

Chapter 22

Before the estranged brothers began to ignore one another anew, and the screaming uncle slammed his wife's head into the ornate mahogany armoire, and one cousin after another sprawled in the dirt under the banyan tree, begging its aerial roots to stab him dead, Ramesh Sambashivan enjoyed a few hours of perfect bliss in the boat floating toward Thaatha and Paati's house.

He always looked forward to the trip when it was first scheduled, yet by the time the hour arrived to leave with his family, he wished with all his heart that he was old enough to be left alone in the apartment with his books. He was a serious child.

The clamoring of his siblings, Yogesh, Deepak, Nela, and Girish, added to the noise generated by his cousins Sundari and Nirmala and Swami, made the idea of visiting the vast land of his ancestors seem an interruption in his real life. He thought about his one secret place on the property— inside the hollowed-out banyan, where nature had carved a small ledge for him to sit in and think— and wondered if this would be the year he would find he had grown too big for it.

He had no choice but to find out. Once again, here he was, in the converted rice barge that seemed to know exactly where to go, once launched. Ramesh leaned over the battered side of the boat, trailing his hand through the water. He liked to catch minnows, but after he had examined all relevant moving parts. How satisfying it was to watch the fish wriggle away through the water toward the seam between river and sky. How did the minnows know to follow one another like that? They swam in concert, together, sharing the waterway with so much of life crustaceans, corals, mollusks, finfishes, the trap of fishing nets lying down beneath mats of lily pads — and Ram never saw a single fish break away voluntarily from its shoal.

Daydreaming about the river as he watched the boats with billowing white sails carry other children to other relatives, Ram fancied he held within him the stored experiences of ancestors who travelled up and down this same route throughout the centuries, asserting dominance, quashing rebellions. He had heard the story of how his mother, as a young girl, once held off bandits with the family rifle. Each time the family visited her family house, Ram would remember the story, poking his finger in the bullet hole that marred the thick wall by the window. The family had been so proud of the little girl's courage, they never repaired the nick.

As the day dissolved into shadow, the grandparents' house stood out from the gloom. At a certain distance it looked as if the stones were leaning against the ancient banyan behind it. That tree had been there all Ram's life, and long before. His parents and grandparents had told him,

and all the children of the family, the myths and meanings associated with the strange tree whose branches reached down while its roots reached up.

“It is the tree to fulfill wishes,” his blue-eyed grandmother would tell him, walking with him around the new small trunks that had appeared since the previous year.

“How did it get here?” the little boy asked.

“When a famous Guru who once lived here died, his sons buried him under the tree that had stood for many years on this spot. The boys came every day to light a fire to keep away the wild animals from the grave. Otherwise it may have been desecrated.”

“The animals wanted to eat the guru?”

“It is their nature. One day the sons could not see the old tree, but found this banyan tree growing from the place where they had laid their father. That very night, the father visited the eldest son in a dream.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked the boy to serve the tree as he had served his father the guru, because the tree was made from the father.”

“Could the boy recognize?”

“Look up! These hanging roots resemble the long matted hair of the father. The son must therefore have recognized!”

Ram was not convinced by this logic, and besides, this was not the same story his grandmother had told him when he was younger. She said then that the Triumvirate lived in the tree. Did that mean the three gods lived in the Guru? Ram liked for things to make sense. Nevertheless he nodded, as if he agreed. He did not want to risk two tight slaps from his hot-tempered grandmother.

The boat neared its destination—the dock, the wooden steps leading to the stubborn stone house, that massive tree. Ram wondered how much more the thick old trunk had hollowed out in the space of a year. After providing nourishment for more and more rooted branches, it had surely widened. The boy worried again that he may have also grown too big to hide inside it. What would he do then? It was his favorite refuge on the property, his only privacy among his swarm of relatives.

The wind picked up and there was a rustling in the foliage. The boy imagined that the greenery was shaking out the stars that rose like dust into the air. The dusk had darkened fully now, and cooking fires began to dot the shore. Aromatic wisps of smoke reached the little boy’s nostrils and conjured the flavors of home. His mouth watered at the thought of the treats the aunties were making for him at that very moment: *kozhukkattai*, *burfi*, *halwa*.

It was time.

How did the neighbors who only saw the family once a year know precisely when to line up on the river bank, waving? Yet there they were, and Ram was once again enveloped by a feeling

of belonging, a sensation that would persist throughout his life, despite his best efforts to resist it.

He pulled his hand from the placid water, breathed in the briny smell of his fingers, squinted against the last sliver of light dropping into the submerged world of gills and fins, and felt the breeze sweep its fragrance toward him.

A sense of peace he wouldn't understand for years flooded him.

Now, decades later, as he reluctantly prepared for yet another family wedding, Ram summoned up the serenity of those boat trips, that bridge between worlds.

"Five minutes, ok, sweetie?" He had been ready for an hour, and his wife still couldn't choose between the blue silk sari and the green salwar kameez. They were going to his grandnephew's wedding, and his cousin had come to the hotel suite once already to help Alice dress in the Indian idiom, as she liked to call it. Should he summon Sundari again?

"The vermillion is good with either outfit, but put Amma's chain also with the green. Display the Ganesha pendant," he had heard her tell Alice earlier. From his perch in the kitchenette, he caught a glimpse of the necklace melted down from his mother's wedding bangles. It was the only gift his mother had ever given his wife and right now it was held hostage in his cousin's right hand, the green tunic pinched in her left.

"But the blue sari matches my eyes," Alice protested. Sundari flinched, scowled, and then produced the humming sound she often made when words became too dangerous. Both Ram and Alice were fluent in the subtext of that sound. Their eyes met across the room, and when they lowered them, it was as if something had been agreed upon. To stop Sundari's noise, which could have exploded into a rapid-fire language Alice could not follow (such a thing had happened before) Alice changed the subject. "Did my husband tell you he's just been elected SIAM Fellow?"

"No! Is very prestigious, is it?" Sundari clapped her hands in Ram's direction, not understanding what she was applauding. She was like a child who responds to sound long before sense. "We will attend all ceremonies! The whole joint-family attending!" None of them had ever come to any of Ram's graduations or awards ceremonies, and the joyful initial response to good news, before logistics stalled and possibilities for travel dwindled, sounded artificial now.

So many opportunities for gathering, missed. Family weddings were a different matter, of course. Not based on individual achievement (unless one counted the parents or aunties who brokered the match) but rather on the successful crossing of a social threshold, they were command performances, and the relatives relished it all—the flowers and incense and cumin-scented sweat, the vibration of sitars and sarods, the rustle of fabric in color combinations rivalling bird plumage, the heat of spice on the tongue. The same details flooded Alice's American senses, too, but never yielded the same delight.

Sitting on the edge of the paisley hotel bedspread, suddenly woozy amid waves of green and

blue fabric that recalled a deconstructed globe, Alice closed her eyes for a moment. She opened them to the surprise of Sundari holding out a glass of water.

“Are you ok, honey?” Ram said, peering over his cousin’s shoulder. The spontaneous pose of the two of them resembled an *Ardhanarishvara*, the half-man, half-woman image so often depicted in Indian art. Ram moved in closer and rubbed his wife’s back.

“Just a little jet-lagged. No biggie.”

Sundari turned away, as she always did when forced to confront any physical display of affection between the couple. She was one of the relatives who had refused to attend Alice and Ram’s wedding so long ago. She had manufactured a weak excuse, and the newlyweds recognized a boycott when they saw one. Early on they crossed her off the list of relatives they might eventually pull to their side. Sundari was clearly a hard case and not likely to be worth the trouble anyway. Sooner or later, the women would run into one another. There was no rush.

When they did happen to attend a particular family function, coming through the teak door at the same time, introductions could no longer be postponed. Sundari took Ramesh aside and whispered to him behind the fan of her hand, “What shall I say to her? I do not know what to say.”

“Just say what you usually say when you meet someone new. Look at her! She’s a lovely, warm person, not some alien creature from outer space!”

That humming noise again.

“I feel I know you already, through Ram’s stories of your Brahmin joint- family life,” Alice said as she embraced her husband’s cousin for the first time. She pronounced each word of the phrase she had so carefully rehearsed, not wanting to make a mistake and give offense.

Sundari took some anyway. She jumped a step away from Alice as if she had been shocked, and turned to glare at Ramesh, who had betrayed her —betrayed them all— to the enemy. The blonde interloper should not be privy to family secrets. Their history was much more than a string of anecdotes to be trotted out for some stranger’s amusement. They should be kept within the tight family circle.

Sundari said to Ram, having absolutely finished with Alice for the first and presumably last time, “Are you knowing about our sister-cousin’s match with Raj?”

“You don’t mean our first cousin Raj, do you?”

“Yes. He is second degree cousin to the bride. It is the only way! Closer ties between relatives!”

“Obviously, there is another way,” sniffed Alice, taking Ram’s hand and leading him into the rest of his life.

And now here they all were, their uneasy truce made permanent. How had that happened? For a long time it hadn’t seemed possible.

When she saw that Alice had recovered from her vertigo, Sundari gathered up her basket of

accessories, and announced, "I will leave now to help other relatives in the hotel." It was her dharma, she realized, to spend her life helping other relatives. She raised her sister's sons. She helped Alice after her accidental overdose. And she was the one they called to help Amma recover from the stroke that nearly killed her.

"Why don't you leave your ornaments on the dresser? I still might be able to use some," Alice said, knowing full well she would not, but feeling a wave of sympathy for Sundari.

When the door clicked shut and Alice was alone with Ram, she registered his searching look, checking her words for sarcasm. Careful not to criticize his cousin any more than necessary, the effort needed to hold back exhausted her. She had not resisted Sundari's "help." Couldn't that be enough, for once?

Ram, intent on re-folding his handkerchief, made no indication as to whether it was or not. The idea that anyone should have a say in how his wife presented herself to the family was as ridiculous now as it had ever been. The perpetually unsuitable bride should either play along, her responses thoroughly tongue-in-cheek, or else she should take a stand against such manipulations. Ram had spent the last few decades rooting for the latter course, increasingly tired of the power tussle played out among the women of the family. It was all old news.

"At least I didn't have to ask for the water this time," Alice said softly.

"Think you are growing on her?" He coughed up a sarcastic laugh. In a perfect world, his cousin and his wife, his sister, mother, and brothers' wives should have all become great friends, but then again everything seems possible at the wide-eyed beginning of things. It should be clear by now that there would never be a real acceptance of Alice into the family fold. Why did she continue to scratch at the gate long since closed to her, especially this late in the day?

To sidestep more discussion along those lines, Ram said, "You still have time to take a nap before we go." Avoidance of troublesome topics worked better now than it had when they were young. Alice was more easily distracted and had less energy to argue. She stretched out on the bed and he floated a light blanket over her. "I'll wake you in plenty of time, don't worry."

"What will you do?" He knew she was toying with the idea of asking him to lie down beside her. Each one slept better beside the other.

"I will pop in on my brother and see how all the wedding fanfare is striking him." Alice nodded, already closing her eyes. Ram turned the key in the door and stood in the hall for a minute, thinking of the bridge that had never materialized between his worlds.

He took the elevator two floors down to his brother Deepak's suite. Deepak was nearly eighty, twelve years senior to Ram. In love with the idea of being an old man, he glamorized decrepitude whenever it gave him some kind of advantage. For instance, he'd continued to wear his neck brace from an old and fully healed injury whenever he wanted special attention.

"Drivers do not honk when I cross the street wearing it!" He'd enter someone's home with the robust greeting "Old person coming through!" whether or not a person older than he lived there.

But worst of all (in his brother's eyes), he had recently moved into what he called his old people's home. "A cook comes! If we are too lonely, we visit in the dining hall downstairs. They are always having lots of people talking in Tamil."

The presence of a cook had been a big factor in making the move. It was common knowledge among the relatives that his wife Jyothi only cooked in other people's homes, unceremoniously taking over the duties of the hostess, often grabbing a ladle right out of her hand. Some were happy with the intrusion, while others resented it. Alice thought it was funny, especially when Ram told her how the practice began. "They were visiting me in the old apartment, and Jyothi would not stop bickering with Deepak."

"Right in front of you?"

"That's right. She has no filter. Never did. Anyway, she refused to make Deepak dinner, so we brothers were left to mess around in the kitchen and come up with something ourselves."

"What a good host."

Ram looked at her trying to interpret her meaning. He had not yet learned to read her, so he went on. "We brought the concoction to the table, and Jyothi tore off a piece of naan, scooped up the curry with it, and made a face when she tasted it."

"How rude!"

"She was just getting started. She shoved the bread back into the soupy vegetables, and stomped off into the kitchen with the bowl stretched out ahead of her, at arm's length."

"As if it stunk?" Alice giggled.

"Correct. She determined she would rescue dinner, but we had to listen to her complaints all the while." It was the last dinner Jyothi would ever make for her husband. After days spent beseeching, followed by weeks of cajoling, Deepak saw that she was serious about her retirement. Knowing how stubborn she was, Deepak had no choice but to take up the slack. He quickly became a proficient cook, better than his wife had been, although she critiqued him mercilessly.

However, at eighty, Deepak too was tired of cooking. "It hurts my old knees to stand over the griddle making dosa," he complained. Hence they moved to the godsend that was Nana Nani Home for the Aged.

There were some aspects of old age Deepak did not embrace. He insisted that his hair was naturally as black as it had been in his youth, while his siblings had all greyed around him. "I am the only one in the family not going grey," he would proclaim, daring his audience to contradict him. Ram thought back to the first time he had found a small black stain in the bathroom sink after a visit from his brother, and suppressed a chuckle as he knocked on the door.

Deepak opened it with one hand; the other held a comb stained black, pungent with the odor of hair dye. He hastily put the comb on a table where it left a black smear. Jyothi quickly scooped the comb into her palm and scrubbed at the table with a handkerchief pulled from her

blouse. The cane she always dangled from her wrist like a purse clattered to the floor.

The brothers didn't hear the noise over the sound of their own voices speaking loudly in the language they had grown up speaking. They continued to squeeze each other's shoulders and pat one another's backs until Jyothi pushed her round body between theirs. The idea that the brothers might like some private time was not an idea she ever entertained, although Ramesh held out a narrow hope that she might, someday.

Not bloody likely, he thought now, as she pressed her flesh against him and tugged him to the couch, chattering at him over the sound of her husband's story about other hotels he had visited, much less impressive than the one they were in. They were among the group of relatives and friends being put up by the grandnephew's new father-in-law, and Deepak spread his arms exuberantly with the pleasure of having been included. It was as if he had won a prize. He tried out his star-struck argument that the entire family was somehow marrying up with the grandnephew's alliance, but Ram just shook his head.

It was not the response Deepak wanted, so he pointed again to the furnishings in the suite. "This hotel is superior to all others we have visited! All amenities! I see movie people walking all over in the halls. Our little bride's Appa is very famous."

Ram's brother was too old to be anyone's groupie. It was undignified. Ram hated the diminishment Father Time had wreaked on his dynamic older brother, but this particular change was especially infuriating.

At the beginning, when seven of them lived together in the old two-room apartment, Deepak, who was considered not only handsome but blessed with an optimistic disposition, had been so full of confidence that he was not impressed by much. His ascent in the cigarette company seemed meteoric to the family, and they based all their hopes for a better life on him. "I still remember how they would summon you in the middle of the night to fix the machine that rolled out long cylinders of wrapped tobacco for cigarettes," Ram reminisced with him whenever Deepak was in the mood for a backward glance. "I would stir in my sleep, eyes opening in time to see you rush out the door into the dark, Amma holding out a tiffin carrier to you, fretting about your interrupted rest." It wasn't until Deepak began to panic about the level of his success (not as little as he feared, not as much as he hoped) that he began to correct these family stories with increasingly preposterous claims.

—I worked hard so you could keep staying in school.

Where else would I be? I was a child!

—Jyothi and I helped raise you, yet now you have no time for us.

Appa and Amma raised me, and if I have no time for you now it is because I have a demanding job on the other side of the world.

—You have allowed your commitments that side more importance than your family this side!

And so it went on and on, a refrain once begun still chiming through the years. It was difficult for Ram to ignore the echoes, but in this moment, in the overbuilt garish hotel, he needed to focus on the one fact his brother let slip: although he claimed to be retired or semi-retired or a consultant, Deepak was still employed. At least one thing is good, as their mother would say. Even in a culture that encouraged early retirement, why should Deepak fully retire, even at this ripe old age? So he could watch TV with his wife all day? He hadn't yet made all her wishes come true, as she was fond of reminding him, and they needed more money than a pension provided. She depended on his consulting fees for her luxuries, complaining that she would have to sell her jewelry if his efforts fell short.

Ram asked Deepak, "So, your old bosses still send you out?" He wanted to know details of his brother's travel, and everything there was to know about his latest project.

"On occasional trips only." It was Deepak's instinct to back away from whatever he was on the verge of confessing. He's subversive, Alice often said.

"They put us in a small suite with steps. I cannot climb steps!" Jyothi interjected in an outraged way, looking daggers at the cane on the floor.

"So you both went?" Ram was surprised. Jyothi usually excused herself from such exertions. She avoided tasks such as visiting people she did not want to see, or situations she didn't like (*Their house is too dark! They begrudge our calling long distance on their phone!*) using vague explanations of vaguer illnesses.

"She cannot be left alone," Deepak explained, after a lifetime of leaving her alone. In reality, she was healthy enough to do the things that she enjoyed. How had she been able to convince her husband otherwise, for all these years? "Also she was grieving the loss of her little dog. I thought a vacation would lift her spirit." Jyothi, at the mention of her dog, began to cry. Her husband shrugged his shoulders and moved a little so that his brother saw his own helpless gesture but his wife did not. Deepak embraced her, whispering the calming phrases he had developed over a lifetime.

Ram let himself out of the suite and softly closed the door. Before Deepak married Jyothi, trailing her demands behind her like a wedding veil, he had been Ram's protector. "Watch out, or my brother will beat up your brother" was a familiar enough playground battle-cry, and Ram felt safe if Deepak was around. Now the brothers could barely have a private conversation.

"How was the visit with Deepak," Alice mumbled, her lips sticky with sleep. She didn't need to open her eyes to sense her husband's presence. This ability, this bit of magic, uncovered the first time she had sensed his presence without seeing him, each of them alone in a dark theater, had unsettled Ram in their early years together. Now it comforted him with its quirky dependability.

"Oh, he's all smitten by the fact that Venky's new father-in-law has put us up at this overpriced hotel."

In a society where marriages were soldered together with the stink of a merger, the overhang of cultural tradition legitimizing alliances between families, everyone had his price. Ram didn't expect his brother's to be so low. "He's another one chortling over the deal our grandnephew has made. He thinks the little bride will somehow strengthen the joint-family finances. Does he expect she will dole out an allowance to each of us every week? I know some would take it. I wonder what bargain the boy has made with the bride's side. He is quite a groomzilla."

"And here I always thought the girls were the chattel." Alice's eyes were fully open now. She raised her body up on one elbow.

"No, it is equal opportunity backwardness."

"I remember that Deepak was the one who admitted to me that he knew you were happy in our love-match, but wanted to know how our marriage benefited him. He's essentially a businessman. A leopard can't change its spots." When the conversation took a turn like this, Alice usually dug right in. Over the years, the subject of arranged marriage had remained interesting to her, but today she felt less invested. It worried Ram, who knew she had always had a sense of being alone, despite the fact that he loved her. He had willingly sacrificed his family's good opinion of him to marry her, and was left with the feeling that if it was not for the emotional distance from his family he so carefully cultivated, his wife could easily have been subsumed by them. Ram wondered if she would have been happier if he had allowed that to happen.

Her eyes were closing again.

"No, there is no time for more sleeping. You had better get ready," Ram said. "I will wait in the other room."

Left alone, Alice did her hair in a demure French twist, rolling the strands hand over fist. Unsatisfied with the geometry, she sighed and pulled out all the hairpins. She let her silver hair fall past her shoulders, past her waist. In an American setting, very long hair was the exception, but in India, any woman who could grow hair, did so.

Ramesh came back to check on her again. Had she even heard him remind her of the time? No. All her attention was fixed on a bracelet. She had draped it across her wrist, and was slowly rubbing the stones with her thumb. This particular piece was the first Sundari had given Alice years before, presented with great ceremony. Nestled inside a box with tell-tale crushed corners, Sundari had tried to pass it off as new, but when she saw the couple register the dust between the vermilion nuggets, and exchange smirks, she drew her mouth into a silent thin line and marched out of the room. Alice, smiling broadly, had wiped the piece with tissue and said to Ram, "How old do you suppose this dust is, actually?"

Drawing his forefinger across the red stones, he said, "Ancient. Antique. Also, I am sure I have seen this piece before, but on whose dresser and in which home?"

"I'll think of it as another priceless heirloom then. Your cousin will want me to wear it to the

next family wedding.”

“You could always tell her that you cannot, because you must wait until five days have elapsed and you are sure there are no evil spirits in it.” At the time they had both laughed at Sundari and all her superstitions, but now Ram found himself fastening the bracelet on Alice’s wrist with a somber expression. “This will please Sundari,” he said with a straight face.

He was so tired of it all. Everything tasted of ashes. Glancing at the outfits draped on the chair, he made an exasperated sound, sucking his breath in over his teeth. “Still can’t choose?” Alice indicated he should pick. Green or blue? Grass or sky? Ram reached into the closet and pulled out a Western cocktail dress of pale pink silk instead, with long embroidered sleeves, a hem just past the knees. He took Alice in the crook of his arm and unfastened her robe. He pushed the fabric from her shoulders and let it fall in a terrycloth pool at her feet. He suppressed a groan of pleasure, which made her smile. Then, pulling her into his lap, he eased her feet first into the dress, sliding it over her lingerie while he gradually set her upright. He zipped her up, murmuring “Ah, the scream of the zipper,” and tied the sash with one hand.

“Single-handed. The way a good cook breaks eggs,” Alice smiled. Pliable as a rag doll, she had let him do as he pleased for several minutes, but now, recovering her agency, she walked to the dresser, picked up her package of bindi dots, and held them up to him. He shook his head in the negative, and pointed at the shoes he wanted to see her in. She had brought both ballet slippers and heels, and raised her eyebrows in surprise at his choice. Cupping the black pumps to her heels, she knew the shoes would make her taller than the tallest man in the room. Whoever the man, at these gatherings he never exceeded five and a half feet stretched vertically. None of them liked being short, and Alice’s American Amazon posture always made both the men and the women frown. They all believed that a woman towering over the men was a deliberate sign of disrespect. Good.

After a last glance in the mirror, Alice grabbed her small sketchbook. She carried it with her at all times, the way other people carried phones. She stroked the cover with her thumb, and eyed the extravagantly wrapped wedding gift on the bureau.

“I will get it,” Ram said. He did, and walked out of the suite with his hand lightly touching her back. The two of them descended the stairs. “You look beautiful,” he said as he opened the gilded front door of the hotel, his dark eyes softening.

“Thank you, love.” Now it was her turn to give him an appraising look. His thick, silver hair showed the teeth of the comb but the top button on his kurta needed fastening. Alice did it up while she kissed his cheek, the grazing gestures of a lifetime. “You look dashing, all dolled up like that.”

He took her hand, kissed it, and held it against his chest. Once again they were so connected he briefly mistook her hand for his.

Cheryl Snell

Bombay Trilogy

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