniam got back to the waiting car, and he didn't look like the first time he had a slosh on the trailer rear.

'I don' much like the looks of the muddle-up here. Looks like these road workers are used to building aerodromes. They are jes flattening everything.' He surveyed the traffic situation around him. There was some movement, though it was far from being fluid. 'We might as well settle in for the night. So, get on with your southin ounce, if you want to.'

'Look, Mani, if you don't want to listen, why ask me to relate all this?'

'You get me wrong, man. I want to know all of it. I want to know to what extent you can get yourself into a mess.'

'Oh, so that's it, eh?'

'Eih, come-on, that's not it. I 'aven't slept, not in the plane anyway. I'm really interested. I want to know what I and all our friends back home escaped being put through. Look, you'a still paying rent and driving around in a jalopy. Back home, all the guys you went to school with are living in mansions they own, eating their fill and are driving around in Mercedeses with the girls of their choice. Most of them have even retired before time. So, I'm going to lie back and listen.'

'Okay, okay. Why d' you interrupt me then?'

'What d' ya want me to do? Swallow everything you say? Half of what you'a relating seems to be in a strange tongue.'

'Okay, okay, I'll try to simplify things. Anyway, this non-director of my dissertation who had already "directed" one hundred and seventy dictatorships, suddenly, to everybody's surprise, threw a fit. His face grew reddish-black - I tell you, really it did...'

'Maybe he was a cross between a red and a black...'

'What's that supposed to mean? Anyway, he fumed and he fretted, he huffed and he puffed, only to say that my notes were all contorted up like the Eiffel Tower dangling from a G-string down the Golden Gate Bridge. They were not up to the mark required of a dictatorship degree. First of all, he said, I should have put them at the bottom of the page, not at the end of the main text.'

'I said that that was due to the fact that there simply were far too many references, and if I placed them at the bottom of the pages, they would have taken up more space than it would

aesthetically be tolerable. In some pages, there might even be more space devoted to notes than the text. He simply jumped at this remark.'

"That's precisely what I'm saying. More notes than texts. Besides, I don't find any references to the Punnans tribe on the Borneo border with Indonesia. How do you account for this? You call this a dictatorship soutenance? You have quite frankly defamed all the great anthropologists and linguists who have gone out from this country to educate the world. You have no right to write such a...such a...such a...(at this stage, my director who had his eyes fixed on me, for I could see he was feeling sorry for me - after all, it was me who invited these buggers to judge my work - cleared his throat rather angrily and looked in the direction of the "non-director" member of the panel) stupid, what shall I say, stupid shitty thesis. Who do you think you are?" By now, he was shaking and sweating profusely. I made an attempt to reply, but my director saved me from further sweat.

"Will the distinguished professor refrain from using argumentum ad personem retorts! This is quite utterly unnecessary. Let us hear your point about the Punnans." The non-director was certainly not pleased at all by this uncalled-for defence of the candidate.

"Yes, precisely, my point is, why the... the... the...candidate did not deal with the...the Punnans tribe in his coverage of the region?"

"Yes, why?" echoed the chairman, and looked at me, urgingly, as though he expected me to give the "non-director" a virtual drubbing. I wasn't feeling up to it, in the first place. My mouth was dry, and my tongue turned to lead. Such was the state in which I found myself. I knew that no good would come of ridiculing a member of the panel.'

"Yes, you're right, Mister the Professor", I said. "I should have dealt with them, too. But the truth is, they were and are a nomadic tribe, at best only a few thousand, and as they straddle the frontier in the dense equatorial forests over the main mountain range, it was difficult to say which country they belonged to. In fact, if you asked them yourself, they wouldn't even know that they were living in a country. They would certainly wonder about all this fuss about countries. I think they would say, 'Why, living in this life, is it not enough?'" Instantly, he cried out.

"That's a lie! A real lie! Have you no shame? Defaming our savants ..." I could see that my director was having a hard time trying to protect me from these savants. He picked up the wrist watch he had placed before him, scrutinised its face, and rather triumphantly declared a recess of twenty minutes. By that time, I was also breaking out in a sweat, and I was really glad for the slosh I had all alone for a few minutes. No sooner I had finished, a whole lot of people arrived, chattering and caressing their crotches. I slipped out of the lav as quickly as I could, without even washing my hands.'

'Vatta dirty bugger you are!'

'Who'uh you calling a dirty bugger? You forget that within an hour and a half after that I became one of the Dictators of the Solfège - even though my hands were "dirty", as you say. Anyway, I'm not in the habit of pissing on my hands as you so obviously do.'

'Get on with the tale; otherwise, I'd jes catch the next plane back to London.'

'D' you have a drink of sorts in your baggage?'

"Talking of pissing makes ya thirsty, uh?" Maniam extracted a couple of cans of orange-crush that he forewent drinking on the plane. The attempts to extract the trailer and set it right - it was now disconnected from its pilot wagon-truck - were going on full-swing. Both the men in the seiscientos were too tired and engrossed in their conversation to worry about how late it was or how the operations were going. The place was now filled with bystanders from the stationary

vehicles, watching and walking around, or just eating and talking. There was an air of festivity about the proceedings.

'Roll up your side of the window, it's getting really chilly, man,' ordered Maniam, between gulps. 'And turn the radio down a bit, it's getting on my nerves.'

'Oh, I didn't know you had nerves! I thought - judging by your rudimentary Toumai Sahelanthropus tchadensis looks - you were suffering from arrested development, you know, at the baboon stage...' Both of them chuckled and looked ahead, without taking in the scene for the windscreen was now beginning to cloud over.

'And so, before the viva resumed, I had to say hello to several colleagues and friends and listen to their comments on the way the whole thing was going. This by itself gave me a headache, for I was, on top of it all, worried about the reception arrangements. I had to check on everything, and under the pretext of wanting to read up on my thesis, I quickly descended the well of the auditorium to look through some notes. This was a real mistake, for the air at the bottom was musty and stifling. It sort of jangled up my neuronal connections and slowed down my reactions. I later realised that this was a good thing. If it was not for the putrefying air which somewhat put me in a state of demi-sleepiness, I might have reacted intelligently and endangered my prospects of obtaining the coveted degree.'

'What the hell d' ya mean? Everything you say seems to be so contradictory!'

'I don't blame you for not being able to understand these things. Not being a dictator yourself, you are not likely to be able to make out how these dictator-minds get nourished, nurtured and "neuroned", if I may put it like that. These form a special breed. Centuries of ecclesiastical undermining of the processes of logical reasoning makes the mind a kind of a rubbish bin with the lid off. It's as if the rubbish bins in front of the houses each morning suddenly took off - without their lids, of course - on buses and trains and tubes to the Solfège, and there just either sat around for their sizzling airs to invade the campus or they simply capsized themselves and littered the place. Now, you get the picture?'

'Not quite, but I'll let that go. Jes get on with the viva. I'm dying to find out what happened after the recess.'

'Anyway, I think I see your problem. You see, if I was myself, in full possession of my faculties as they say, I might have blown up, incited by the kind of crap some members of the jury were spewing. As I told you before, whether you get the degree or not is already decided upon when the reports are written out; only the honours remain to be worked out, bargained or fought over.'

'In that case, why didn'tya accept any kind of honours before the viva and tell them to shove the rest up you know where?'

'Good question, only this is not possible. That's not the way they do it. That'd be too sensible, but then, probably, they want to find out whether you wrote the thing.'

'Surely, your past academic background should be enough of a guarantee?'

'To your mind, yes. To theirs, you should wonder.'

'Gad! Why the hell couldn't you make it up with the buggers back home? There'd be chairs you could have for the asking.'

'No use harking back. Here I am, and here I stay. They have a saying over here: J'y suis, j'y reste! So, when the jury was seated and the auditorium was still settling down, my director called upon the Unionist to make his speech - for speech it was. But the noise didn't die down behind me. There were four women - not young of course - who were involved, while being seated in two rows, in a kind of running commentary-cum-debate which sort of hovered at the back of my

ears like flies taking my ears for sores. Unionist who was seated on his satchel barely peered above the jury table, and thus I had some difficulty hearing him, too, but then, I realised, it didn't matter very much, for whatever he had to say and whatever I had to say was not going to change the way he was going to vote later on. His main point was that I should not have written out a dissertation in volumes, or added appendices, etc. I should have merely written out one long piece of text and that's that. You could see he hadn't the kind of mind that preferred classification and/or orderliness. Besides, it was obvious, he didn't much like checking things up, that is, making references; he wanted all on his plate so that he could lap it all up in one go. In short, he was not much of a researcher, and if you were inclined to rudeness, you could think of numerous complexes which would sit well on him, most of all, an affected, inchoate "anti-authoritarian" complex, due to his unfortunate height, a complex which might have its origin in the great height of his ancestors, perhaps. So, one joins trade unions to pretend to attack the State when in actual fact one seeks to be kissed and fondled by authority.'

'You mean, something homo about it?'

'I don't know, maybe you're right, but one can't be sure about these things. One has to have full case histories in hand to be certain.' Selvan was now more or less slightly turned towards Maniam. He paused, wiped the windscreen with his palm to peer out, and suddenly yelled, 'Anyway, what the hec are you distracting me for? You want to play Freud, I suppose?'

'Look, chum, you'a the one who's bringing up all sorts of psycho stuff; so, what's wrong if I said "homo" or even "incest" in this case?'

'You're a fine chap, a homo relationship between trade unions and the State is visualizable, but incest...an incestual relationship? How can there be an incestual relationship between trade unionists and the president of the republic or prime minister?'

'I don't no, maybe...maybe because this guy couldn't revolt against his father, he decided to take on the Father of Father figures?'

'Uh, come-on, you're letting your imagination take a vacation, man. Rein it in and just listen. Unionist, of course, was very pleased with himself. He had never been invited by anyone to sit in on a jury over a dictatorship degree, much less be asked to write a report on a dissertation. The truth is he had no right to: he was himself not a Dictatorship-degree holder. According to the Charter of the Hallowed Solfège, only dictators can confer dictatorship titles on others. So, this was his day. I, myself, decided not to answer the jury's questions if they seemed to be simply about the size, form or weight of my dissertation. What's the use, anyway; if you said anything at all, you'd be giving these inconsequent aspects the importance that they simply did not deserve. I looked at my director, and he seemed to have capito the point. He quickly came out with a rejoinder. "As the member has nothing more to say, I call upon the next rapporteur for her questions. Here, I knew that I was on safe ground. She quickly delved into the contents of my work, praised me for the enormous efforts I had deployed to gather and research the material, and, above all, congratulated me for my erudition. Her only reserve was that I didn't give any systematic attention to the way our people emitted the noisy and noiseless farts. Immediately, I interrupted her to say that on this and that page I had referred to both the noisy and noiseless variety, etc., etc., but she quickly put me right. She said that I had not worked out a systematic classification of various postures and gyrations of farters in our region. She said that when she had passed through the various states of our part of the world, she noticed that almost all adults, and sometimes even the younger generation, were used to turning and twisting their bodies for no apparent reason - until you got close to them.'

'Speak for yourself, Mister. I don't see how you can run your own people down like that!'

'Look, Mister, I'm only repeating what a foreigner said. What's the matter with you?' Selvan glared at his friend, and then continued. 'Besides, they may be my people, but just think, if they thought I was also their "people", I wouldn't have had to go through all this hell for the better or even the best part of my life.' He looked hard at Maniam. The latter went into a moment's reflection and relaxed. Selvan resumed his tale, now somewhat reinvigorated. 'Anyway, I had to agree with her. My director nodded in both our directions. She was nice. She saw that I wasn't quite feeling well after the previous four tirades from the jury, and she added to reassure me, "I'm not making a criticism which is of any moment. True, you could have expanded on your thesis in the direction of particular gyrating mannerisms, giving the work a sense of local colour, but this is not at all necessary, considering that your research has taken into consideration more than twice the material a Dictateur thesis normally encompasses.' I was elated and looked everybody in the eye, but I noted how the three others who seemed happy about her criticism earlier on, suddenly looked crestfallen.

'So, vaat didya do?'

'What I did? Well, man, I thanked her, but she said there was no need for thanks, since she had actually learnt a great deal from my dissertation and hoped that I would bring to bear my know-how on the matter of flatulence on her own people. She said that there was an enormous encyclopaedia of sounds to be put together on the people who were addicted to pâté de foie, foie gras and pétillante champagne, and no one was better qualified than me to undertake the task. To tell you the truth, I was feeling a bit embarrassed, and so, I said, "You do me too much honour, Lady the Professor." Then she said, "No, not at all. Only one who has had to stoop so low for so long is in a position to make things clear for everybody!" Just think on that man, if you can.' Maniam was obviously thinking, without in any way appearing to be the wiser for it. 'Well, what d' you think?' urged Selvan.

Maniam thought for a while and said, 'Sounds good!'

'So that's all you've got to say?'

'Vatt d' ya vant me to say? That you'a a great guy!' He looked at Selvan squarely. 'Okay, you'a a great guy.'

'Okay, boy, now you're latching on. By then, I was feeling somewhat better. Then, it was the turn of my director, the good old man who threw his last trump card to back me, even if as later on I had to find out, getting this degree didn't save my soul, much less get me one rung higher up to safety in the hierarchy. I looked at his stolid stoic face. He was as gently tough as he was tenacious. He had decided to see me through, and he was as good as his word. He was obviously feeling free and relieved, at last. He had managed to steer clear of all the rocks. There's something I forgot to tell you though, due to, certainly, all these interruptions, especially yours.'

'Now, vattermai supposed to have done? I suppose you'a blaming me for your lack of talent in telling a tale?'

Selvan giggled, obviously feeling mischievous. He liked riling his schooldays chum. It never failed.

'You remember the transfer I had to effect from one faculty to the other for the viva? Well, the transfer of my entire file which was supposed to have been sent from one secretariat to the other simply didn't take place. I got all the necessary papers signed, obtained the requisite permission and waited the couple of months for the file containing all the documents, reports, certified certificates and diplomas and their certified translations, which, in the continental version means one hell of a lot of time and money spent. You have to dig out your birth certificate, have it translated by a traducteur assermenté, appointed by the courts for a hefty sum, and then, on top

of it all, get the local Mairie to get what they call a Fiche d'Etat Civil which is simply a confirmation of what is in the birth certificate, and to get this, I have to apply to the Office français des réfugiés et apatrides for the necessary document to prove, you know what? To prove that I have been born of parents. Anyway, this dossier simply disappeared, and when my director heard this, he got so mad, he said: "Reconstitute the dossier and send it in by registered post, and we'll see what happens. There's no use wasting time, setting an investigation in process. In any case, the whole thing took another three months or so before even the faculty secretariat acknowledged the receipt of my dossier and my candidature. This also meant queuing up in all sorts of places at specific opening times and days. When you tote up the time you spend getting your candidature registered and the actual time taken to research and write out your dissertation, it sort of breaks even. One should also be given a doctorate for succeeding in registering one's doctorate in the faculty for the viva, etc. Besides, the faculty should also award a doctorate for the time and trouble taken to type, photocopy and bind the dozen copies or so for the viva and libraries, etc.'

'Vatt you'a trying to tell me is that the Solfège should have awarded you two doctorates and the dictatorship title?'

'Right, you're latching on fine. Now for the finale. When my director cleared his throat rather hesitantly, I suddenly realised that the auditorium which was by now choc-a-bloc settled down in silence. I twisted my head slightly to take in the view. Not only were most of the seats occupied with heavily-robed gentlemen and ladies, but also the unoccupied seats were used as coat and cloak hangers. Many were seated down on the steps leading to the proscenium; others stood leaning against the walls, particularly at the entrance, as though waiting to escape as soon as the moment was propitious. I must admit I felt a bit nervous, actually quite nervous, not because of what my director might say, but simply because I was wondering what would happen if they all decided to stay for the reception. They, too, must have heard of the champagne and oriental cuisine, a mixture which is particularly suited to the free airing of airs. As things stood, I was already choking from the smells, not to mention the tendency for methane gas to find the lowest level, that is, just where I was seated. Of one thing I was absolutely certain: if anyone took it into his head to strike a match and throw it down the well of the auditorium, I was sure there would issue a mind-deafening explosion. I thanked my stars that the ordeal was now coming to an end, and that all I had to put up with was the good old man's summation. He didn't mince his words. He was as good as his word when I first recounted my mishaps to him.

"When the candidate first came to me with his enormous dissertation, I thought to myself that taking on his work for a soutenance would deprive at least three or four other candidates of their chances of upholding their candidatures for the doctorate certainly in the same year. I thought to myself that I should perhaps keep his candidature pending up to the very last moment of my retirement. Instead, I took it on without giving much thought to the consequences, and when I heard the incredible tale of his misfortunes at the hands of other faculty members, I became well and truly ashamed. I thought that something surely had gone rotten in our alma mater, something surely alien to the spirit of our age-old institution must have inserted itself in the body politic of our day-to-day affairs and diverted the course of the development of this venerated university. Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, I was wrong. Nothing new has taken place, nothing so surprising that the candidate could someday recount to his fellowmen that all is not well anymore with the Solfège. It is my painful task to point out that I was wrong. What took place in this case, what happened, or continues to happen, in all such cases is due to one simple mistaken tradition. We, the corps enseignant have got it into our heads that we have been wronged, that we have been

betrayed by the very people we have served, that we have therefore the right to inflict our thwarted rights upon all others who come our way." I noticed that the silence that was building up was awe-inspiring.'

'Vai is that? Vai actually did the audience hold its silence?'

'He was the doyen of the university. He was old enough to drive terror even into the hearts of the deans and presidents of faculties. Besides, he enjoyed a world-wide reputation, and when he came down hard on the faculty, he was not only likely to be listened to by his inferiors, but also to be taken seriously by the media, and who knows, there might even have been something in the papers soon after. By then he was already breathing fire. His great arch of a nose, striding downwards from his balding scalp, suddenly appeared like a wild stallion reined in only by the flaring nostrils. It was easy to see, this man meant business. I could also feel that the audience was bracing up for a tirade.

"The reason for so much injustice in the halls of academe lies squarely rooted in one odious practice, and that is, the shameful habit of plagiarism - open, downright abusive plagiarism. Who is there among us so pure that he can stand up even in this small audience and say, "Me, yes, I can throw my stone in all conscience!" It is true, we ourselves have been victims of this perennial tradition at the Solfège. All of us know how we have been made to scrounge and stoop in the antechambers and corridors of this haloed institution, all in the hope of obtaining that piece of paper entitling us to be revered as doctors, entitling us, in effect, to assume the tasks of our seniors once they had been ushered away by age or infirmity. All of us are aware of the painful sensation of seeing what a candidate has arduously researched, thought out and elegantly explained -- under his or her professor's signature; much worse than that, all of us are aware of the terrible torture of watching our seniors being decorated or eulogised in distinguished gatherings for ideas and inventions we may ourselves have been the original authors or inventors of; all of us, indeed, are aware of the terrible fate of those who dared voice their disapproval, that is, the unconscionable fate of ostracism by the rest of the faculty members nation-wide and the eventual downgrading and even, as in some cases, exclusion from academe. It is time such an odious practice came to an end.

I am particularly proud today to be able to preside over this jury, especially in being able to bring our candidate's dissertation up before a jury and see that he gets what he justly deserves for his efforts, not least for the unfortunate events which succeeded the unforeseeable retirement of his first director. I must admit that I have had great pleasure in reading through this dissertation, and I don't mind at all admitting that I have learned a great deal about not just one region of our globe, but also of the reasons why humans behave in certain ways in other parts of the world, for which, might I add, we should also take the blame. I know there are some amongst us who think that when our forefathers went out into the world some centuries ago, they sailed over the horizons tout azimuth with the expressed intention of benefiting mankind at large, but we all know today that this was hardly the case. Certainly, we did bring to some far-flung peoples of the globe some aspects of our industrial civilisation, but, on second thoughts, I think they, too, would have been better off if our forefathers had accepted to stay well at home. Whatever the merits or demerits of the actions of our forefathers, one thing is clear: we have enough on our hands here at home, itself, which needs our immediate attention. As teachers in this haloed institution, we should at least focus our attention on the question of awarding degrees, especially the doctoral dictatorship kind.

On this issue, our candidate has contributed a method of reasoning which is particularly enlightening. His theory that farting clears the air and thus purifies one's manner of thinking is a

unique way of looking at things. The contrary we all know characterises our tradition. Look at this revered block of limestone and rock. Everywhere the windows are painted over and kept locked for centuries, neither light nor fresh air may enter. We have been stewing in this atmosphere for so long that we are no more able to see straight. To put it simply: we fart in ourselves. This is the reasoning in our candidate's theory that I didn't quite catch at the beginning. We, the teachers, think that just because we have been robbed of some of our best efforts by our own professors, we have the right to continue stealing from all the candidates whose dissertations we have the honour of directing. Isn't this a total cul de sac way of reasoning? Thanks to our candidate, I see the light, too. The first thing we should do is to open these great big windows, bring in giant electric fans and drive away centuries of putrefying farts - locked in musty auditoriums, apartments and offices - from these precincts. Not until I read this dissertation was I aware of the enormous fault of belonging in a system which is the quintessence of the psychology of the soutane, which is the symbol of, if I might say so, "infarting". Would somebody be so kind as to open these windows? This is the time to do it." Just at that moment, the Mung lady on the panel got up, bent slightly forward, adjusted her skirt and sat down again. I don't know why but I distinctly felt a whiff of dayold mung beans invading my nostrils. I don't know why this is so, but that was how I felt.'

'That's probably because you have your nose so low and close to the subject - you know researching a subject like this for so long: how long was it? ten years? - that you are prone to interpret every action as an effort to liberate noise or smell.'

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'That's probably because you have your nose so low and close to the subject - you know researching a subject like this for so long: how long was it? ten years? - that you are prone to interpret every action as an effort to liberate noise or smell.'

'Or both. Right at that moment some youngsters - friends of my son - got up, with the latter, to try the bolts of the windows. But they were - as you can expect - placed so high, none of them could reach them. My director then advised getting one of the appariteurs who were stationed outside the auditoriums or in the corridors, all accoutred in ocean-blue uniforms, to make the effort, himself. The appariteur who came in, after having listened to the doyen, immediately raised a finger and shook it before all present. That, he said, was forbidden. It would require the permission of the senate and even the signature of the minister of national education - albeit that of the president of the republic in plenary session with his cabinet - before any such thing could be contemplated. Of course, he was not as eloquent as that, but he made his point notwithstanding. Dismayed, the doyen who had moved down to the floor in the meantime, shook his head from side to side.

"I should have known better. To think that these walls have been standing for centuries, these foundations for more, these draperies - he pointed to a woven faded idyllic-scenic tapestry hanging on the wall to one side - for even longer (this raised a few giggles among those present), I should be better informed than to attempt to do such a thing. Who is there so brave to attempt a more drastic solution?" Many in the audience looked about the auditorium as though the Messiah was suddenly to make his appearance. Then, suddenly, one youngster grabbed his rucksack, full of paperbacks I imagine, and hurled it at the closed window-pane closest to him. It just hit the thick, reinforced coloured glass and bounced back onto somebody's head. The ruffled mister leaning on the wall was in a huff, but the solemnity of the occasion prevented him from pouring

forth the invectives that the youngster justly deserved. The doyen realised the mistake he had made.

"I didn't mean to incite any one to violence. I was just using the question as a rhetorical one. I do hope the gentleman who had been hit by the missile will find it in him to pardon the young man and his thoughtless action...."

In front of them, while the two old friends were engrossed in the tale of the soutenance, a great deal was taking place, though not much to the satisfaction of anyone present. The policemen yelled and blew their whistles, sometimes repeatedly, long enough to sound menacing. The road workers called to disentangle the trailer in its cornered situation shook their heads in despair, cursed and even spat profusely on whatever metal or tools that they had to deal with or use. The spectators who remained sullen during the proceedings now took it upon themselves to jeer at the workers. Some even aimed threats in their direction while keeping a safe distance. Then, the police drove all the motorists and their occupants back into their cars, as though they had decided that - without the consent of the workers and the technician directing operations - the time had come for the traffic to flow.

'Vatt's going on outside, I wonder. Everybody's going back to the cars. Maybe, it's time to leave,' mused Maniam.

Just then there was a rush of violent air like a jet throttle-exhaust past the hood of the seiscientos.

'What's that!' cried one or the other or both, at the same time.

The next moment, the seiscientos was hit head on by a Peugeot 405 GR, right smack on its kisser, as the Americans might have said. The SEAT 600 sprung like a tumbling card in a stack and dropped heavily against the waiting van to the rear. It was obvious that the cars on the trailer broke loose. But most just piled on the Peugeot 405 GR and formed a sort of a Giacometti mass of contorted zig-zaggy metal. Cries and groans filled the air, mingled with gripes and orders. The traffic on both the roads came to a standstill, and people just poured out of them onto the embankments, the still loaded bridge and the overcrowded side tables of the roads.

When the SAMU helicopter arrived and the white-overalled personnel set about their business, that is, after the road workers had managed to extract the two old dear friends from the mess of the seiscientos, there was just the question of transporting the two in stretchers up to the hovering helicopter. First, the tightly bundled stretcher with Maniam was hoisted up. Then, it was the turn of his host, Selvan. When the second stretcher neared the hull of the helicopter, Maniam looked down from his height at his friend and said:

'Look, vat'as happened to us! If it was not for your hankering after a piece of white paper, we would still be alive! And if it were not for your stupid tale, I would now be stomping down Chomp-Elisay with all the cutie chicks in town stalking my every...'

Fresnes, Paris. March 8, 1993 Revised 2002

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