



Mahadeva
& other stories

Srivi Kalyan

Mahadeva & other stories

Srivi Kalyan

Oxford Bookstore e-author Version 4
Second Runner Up
Copyright ©Apeejay Oxford Bookstores Pvt. Ltd.

Srivi Kalyan won the second runner up in the Oxford Bookstore e-author 4 contest in 2006. This collection of stories has been published on the [Oxford Bookstore](#) website.

Mahadeva and Train have also been published in the Reader's Digest supplement 'Joy'

Visit the [site](#) to learn about the contest and read the books by other winners.

Stories

Mahadeva.....	5
The Cracked Wall.....	29
Anant, the Endless.....	47
Train.....	61
Hands.....	78

Mahadeva

Mahadeva!
The greatest of gods
If he lived in the heavens
he would be of no use to the creatures on earth.
If he lived on the earth
he would be of no use to the gods

Where is he to live?
And yet he is Mahadeva- the greatest of gods

He cannot live inside anyone
for sooner or later
he has to take all responsibility
for all errors
The greatest of gods Mahadeva
Where is he to live?

Spanning the space
between the earth and the heavens
destined to have no space for himself,
the greatest of gods
Where is he to live?
Mahadeva!

1

Mahadeva! This is a conversation, a very private conversation between you and you. It is something that must happen nowhere else but here and now, where the now ceases to be a fraction of time and the here ceases to be a division of space.’

Mahadeva laughed at his own invention, his own unintentional fallacy of himself. Fifty years of private conversations. Sixty-five years of age is a good time to laugh at one’s own invention, at oneself. It is as good as laughing at it at twenty and repeatedly every five years hence; Sixty-five years in conversation, in relationship, speaking with no fraction of time and no division of space; *Sixty-five years of Mahadeva in conversation with himself.*

“Mahadeva is a writer, he writes because it gives him great pleasure to write. When he writes, he meets more people than he does when he sits by himself and stares out of a window, or when he takes a stroll down a street. Mahadeva has no particular restrictions about what he will write. He neither seeks any particular kind of satisfaction through writing nor does he want to explore

people's lives, great philosophies or crimes. He has no requirement even to describe what he sees, meets, feels or realizes. He doesn't need to write about nature, people, gods or mythical beings. He doesn't have to invent any specific character or talk about the machine age, computers and ultra modern futuristic fantasy. He could just be writing about a perfectly ordinary broken piece of glass and yet not seek to explore anything about life.

Mahadeva loves to drink a glass of milk every morning and watch the group of birds that start the day. He loves to hear them chirping on the tree, which overlooks his balcony. It is not a pastime for him. He actually likes to watch them everyday. Sometimes he entertains himself by writing unexpected stories. And one such is what he has started today; *'The story of Mahadeva - the greatest of gods.'*

As Mahadeva observed his wandering thoughts, his verse gave him the direction to write further. He was still seated at the balcony; the birds had left long ago.

Mahadeva had been married at some point of time. His wife had been a very good companion and would have continued to be if she had not passed away a few years ago. His sons still complained that he, Mahadeva had no grief at the tremendous loss of his wife. They could not accept that he had continued to write about frivolous things as soon as the last rites for the *dead body* had been completed.

It was a good choice that Mahadeva had made earlier that he would stay alone. Now he had no requirement to hear about the celebration of grief. He did not have to listen to his sons' accusations regarding his lack of love for Paaru. So Mahadeva was living alone in the apartment with no particular problems. He was a healthy man and had saved sufficient money. He had no particular worries, which was one of the reasons he was so often blamed for having no feelings. But perhaps he really did not have feelings.

He was neither thrilled by the greatness or wonder of life nor moved by the intensity of sorrow or pain. He never entertained any belief and hence had no burdens.

A sixty five year old man with no feelings, who lacked the capacity to feel, conversed with himself, did not require beliefs and did not celebrate grief. - Mahadeva laughed at himself again. It amused him greatly to know how boring his life would sound to an outsider. A marvelously delicious chuckle escaped his throat. There was an answering call from a far off bird at this sudden unexpected sound of delight.

2

Mahadeva left the balcony as the heat blazed through it. He went in to wash his coffee cup. The water made a lovely sloshing noise as he washed the cup. The sensual delight of water falling on his wrinkled hands and traveling through their many divides and folds made him keep the tap open a little longer.

He prepared rice and rasam, traditional south Indian food items and then left the kitchen for the living room.

‘Hey father of the thousand gods!
Have you cried long enough to know that you are
crying?’

Have you slept long enough to know that you are
sleeping?'

The notebook in which he wrote was single ruled, and the front cover had a picture of red pencils that seemed to burst forth from an unseen container. The pencils were sharp and ready for use. Mahadeva was very particular about the cover of his notebooks.

‘Mahadeva!

Have you found a place for yourself yet?

Are you still searching?

or have you also stopped the search?’

3

Mahadeva didn't feel old. He almost felt ancient, as if he didn't quite belong to the present time period.

Mahadeva, the god who strolled through the fields never felt old or ancient. He could be met at anytime provided you knew where to find him. He held the intimacy of a wanderer. Mahadeva was fond of talking to him. He was the kind of god who gave you no right to pray or demand

anything out of him; a very subtle god, who could be found or not found at a certain space and time.

Mahadeva smiled to himself as he thought about this God. The God who roamed conveniently undisturbed by built walls, closed rooms, sanctified temples and praying humans. He rarely addressed gatherings, but had more time for private conversations. Sometimes he would be seated casually under a tree or lying down and resting on one hand with a smile on his face, watching birds, listening to rustle of leaves. Then he would be very pleased to talk.

Mahadeva had lots of memories of the *wandering* God. He had been popularly called ‘kaatru kadavul’ in Tamil. He wasn’t the popular God of winds. He was the God who moved like the winds. He could never be found at the same place. He was an unexpected visitor and a very good one too. He never demanded anything out of the host. He just laughed, made merry, talked serious and went away.

He was called by various names by different people, but Mahadeva preferred to call him Mahadeva. It created a

great sense of delight in him and a feeling that he would encounter the God constantly. He chuckled to himself in great satisfaction.

4

Mahadeva remembered his beautiful wife. He had been walking along the fields to meet the wandering Mahadeva when he had first caught sight of her. She had been standing in the middle of the fields smiling at the swaying rice plants. She was a young refreshing girl, a beautiful woman. For a moment, she had mistaken him for Mahadeva. Daring to laugh at the wanderer she had asked, 'Have you found a place to stay or would you like to stay with our cows?' Mahadeva had been startled until it dawned on him that she was speaking to the wandering God. She had run away laughing with the rice fields by the time it struck him.

Mahadeva had promptly reported at her cowshed the following evening and demanded some milk. 'Mahadeva the hoax, so you have come', she had said. Her eyes were fearless and mischievous. She was laughing. She had realized the blunder she had committed the previous

day and collected sufficient information to know he was Mahadeva - ‘the hoax’

Mahadeva the wandering god had guffawed as they teased each other. Soon they had got married under Mahadeva’s favorite tree where he was found to rest frequently. It had been a very simple wedding. He and his wife had shared many things together over the years. For many years when she got angry with him, she called him Mahadeva- the hoax.

He loved her, but he had never learned to cry. Crying had just not happened. Mahadeva thought his sons had sufficient reason to be angry with him. But there was nothing much he could do about it.

5

The entire village was considered to be a sacred place because Mahadeva could be just anywhere: under the pipal tree, in the heart of the fields, by the river, in the abandoned houses, on the streets. He could be walking with the cows as they sauntered back home, playing *pachai kudirai* (leaping frog) with the children or

drinking water from the wells. Nobody ever denied the existence of the sacred.

Mahadeva loved the sound of water, the sound of a bucket touching the source of water. He splashed the bucket in the water for quite some time before he pulled it out with water to drink. Cold, life-giving water was always the most welcome thing in the scorching heat of the day.

Mahadeva had turned up one of the days at the well. He had splashed the bucket into the well with great joy. He was in a very good frame of mind for conversation. Water always seemed to set him into a good mood and so Mahadeva conversed with Mahadeva that day about the pleasure of drinking water from the well. He even gossiped about the sound of anklets that were synonymous to the laughter of water. Mahadeva had been surprised to know that the wandering God also loved to splash the bucket in the water for a while before drawing it out from the well.

‘So you too are Mahadeva, Mahadeva the hoax’, the wandering God had said in their first meeting. He had

laughed with great pleasure at the paradox. He had subsequently extended his conversation to spinning tops. Mahadeva had been very pleased with the idea that the god also liked to play with tops. This episode had occurred when he had been very young, perhaps only ten years old. He had produced his top from the varied objects that bulged out of his pockets and both the Mahadevas spent a whole afternoon spinning tops.

Mahadeva had never thought it was a strange thing to find a God walking on the streets. He was used to it. In fact it was the most normal thing to happen. However, temples still perplexed him in spite of residing in their proximity for the last forty years. He was unable to associate with the idea of praying to gods, of witnessing gods imprisoned within walls. He wondered how his sons had learned such associations so easily.

Mahadeva wondered if his sons would ever understand the god who wanders, who has no place to stay, who might be walking in the heavens or on earth at any given point of time; a god who never gave a definite chance and assurance to pray.

Mahadeva smiled at his own line. He thought it was a good idea, that it is only gods who give you assurance to pray. But what if they didn't, like Mahadeva. He was the kind of God you could be sure was not the one who brought about disasters.

6

'Does Mahadeva love his sons?' he wondered as he scribbled patterns with his pen. He had never chanced to meet them in the pathways of life, as he had met his wife during his quest for Mahadeva. They were always out of context for him as he was for them. This strange issue wasn't what was identified as a generation gap. It was more profound than that. Mahadeva thought it was the way people interpreted 'god' that played a vital role.

Mahadeva had never acquired the art of praying to a god, blaming him, bargaining with him and pleading to him. Mahadeva had always been the wanderer, the god who held more private conversations, laughed, made merry, talked serious and vanished. There was no destined order in his life, neither of time nor of space. He was so much

simpler. Mahadeva's own life had been designed in a similar fashion without any complications.

Mahadeva attributed much of his education about life to Mahadeva who had accompanied him one evening showing him birds, insects, different herbs and crops. This event had happened when he had been even younger, only around five years old.

Mahadeva wondered if moving to the city had made his sons insensitive to Mahadeva. But he couldn't really believe it for he, Mahadeva had met the wanderer many a time even in the hustle-bustle of the city. Often he had heard the clanging sound of the bucket in the well in his backyard when no one else had been near it.

7

Mahadeva loved names, especially names that belonged to Gods. Whenever he walked down the streets, he heard Gods being called by Gods. He liked the idea very much. There were Gods and more Gods. He smiled each time he heard a name being called. One more God he uttered to himself and walked down the street. The children on the street always watched out for Mahadeva. They

counted the number of times he smiled. That was part of their game.

8

Mahadeva had a sudden insistent desire to plough the field. He generally didn't think about fields. But now the memory surged within him. He just wanted to plough the fields and sing those strange songs that had made him feel like a thread between the earth and sky. He called it the 'song of the Mahadevas'. He took great pride in calling every element that joined in the song as another Mahadeva.

'Mahadeva sprinting in the winds
Do you eat the Mahadeva that grows on the earth?'

He sang loudly remembering the old times.

Mahadeva perching on the growing one
Are you going to fly away when the flying Mahadeva
gives you a song?
Mahadeva, the tall wheats of my fields
Have you had a good time with the Mahadeva of the
light?

And he was still singing aloud, ploughing in the air with his hands, when his sons entered the house. They had quite enjoyed the seemingly ridiculous song.

‘Oh!’ He said as he saw them at the sudden breach of his privacy.

‘Oh father why are you so stuck with your name?’, they asked him.

The short break did not tamper with Mahadeva’s spirits.

Mahadeva of the winding road
Have you curved around the fishing pond?

He continued as soon as his sons left.

Mahadeva the greatest of Gods
Have you found a place to stay?
Mahadeva is ploughing the fields
And singing a Mahadeva
And the Mahadeva who flies knows the tune
Come my good Mahadeva!

This morning, there is space for you in the fields.

It was a good song. It always pleased Mahadeva the God and whenever he was invited he came over. Mahadeva had many memories of the song, many good memories. The last line could always be changed to invite any Mahadeva. Sometimes he called a bird or a squirrel. Sometimes he stood by the curved bending road and called in a snake.

He had a good many friends among the Gods, he told himself.

9

Many a time, Mahadeva the God would join him and they would chat together till late in the evenings and a wandering stork or a goat or sometimes a buffalo would join them for a while.

‘Ah!’ His good sons who had learned the art of praying knew nothing about the Gods he thought. But he couldn’t do anything about it because they had always had strange beliefs about Gods. Mahadeva had never been able to explain to them what it meant to feel and see Gods in everyday lives, especially the great God who

wandered, the wonderful Mahadeva whose company, he Mahadeva cherished greatly. They had refused to believe in him and had never chanced to see what he had seen. He wondered sometimes if the children had made him feel lonelier, or perhaps alone?

Of course one cannot force or expect another to believe in one's own beliefs. Mahadeva had never forced his sons. They had made their own choices about prayer. Mahadeva had found it very strange that his sons wanted to go to a place and pray. He had never thought that something as simple as a God could make so much of difference to perception and understanding.

It took him a long time to understand that perhaps a God was not so simple as Mahadeva.

10

Mahadeva had wanted to go on a journey, two days before his wife died. They had planned a nice trip back to the fields, to their village. But it so happened that a day before the trip, his wife told him that she would die the next day. So Mahadeva must make the journey alone later. She hadn't been ailing from any particular

sickness. She just knew she wouldn't be alive any longer and Mahadeva had also known it the moment she said it. So they made the best of the two days they had with them. They cooked a good lot of dishes, sang together, played the veena, spoke of Mahadeva and she laughed many a time at Mahadeva the hoax. Both of them went to the beach, sat through the evening winds. She knew that he would not cry after her death. Yes, he would miss her presence, but it would do nothing to his life. It would not wreck him in any way. She knew she had made a good choice when she married Mahadeva the hoax. What she liked about him was his ability to live alone. He required no one and yet no one else could have loved her, the way he did. He loved her in a very special way. He loved her in freedom. It was as if she was a sacred banyan tree or a flying eagle. His love had the intensity of open skies. But he had not learned to cry.

She knew her children would never understand him, his lack of tears, the poetry and metaphor that shaped his life. So she made sure that he would have no requirement to live with them. She knew he would end up feeling lonely if he stayed with them.

Mahadeva had no knowledge that love was such a distant complicated thing till he met his sons alone without his wife. He thought she had made a wise decision when she had refused to live with her sons. When he remembered her, he realized how clever and intelligent she had been. How much she had planned in his life. She had been careful enough to make sure that temples and prayers would never affect him. He would never have realized the small adjustments that she made, had he not loved her as much as he did. And perhaps if he had not noticed the judgments, he would never have understood the great dividing disparities between his sons and him.

Maybe if she had not passed away they would have spent another evening chatting under their favorite tree and they might have heard again the uproarious laughter of Mahadeva as he joined both of them in their jokes.

11

Mahadeva thought it would be nice to meet his old friends who knew of no other kind of God other than Mahadeva. It had been a very long time since they had talked about the games they had played, the walk into

the forest, the night in the caves, the swim in the river; everything guided and taught to them by Mahadeva.

Mahadeva had kept their addresses safely over many years. He called one by one, some at their houses, some by their phone numbers. He found it very strange, to see tired old men, having lost out in a battle of life. He noticed that they had forgotten their days with Mahadeva. He arranged for a common meeting of all twenty of them who had ventured out of the village. All of them came and all of them spoke and when it came to sharing memories, there was a strange lock on Mahadeva. They spoke of life as if Mahadeva had had no role to play in it, Mahadeva, the greatest of Gods.

Mahadeva wondered and thought, ‘There is no place for you Mahadeva, and indeed it is strange.’ As everyone got up to leave, one of his old friends spoke for the rest. We know why you have called us all here Mahadeva and we must confess that all of us have learned to pray. We have learned to visit the temples and can no more speak without guilt. We have heard your song of the Mahadevas, and when we see you we remember the days we passed under the mango trees and the days we played

with tops. It is good you have kept everything alive. We haven't met Mahadeva in years and we have no courage to challenge him again to play tops with us. They left one by one and Mahadeva smiled and played the veena. He remembered his wife again, she had told him 'Mahadeva the hoax, one day you will find that you are alone and that is the day you will know you are not alone.'

He had a very peaceful sleep that night.

12

Mahadeva packed up his belongings, told his sons that he wished to go on a pilgrimage. They were extremely pleased to note that their father had at last changed for the good.

Mahadeva boarded the bus to his village. The sounds of the city mellowed into the crickety sound of the old bus running into the silent by-lanes and eventually paused at the destination. Mahadeva got down and went to his house. It had been his wife's idea that he renovate it and keep it inhabitable. Mahadeva left his luggage, had a refreshing bath and walked down to the tree. It was still there fortunately because of its religious significance. He

sat down and there came from behind him the voice of Mahadeva.

‘Ah! How long it has been Mahadeva! Good! What brings you here?’ He asked.

‘I am on a pilgrimage to see you’ Mahadeva replied seriously.

Mahadeva! The greatest of Gods said, ‘So am I’ and the two Mahadevas cackled into laughter.

‘So Mahadeva, have you still not found a place to stay?’
‘Don’t you speak of it Mahadeva. But I must thank your wife for the good service she rendered to me in offering her cowshed. It still gives me shelter when I need it.’

And the two Mahadevas chatted, one the God and other the God.

13

Mahadeva the god picked up the notebook, which had the cover of pencils ready to burst out and read the first page...

Mahadeva!

The greatest of gods

If he lived in the heavens

he would be of no use to the creatures on earth

and if he lived on the earth

he would be of no use to Gods

Where is he to live?

And yet he is Mahadeva- the greatest of Gods...

He then asked ‘Whom were you writing about, you or me?’ Both of them burst into laughter again looking at each other’s faces.

And the two Mahadevas laughed together for a long time, one the God and other the God.

The Cracked Wall

The Cracked Wall

1

‘That’s too close to reality’, I said and laughed. I had not meant to laugh at the painting. But in front of me was a wall, just a blank white wall and a tiny crack. A little girl was patiently watching the crack.

‘What do you mean, Leela?’ my friend asked me.

‘It reminds me of the days when I watched cracks on walls. I searched for different kinds of cracks. Grey cracks on blue walls, white cracks on orange walls, funny shaped cracks on yellow walls. I also loved to search for cracks between torn film posters. The cracks made me feel closer to life. Just like the little girl in the painting.’

‘So can you tell us what the little girl in the painting is thinking?’ a voice called from behind. I had certainly not expected the artist. ‘Ivan’ he said softly, introducing himself.

That was the first time we met, Ivan and I. Ivan had had many exhibitions. But he was not an artist at his core. He

didn't seek to find walls for his paintings. Ivan hardly had time for friendships. He didn't believe in them. He had strange ideas about human relationships. He cherished them the way he watched cracks developing on walls. If I had not seen that painting, perhaps we would never have chosen to speak about and observe the intricacies of life together.

'Leela! The lovely play of life', he would call me affectionately. He loved the mundane.

2

Ivan and I had an uncanny love for counting potholes on the streets. If anyone had watched us or listened in on our conversations, they might have found us sacrilegious. It appeared like we did not value life. There seemed to be no depth to our perception of life.

However, there was Ivan, who touched a flower by a roadside pothole and expressed amazement that it was alive, fresh and still retained its original colors after an occasional rainfall. Sometimes I wondered if he felt pain. If he did, pain never added creases to his visage.

He loved stroking animals, lying down on wet grass, and jumping over small hurdles. He always smiled and his smile was genuine.

3

He had displayed his artwork all over the world. Oftentimes he did not reveal his identity to his buyers. He enjoyed watching people and their reactions to his work.

I enjoyed meeting Ivan. He never failed to surprise me. I loved doodling, photography, painting and design. We discussed a range of subjects. Suddenly he would give me a call and I would hear his smile on the phone. The first time he asked me what I loved doing, I said, ‘Gaze’ He never asked me to explain further. He looked at me and his gaze took in all that I loved about the earth, about living. ‘What else do you love?’ he persisted, ‘Writing’, I said. Since then every time we met, he made it an unwritten rule that I bring a piece of writing for him. He always returned my work to me. There was one piece however that went into his file. Whenever I asked him why he loved that piece so much, he smiled and said, ‘I don’t have the answer yet.’ Since then I have continued to write voluminously, but strangely that was

the only fragment that found a place in Ivan's wine red file.

4

'Many years ago, I began 'looking' at crows. Crows continue to fascinate me. Utter black, slight shades of grey in-between and black eyes that pop out. As I keep watching crows, shivering in rain, resting on trees, calling out for food, cawing mercilessly.... the visuals become stronger in my mind. Black against green; fluid forms against the flowing winds; a sudden flash of movement and a black streak against the sky. It is interesting the way visuals weave narratives of their own. I wonder what would motivate my narratives if I had no capacity to watch visuals.

How are thoughts created? How visual are they? Do our imaginations have images? Do our professions dictate our power to visualize? How different are the visualizations of artists, poets and scientists.... Do the landscapes we live in change the way we look at things? How do stories that we have read and heard affect our visual sensitivity?

The questions go on. Meanwhile my favorite image creeps into my mind. The crow contemplates on the edge of a raft and watches the blending of the sea and the sky. Perhaps it is not very important to watch the crow. He is bound to fly away... but the visual is worth the watch!”

This was a piece of writing I took to show Ivan in the third year of our meeting. Ivan loved my crows. Sometimes I photographed them, sometimes I sketched. At other times they were merely quick entertaining lines along the margins of a notebook. He took time to watch crows more closely that year. He began inventing stories and gossips as he watched them. It was delightful listening to him. I laughed for hours afterwards. The crows that we doodled together found their honorable positions in photograph stands over the fridge, door handles, even over the old cuckoo clock. We made “The Exotic Crow” calendar together. It was a special title for both of us “The exotic and the mundane” ‘Everything is exotic for us, isn’t it?’ he said – ‘The beggars on the street, physical handicap, inability to express, disease, death, pain, joy.... Is there anything that ceases to be exotic to the human eye?’ I carefully watched him for any trace of pain. But those were merely observations

that he shared in a factual tone with me. Ivan! Does anything make you feel very sad? I asked him once. ‘Yes! A lot of things! And a lot of things make me happy. I don’t fight to be in pain or in joy’ he answered.

5

He was a teacher at heart. He often spoke about education with a sense of awe. He traveled widely teaching history. ‘I have found my counterpart in spirit in the pages of history, I am yet to yet to find one in physicality’, he used to say often. I attended one of his classes on ‘power’. There were four photographs on the wall, a skyscraper, a temple gopuram, a minaret and a church. He slowly looked at everyone in the class and asked his question, ‘What is the first question you can think of when you look at these pictures?’

‘Why is there an obsession for height throughout human history Mr. Ivan?’ asked one of his students. Ivan was seated. He smiled and looked up at the student.

‘Muthu, it is this sense of the upward glance, I feel elated when I look up to you.’

The class burst into laughter. It was one of those rare moments when everyone feels the sheer absurdity of human concepts.

He continued. ‘Pray! Do not laugh. Look upwards. There is a certain sense of dignity when you hold your face up and look at the skies. It is not only about you or centuries of human concepts, but the sheer vastness of the earth that you inhabit. On the contrary, the sense of power is very different when you wish to kill the nuances of that upward glance. The instant power follows the definition of extending one’s control over another; you lose the essence of the upward glance. Then none of these buildings have any further meaning. The next time you walk home, look up and look up at your own life. Look at what grows from within you and touches the sky. That will mark the end of your power and the beginning of your life.’

I loved that class. What Ivan had spoken about was a vision that I had cherished within myself and never arranged into words.

Muthu's question went into the wine red file. The wine red file was a very special file. The best questions from his students, the best answers they had scribbled down for his questions, doodles, his favorite quotes, dried flowers, things that touched him and moved him most were all arranged neatly in the file. I loved arranging Ivan's files. Each little piece that went into it added to the rich texture of his life.

6

It must have been almost five years since that class on power when we met Muthu again. Both of us were sitting and watching the sea. We had not spoken anything in the last two hours. When Muthu came, Ivan was still watching the sea and occasionally he glanced at me. He had always loved the way my hair formed myriad shapes to the winds. Muthu must have been watching us for a while before he decided to disturb our silence.

'Hello Mr. Ivan', he said casually. He had always looked up to Ivan and there was a deep sense of affection, something that was quite close to reverence in his eyes. Ah Muthu! How are you?' Ivan asked.

‘I have a question for you, Mr. Ivan. Don’t you feel angry?’ Muthu asked.

Ivan was still watching the sea and the sky. He gestured with his hands when he spoke. If he had learnt to dance, he would have been a very elegant dancer.

What should I be angry with, Muthu- these beautiful skies, this lovely earth, this salty water, the human being?

Muthu grabbed his hands suddenly and cried for a long time.

‘I am still angry Ivan, angry at what they do to you.’

Ivan waited for a long time till Muthu was calmer. ‘What do you think they are doing to me Muthu?’

‘You don’t even exist to the normal world, do you?’

Ivan released his hands from Muthu’s hold and picked up the sands. As he let the sand flow through his hands, the wind raced the particles. It was an instance of beauty. ‘What is normal? Touch my hand, feel me, touch these sands, and look as far as my eyes can see.... How can it be that I am not part of this earth, of this network? Who decides my place on earth Muthu? Who is normal?’ and he laughed.

Muthu was silent. He joined us as we watched the sky turning darker. ‘Leela!’ started Muthu suddenly. He never finished his sentence. Ivan looked at him for a long-time and said gently, ‘Muthu, Leela loves me and she has spent more time with me than any other human being in her life. We can sit together and watch crows and sunsets, potholes and ugly scars. There can be no anger when you really love someone Muthu. There can be no anger at anyone or anything. It is in this love that life begins. I don’t seek to belong; I don’t need to be sanctioned power to coexist with other human beings. I feel at one with the earth, with the sands that tickle me and trickle through my hand. Before long I will be gone. The sands that I have touched will be scattered, but while I am here, I cannot cease to marvel, I cannot cease to love, and I cannot cease to live!’

7

Ivan called me on a Monday. It was unusual. We always met on Sundays if we were in the same city. Mondays were workdays. ‘I have something to show you’, said Ivan. It was the first time that I heard excitement. When I went to meet him, he was glowing. He had painted a pregnant woman. ‘Look at it’, he said. ‘Look at that

womb... It's a wonder. Imagine life growing within her. She must love touching and feeling herself!

‘How can they kill her so mercilessly?’ He said suddenly. He threw the brush aside. He cowered in fright in a corner and he stayed there for almost two hours. What had touched him so much? Why was he weeping so piteously? He had always talked about violence in the world as if it was something outside of him. This was the first time I saw him tortured by humans killing each other.

‘It takes so much for a life to be created, and then a single weapon, mindless anger and life doesn't matter anymore! How can we be so insensitive? How can we pass this by as a play of life Leela?’

When I was pregnant, I remembered that painting. I wondered what Ivan must have gone through when he painted it. He had spoken as if he had experienced all the emotions of a mother. He knew the feel of every limb, every tiny little movement of the child. When he knew I was pregnant, his face glowed again for many months.

When my children were born, he loved them. He loved touching them, holding them, and being with them as often as he could. He didn't leave the city for a year when they were born. It was the first time he had remained in the same city for so long.

He was always there with my children when they needed him most. He often showed them tiny nests hidden on trees, wayside flowers and cracks on the walls.

8

The first time I told him that I loved him; he smiled at me for a long time. He had just completed a class on love and war. The question he left on the board was,

“Do you think it was Love that transformed Ashoka on the battlefield? Describe the emotion Ashoka went through as he touched a fallen corpse.”

The students had left the classroom. They were discussing Ashoka. I had walked into the classroom unexpectedly. It had taken me three hours to drive down to the college in the old town. I had desperately wanted to meet Ivan. I couldn't wait. My hair was disheveled. I

looked like I had been rolling on the ground. I had traveled through miles of kacha roads.

‘Leela, the lovely play of life!’ he exclaimed as I entered the classroom. His glance was sensual, loving, concerned, and delighted.

I paused and focused my glance on the blackboard, ‘Tell me Ivan! What did the corpse feel when it was loved?’

Ivan laughed at me. ‘You were never dead my love! You never had to say you love me!’

Nonetheless! That was our relationship. We loved each other all our lives and we never had to claim it. It was like one of those rare cracks on the wall, a crack, which made a thousand lovely patterns.

He gifted me a sculpture for my marriage. It was an amazingly well constructed bridge, but unfinished. A child stood on one end of the bridge, waiting patiently for the work to finish. He had written a note-“Keep building bridges Leela, The lovely play of life!”

My husband loved him instantly. Ivan and he loved sharing many things together. One of the days when it rained like crazy, both of them spent the whole night by a swelling river and came back in the morning thrilled to the core of their beings. ‘Ivan! How the hell could you do this? Did you guys plan to get drowned?’ I was so furious that I continued screaming non-stop for fifteen minutes. When I finished, Ivan smiled his angelic smile and said. ‘It was nice! We had to wait for the river and the lovely play of life.’ I laughed and made hot cup of coffee and some snacks for them.

“Does it ever frighten him that you love me so much?”

Ivan asked me once.

‘What would you do, if it frightened him?’ I asked

‘I would leave’, he answered as a matter of fact.

‘Well! In that case it doesn’t frighten him’, I replied and we laughed.

One of the weekends when Ivan had come to visit us, I repeated his question to my husband. My husband looked up from his morning newspaper, walked up and gave Ivan a tight slap on his cheek. ‘Ivan! I hope you

have learnt your lesson for not understanding how much I love you,' he said. Ivan laughed and said sorry.

10

Ivan was around fifty-four years old. He was climbing a ladder when he slipped and fell down. He was in great pain for five days. He had hurt his head. He refused to let his intelligence cloud over. He fought to speak and to remain alert. The doctors marveled at him.

He was about two and half feet tall in all. He had refused to become a clown in the entertainment industry. He had refused to entertain people by the sheer laws of his physicality. He always used to stand near a cracked wall and say, 'Leela, the lovely play of life, Tell me! How far can I go?' And I always answered, 'Ivan! As far as the little girl can see into the crack.'

That night when he died, he called me closer. 'Leela! What would I have done if I had not met you?' he said and held my hands.

“The little girl looked at the crack on the wall and exclaimed, Oh How lovely! If only they didn't plaster it

up!” he muttered. I remembered that those were the lines he had treasured and saved in his red file along with his sketch for the painting. He was still smiling.

11

I walked down the huge main road. Most of the buildings were new. The old cracked wall came as a surprise. It was painted in deep cyan. The color was rich with textures, scribbles, scratches and the strength of many memories. Right in the centre a crack had developed, and through it few leaves of the peepal celebrated life. That was the last painting Ivan had gifted my children. ‘Look at that!’ he had said and as they stood watching, with a few quick strokes he had painted the leaves of the peepal. My children still find it magical. Saba and Reeti are twenty-five, as old as Ivan and I were when we first met.

Amma how did he manage to hold his head high in this world? How did he gaze at the sanctity of life? They asked me once. I have saved the question in Ivan’s file.

12

‘Before long I will be gone. The sands that I have touched will be scattered, but while I am here, I cannot cease to marvel, I cannot cease to love, I cannot cease to live!’

‘Leela! The lovely play of life’, he would call me affectionately. He loved the mundane.

Anant, The Endless

Anant, The Endless

1

A deep white shell with a curving line of black was broken at the edge. While I walked across the Malpe beach, it caught my eye. I wondered at myself, thirty years down the line, maybe I would stand out as starkly as that shell against the backdrop of life. It was a momentary indulgence in beauty. There were no conditioning elements to my walk, to the vastness of the sea or the transformations of the sky. But for how long would this last?

It is strange isn't it, how easily we can forget what moves us most. It is as if there was no motive force to our lives. I remember the day when I first saw the evening sky. The sky had been there, day after day, year after year, but the first time I learnt to see the sky, what an experience it was! It was almost like touching myself. But I have forgotten it over the years. There was another time, when I was deeply moved by the sands that escaped under my feet at the beach. Isn't there something that happens during these transformations, a certain kind of mellowing of the entire physical being?

When I met Anant, I remembered a similar feeling. I knew he would mellow me and then I would forget him, till I suddenly saw the deep blue evening sky, or was touched by the sea breeze.

2

“If you had a choice between being a woman or a man whom would you have chosen?” - I didn’t think much of the question when I first heard it. Perhaps in some ways I was angry with the question, I was angry with its meaning, its implications. How the hell did it matter to this 6 ft tall guy whether I choose to be a woman or a man? And what a rash question, what did he know about being a woman to word it so casually!

I laughed loudly, quite a fake laugh when I first heard his question. It was addressed to an audience of fifty women in a chat show and my laughter sounded genuine in the midst of their voices. ‘So how would it matter to you Mr. Anant or to your viewers if we chose to be men or women? What is the meaning of your question? For what purposes should we make our choice?’ Anant first

noticed the anger in my voice, and then perhaps the calmness in my eyes. “Would you like to reword the question Ma’m?” he said politely.

‘What are we seeking in our debate, equality for women, a convenient human life, or merely playing with gender issues to market a program Mr. Anant? If you are really serious about understanding what it means to be a woman, I don’t think we will have to spend so much time trying to figure out, what gender we would like to choose for ourselves.’

That night when we made love to each other, I still hated Anant’s question. We continued to fight over the concepts of being man and woman, when his fake surrender sealed the topic for the time being. It is strange, but I can’t remember when I first met Anant. Sometimes I think I knew him from birth. Sometimes I think he probably grew up with me, we knew each other so well. But where and when did we meet first, that’s a very difficult question. I am very happy I am not a celebrity and will never be confronted with the question. Infact Anant is equally bad at remembering our first meeting. But he is good at making up stories. Actually

there was a fantastic one, which he made up for our neighbor. We stuck with it for quite some time. It was about how we had met at a crowded shopping street in Chennai, where he was interviewing shoppers on their shopping patterns. ‘It was right before the Lakshmi puja, I was carrying two of those banana trees, one on either side of my face and carrying half a dozen things in my hand and trying to start my two-wheeler. My roly-poly sweet little mother was trying to make sure she had purchased everything for the puja. I had a thin line of frustration developing on my face and right in front of me stood Anant. ‘Hi I am Anant Seshadri from Blah Blah TV...’ he started of and showered me with a whole lot of questions. God! I wish my hands had been free to give him one tight slap....’ And you can imagine what a selling tale that would have been with my neighbor. I remember Mrs. Jayalakshmi, one of our neighbours distinctly taking in that story and repeating it to half a dozen of our neighbours telling what a charming couple we were and how lucky it was to be in the media and art worlds.

Anant Seshadri conceptualized and developed television programs. He enjoyed seeing some of his programs and hated many others. He loved conceptualizing talk shows. He had a knack for talking to people and getting them to talk without restraint. He could be playful, serious, funny and absolutely charming when he spoke. He was an intelligent and confident guy with a sensitive yet *flamboyant* perception of life.

The seashore had been our constant meeting point. I loved the water and he loved the sands. I loved the roasted corn selling in the beach and he loved the oily bajjis. I relished the sky turning orange and sea turning grey and he loved the stark midday light. Sometimes I wonder how we managed to meet each other, fall in love and end up in marriage. But what I really loved about him was he could understand before I spoke. Oftentimes, before my thoughts had even formed sufficiently, Anant had feelers and he would respond in support, fear, despair, and joy. I remember a lonely morning when I had got up early to cook. I was suffering from my period pains and I wanted to keep murmuring that I hated the whole damn menstruating process and would exchange it

for any other suffering. It was such an amazing surprise to enter the kitchen and find everything cooked and ready. It wasn't that he so understood every month, but that was definitely a desperately needed gesture on the 20th of March, 1977. It kind of made it easier to accept mankind in general, just to know that someone cared enough to make a difference. I guess it is part of being a woman to get sentimental over such a simple gesture. It wasn't until much later that I realized that Anant had invited some friends over for breakfast and forgotten to tell me late in the night. He had thought it better to cook, than wake me up much too early. In any case I still think it was a lovely gesture. At the same time I wonder at it. How many centuries have women been forced into the idea of the kitchen being their territory that it had become natural for me to feel emotional over Anant's cooking.

4

I do remember the way he proposed to me. It was one of his talk show kind of questions that I was taken in by. 'Meera, you have two choices' he said. As I waited, he brought out a chocobar and a mango dolly and said, 'you

get to choose between the chocolate flavour and the mango flavour and that's choice number one. Choice number two is by far easier, Why would you like to marry me- Is it because I love you or is it because I love myself?'

I chose the mango flavor because I loved the deep yellow colour. And I found his second question valid enough to get married to him. 'Because you love yourself', I answered instantaneously. I kept pondering over his question and my answer for many years after. It was almost five years when we looked back at the nuances of our married life. Anant was looking at my face and he asked if I still loved him. I knew instantaneously what he meant and what the second question meant. He had changed a lot over the last few years. He hadn't grown, had committed himself to the mundane chores of life and he wasn't excited about television programs anymore. Anant the endless! He said sarcastically and brought his pen down on the paper as a furious full stop. It isn't about marriage Meera, It isn't about sharing my space with you, but I wish I were free he said softly. In all those years that I had tried to imagine my future, I had always thought I would be the

first one to desire for freedom. But it was surprising that Anant was the first one to break the safety dams and the security of our lives. It wasn't as if we were contemplating divorce, we just wanted to return to being ourselves, if such a thing were possible.

5

Fortunately Anant was not the only earning member of the family. He didn't have to worry about dependents. I brought in a good share of money to meet our expenses. It was true that we were creative spirits and sometimes struggled to make ends meet. Sometimes we would go overboard. For instance when we fell in love with a rickety old pair of chairs that were over 20,000rs, we thought it would be wonderful gift to each other, knowing quite well that they were fragile pieces of furniture. Another time we fell in love with a whole collection of wooden toys. In any case, both of us knew we didn't have to stick to our mundane routines and jobs. Each one of us could explore and break away from normalcy, one at a time. I am not sure that the family as a unit had driven us to forgetting ourselves. It seemed strange that we should go back and forth trying to find

ourselves as we had been five years ago. And there was that shell on that beach that kept reminding me of how I had fared against the backdrop of life.

‘What does it mean to be a woman Meera?’ he asked me after a long pause and ‘what does it take to be a wife? Why the hell have we grown so dependent on each other and how long do we need to promote this as love?’ My fuses absolutely broke at that instant. I was laughing merrily watching him despair. Anant and I fell in and out of love a thousand times in the next few months. We had a hilarious time exchanging our roles. We felt contented sometimes and ranted madly sometimes trying to discover our original selves. But how much clarity can one expect in understanding millions of years of evolution? While it was fairly simple to try and exchange the daily chores of a man and a woman, I don’t think we were able to really cross the divide of how we perceived our respective worlds. Anant continued to love the midday light and I still enjoyed the evenings by the sea. Anant could never forgive me for the cyan blue windows and the pink doors and I could never accept his plain steel grey chairs in the front room.

6

‘Being Husband and Wife’ was one of the talk shows Anant wanted to host during this time. I talked him into 13-episode 1-hour short films, where each episode was a take on different kinds of husbands and wives and how they managed their relationships. We had a great viewership and we made a whole lot of money over that. We decided we were quite a good package in ourselves and celebrated continuously for over a week.

There was another time when we decided to just stay off each other. We didn’t meet each other for over a year. It was a crazy decision. We took up assignments in different parts of the world and tried our best not to meet each other. Well at the end of year we were back in the same city, same house and discussing all the events of the previous year. I think we just loved being the man and woman in each other’s lives.

I wonder if I ever understood what being a man is or what it takes to be a husband. But I think we managed pretty well without getting into the gender issues. Coming to think of it, Anant and I have struck quite a decent deal over the years. Anant and his weird choices

had made me glad over the years and given me a whole lot of options to approach my life. I loved Anant the way I loved myself, with a certain apprehension. I was always afraid that I would find his deepest secrets and it would be difficult for each other to face it, the same as it is when I allow myself to wander within my deepest secrets. I think it was an insane moment when I let go of that apprehension and went to the sea with him. The evening sky sunk into me and I remembered the vastness, the unconditioned limitlessness I had always celebrated within myself. I remembered the ways in which Anant had touched my life. Strangely he seemed to be challenging me again as he made me search for a familiar motif on the sea.

7

I laughed at Anant as I stood on the seashore. I laughed at the nights we had spent together, at the echoing laughter of our souls, at the constructs of society, at the widely marketed symbol of Tao. Standing by the seashore, it was difficult to imagine that creation could evolve such distinct and diverse creatures as human

beings, to whom it becomes essential to constantly choose between being a “man” and being a “woman”

As I searched, I found what Anant had prompted me to. There was a different shell on the beach this time, but the black curve within the white was incisive. It was a very similar shell to the one I had seen thirty years ago. I couldn't believe that Anant was still alive within me. Anant whom I had created, or perhaps Anant who was the man in me. The shell with its single curve of black reminded me of the duality of human life, and the ardhnari. It seems impossible to distinctly maintain one's roles and I remembered Anant's question again, if I had the choice to be a man or a woman, who would I choose? I wondered if there was a choice at all.

‘Anant, the endless’ I said to myself and laughed. How strange it was that I had grown up to be an attractive woman to Anant. How easy it had been to transform myself into Anant and then fall in love with him. How easy it had been to touch myself, care for myself fight with myself and laugh at myself. As I picked up the shell I wondered how easy it had been for the sea to draw that

dark black stroke on the white shell. I wondered at myself. After all, Anant was I.

...Anant.... The endless

Train

Train

It was a charming time to look out of the window. The neem tree at the heart of the station was swaying gently as the skies darkened. As the first drizzle began, the train would move and the window would begin to frame time in its varied colours and shapes. A distant sway of a red skirt indicated the strength and purposefulness of a woman walking at a distance. As the train moved, I clung to the window to touch the first few raindrops. The gray, the swaying green and the touch of red held my fascination as we moved past the deserted station.

Chugchugchugchug shumara chug chug

Look look look look muttered a little child sitting next to me. She had almost flattened her nose against the window, cherishing the outside scene. Ruku Ruku Ruku, Look Look Look she screamed in excitement when we crossed a bridge. The hollow sound of the train on the bridge and the distant flowing water gave a greater rhythm to her mutterings. Rukmani, beautiful, bright-eyed and excited didn't know that the train was taking her far away from all that she knew and all that she recognized. I have not met the girl after we got down at

the station and I wonder what her story would have been. I wish I could meet her again, perhaps on another journey at another time.

1

It was sixteen years since Rukmani had traveled on a train. Nobody had been able to afford another train journey for her. Infact she had forgotten the train, the sound of the vendors, the beggars, the occasional whistle and the smoke. After sixteen years Rukmani would travel again in the train to meet a voice.

The voice of an old lady enchanted her. She had heard the voice since childhood. She had heard the voice in its youth, she had heard it getting transformed into a loud screechy voice, she had heard it pale down and grow silent, she had heard it crack and grow old and then she had again heard it sound fresh and young. The sudden youthfulness in Samanta's voice had created a great desire in Ruku. She wanted to travel. She wanted to meet the lady to whom this voice belonged. She had always called her Samanta; Samanta who called her once a week sometimes, once in a month or two sometimes, but

Samanta who always kept in touch. Ruku shared a strange relationship with Samanta. Each time she heard Samanta's voice she knew what Samanta was feeling. She could feel the way Samanta's mouth would move. She could imagine the way Samanta's hair would have blown in the wind. She worried when Samanta fell sick, laughed when she was happy and cried when she was upset.

Sometimes Ruku thought that Samanta was an impish boy. At other times she thought Samanta was a man. At one point of time, Ruku distinctly remembered falling in love with Samanta and she wondered at her emotions. Ruku loved Samanta, because she was the only symbol of a journey for her. She knew that she would travel a long way to meet Samanta and she would again travel in a train.

2

Ruku had been educated, as her family had been promised years ago. Her family had passed away in the floods that struck her village. She had no purpose for travel anymore. She worked in the dark rooms of an old

house and she studied in an evening school. Then one day Samanta called. Samanta wanted to talk to Parvathamma, the mistress of the house. When she heard Ruku's voice she changed her mind. 'Ruku, did you know I live far away and you have to travel by a train to meet me?' she said suddenly and chuckled.

Ruku knew suddenly that Samanta lived alone and she would go and meet her some day. And after sixteen years the day had come.

Ruku must have had over a hundred conversations with Samanta in all these years. As she sat in the train, everytime a different breeze touched her face, she remembered a conversation among the many she had had. As the fruit sellers passed her compartment with mangoes she remembered Samanta.

'I have always loved mangoes Ruku' said Samanta. 'Just think about it, what lovely shades of deep yellow, a fruit that melts in your mouth. Just to think of a mango tree and to think how far the mangoes must have traveled to meet me! I must be a queen to deserve such pleasure' Samanta had said and laughed.

Maadulai Maadulai cried the shrill voice of another fruit seller. She walked into the compartment with relative ease and grace as the train jolted forward. The fruit seller wore an old faded saree and a fresh smile on her face.

‘Oh the pomegranate Ruku, the pomegranate must be the queen of fruit, infact she must be Nurjahan, the light of the universe! What a beauty she is, with those little pearls! Just say maadulai and my senses will get activated. What sheer beauty!’ That’s how Ruku had been introduced to eating the pomegranate. As she remembered Samanta’s voice, she remembered how many senses had been activated in her over the years.

A bookseller followed soon. He had a bright smile and one hand. He dragged a heavy hand luggage full of books and with his one hand and bright smile he left about 20 tiny books on each compartment. It was a strange marketing strategy. He waited for 15 minutes and came back to see if people’s curiosities had given them the time to choose. Ruku bought stories of *Vikram and vetal* from him. She had always enjoyed the stories of the clever king and the ghost. They traveled to strange and far away places and discovered people and ideas. ‘I

love books’, Samanta had said when Ruku was about nine years old. You know it’s very difficult to get books in this village. Last time, I waited for the train to come and bought books from the booksellers who got down for a cup of tea.’ Ruku wondered if Samanta had also bought a book from the one-handed smiling bookseller. The bookseller suddenly spoke to everyone in our compartment. There was a time when one single round in the train would earn me 1500 – 2000 rupees. I have hardly sold three books today. It is becoming difficult’ he said. The smile never left his face. To Ruku, this was the journey- the strange people, their livelihoods, their conversations and the breathing living train. Oh how much she had missed it all these years!

3

Each time Ruku spoke to Samanta, she had a new perspective about life.

‘Have you met the sweepers on the train Ruku? Have you seen them sweep with a torn shirt and beg for a few pennies? Have you looked into their eyes? It is as if fear, anger, defiance and hope have been melted into them. Have you walked beyond your little space on the train

and watched these boys and girls who sweep the floor huddle up in a corner eating the leftovers of our food. Oh what can we do for them, beyond the few pennies we carelessly push into their hands?

When Ruku watched the beggars, she remembered Samanta's voice trying to find answers and wished desperately she had a solution. Maybe she could come up with one, she thought seriously as the train chugged on...

As she saw women getting on at small stations and getting out at bigger ones, traveling to reach their offices in time, she remembered Samanta's voice again 'I am worried Ruku, I am not sure if I can meet this deadline. I am not sure I will be able to continue on my job. It is going to be a very difficult time for me now. Perhaps it is time to catch the train again', But a few weeks later she had spoken as if nothing had changed and she seemed thrilled about the sunrise in her village.

'Oh Ruku, you should see the sunrise in our village. Just a silent sway of the trees, spiders building their webs on

the hedge and through the network of the web, the orange just spreads into your being.’

’Samanta, it has been so many years since I left the village, but oh! I still remember the spiders and the sky. I still remember the blue, the orange, and the gray, and the green of the morning sky. I remember the old temple in our village made of stonewalls and in the morning light, it would seem like a thousand stories were awakening and being retold. Oh and the most beautiful sunrise I saw was on the train. The train kept moving and I watched the sun rise through buildings, through palm trees, through rivers and lakes and then the light shimmered over our skins. Half the train was glowing in the early morning light and we were moving. Oh! I wish I could travel again, travel in a train, and go on a really long journey....’

As she looked at the sunrise from the train again after sixteen years, she was touched and moved. If it hadn’t been for Samanta’s voice, would she have ever made this journey?

4

‘Ruku! Have you ever wondered what makes us long for each other’s voice? Can you hear that love for a journey within yourself? Oh how I wish I could see your eyes as you speak. How I wish I could watch the way your steps move across the landscapes you choose. How I wish I could stand by you and support you!’ There was a trace of anguish and love in Samanta’s voice. There was a strange kind of passion.

‘Oh Samanta! It is your voice that has kept my desires alive; it is your voice that makes me dream about a journey again. Oh how I love your voice! How I love you!’ Ruku had whispered that day.

Now she wondered whom she would meet at the end of a journey. How would the woman whose voice had been her guiding force look?

5

Ruku had traveled about thirty-six hours on the train and she walked a good long mile before she reached a dilapidated building. On the greenish yellow wall were stuck hundreds of papers. There were lots of drawings

and scribbles on the papers. ‘*Ruku was smiling over the phone today*’ said one of the papers and Ruku looked at the round two-plaited painted face smiling at her from the paper. The paper was numbered 102.

Ruku slowly searched among the papers on the wall for number 1 and there written on it was

Train

It was a charming time to look out of the window. The neem tree at the heart of the station was swaying gently as the skies darkened. As the first drizzle began, the train would move and the window would begin to frame time in its varied colours and shapes. A distant sway of a red skirt indicated the strength and purposefulness of a woman walking at a distance. As the train moved, I clung to the window to touch the first few raindrops. The gray, the swaying green and the touch of red held my fascination as we moved past the deserted station.

Chugchugchugchug shumara chug chug

Look look look look muttered a little child sitting next to me. She had almost flattened her nose against the window, cherishing the outside scene. Ruku Ruku Ruku, Look Look Look she screamed in excitement when we

crossed a bridge. The hollow sound of the train on the bridge and the distant flowing water gave a greater rhythm to her mutterings. Rukmani, beautiful, bright-eyed and excited didn't know that the train was taking her faraway from all that she knew and all that she recognized. I have not met the girl after we got down at the station and I wonder what her story would have been. I wish I could meet her again, perhaps on another journey at another time.

A little farther away there was a crumpled no 2 that had Parvathamma's phone number. 'This house has a girl called Ruku', said the writing on the paper.

Each little piece had a different handwriting on it. Ruku walked upto the office room and there sitting on a wooden chair was a shriveled old man. Ruku asked for Samanta and the old man smiled, the office boy in the corner turned and smiled at her, suddenly as if a hundred beads had been let loose, Ruku heard voices, voices that were young, voices that were old, voices that were silent and voices that were loud. Outside the little office room faces crowded around to look at her. 'Samanta' repeated Ruku again and a tiny little girl of eight smiled and said

‘Samanta 102’. Ruku wasn’t sure she understood. ‘Samanta 102...’ she repeated, and it suddenly struck her. How many Samantas had she spoken to? Who were they? She had never wondered at the changes in the voice. Samanta had always been one person to her. Samanta was like the train, a single soul with a thousand voices.

6

‘It was a project that Samanta started’ said the old man looking at her bewilderment, Samanta, the lady who started this school. We had only 20 children and four staff members in our school 16 years ago. And she told all of us to complete the story she had started. All of us who are here have spoken to you Ruku, and many more who are not here.

‘How would it be to meet someone on the train and fall in love with them?’ said Mrs Samanta when she spoke to us in the assembly. The seventh graders smiled at her. Mrs Samanta always gave life to the strangest ideas. Many of us had never been on a train. Travelling on a train was the greatest mystery we could come across.

Mrs. Samanta wanted to plan a trip on the train for all of us.

‘Well Mrs. Samanta, whom did you fall in love with in the train, the seventh graders chorused.’

‘This time I fell in love with Ruku, a little girl of eight. This is the first time she was traveling on train and I can tell you that she was absolutely amazed.’

‘An eight year old girl Mrs Samanta! Oh!’ Said the seventh graders quite disappointed and she laughed twinkling her eyes mischievously.

‘Well who knows! Maybe one of you is going to meet her on a train journey and fall in love with her instantaneously. Till then, maybe we should write a story about her. I wrote this little piece on Ruku on the train and I am going to stick it up on the wall for all of you. Now I want each one of you to add a page to this story. Don’t you think it would be wonderful when we finish it?’

‘That’s how we started and then Rasi found your phone number and we were all excited. I don’t think it was anything to do with you. We just needed someone called Ruku and Rasi said she was sure your heart missed a beat when she mentioned the word “TRAIN”. Now here

we are' he said proudly and paused as Ruku's eyes wandered again to the papers on the wall.

7

Paper No 101 said 'Ruku has still not traveled in a train'. I have invited her over to meet Samanta.

Ruku searched among the papers for the man she had loved over the phone, Paper no 87 said, 'I am in love with Ruku, Perhaps I should tell her I am not Samanta.'

'Where is Samanta?' asked Ruku and she suddenly smiled. But who was her Samanta? She had never spoken to Samanta, the one who had started the story.

Samanta is on the train said Samanta 102 and chuckled mischeivously. The little girl seemed delighted at the way the story had evolved over the last sixteen years.

After long hours of conversations with all the Samantas around her, Ruku prepared to leave. She wrote her little piece of the story in a bright yellow paper.

Samanta is like the train. The train is one living breathing whole and as thousands of people sit in it, travel in it, make their livelihoods out of it, the train moves on like a single breath, touching lives, holding people together, making journeys possible. Samanta is like the train, a single soul with a thousand voices.

As she finished writing, she asked ‘who will speak to me when I go back?’ addressing no one in particular. ‘Samanta 103’ said the postman who entered the school building. Ruku smiled and wondered if the voice would be as charming as it had been. She left her new phone number on the wall along with her write up on Samanta.

8

As she traveled back on the train, she wondered at the many voices she had heard; the voices of Samanta. She wondered if she would ever hear from the real Samanta, she wondered if she would hear from Samanta 87 again. She drew patterns on the glass pane as the rains pelted on the train. She wondered who Samanta 62 had been. The paper had said, ‘When Ruku comes, I want to show

her my clay horse'. She wondered how the clay horse must have looked. "Chaya chaya Coffee coffee" the voice of the coffee and tea seller broke her thoughts and the train's song seeped into her being as she fell asleep

9

As she entered the house the telephone bell rang and Ruku rushed to pick it up 'Samanta' she called in a hurry as she heard the voice and laughed at her eagerness. On the other end Samanta laughed. 'Is my voice still as charming as before?' she asked.

In the distance a train made its way across a bridge and a little child stuck his nose to the window. He wanted to know if the reflection of the train would fall in the river below.

'Will I be reflected in the train's reflection?' he pestered his parents.

Soodana idli dosa vadai, bread omelette cutlet let let, chaaya chaaya coffee coffee, amma akkaa Cooooooooooooooooo chik chik chik imitated the children's voices.

Hands

Hands

1

‘You aren’t Pency, are you?’ Mohana asked as the hands touched her. She heard a faint laughter as the hands poured a wee bit of oil on her back. ‘You are right, I am not Pency, I am Nimmi’, said the voice and her hands began to massage. ‘Pency is sick’ she said after a pause and continued to massage. ‘Ah!’ said Mohana quietly, ‘your hands are different!’

For a long time there was silence. The sound of hand touching a human form seemed like regular breathing. Mohana could feel the swing of Nimmi’s body as her hands moved back and forth rubbing the oil on her skin.

‘What is different about my hands miss?’ Nimmi asked. Nimmi was more curious than Pency; she loved conversing as she massaged. ‘Ah you are a soft one! A smiling young lady’ said Mohana and laughed. ‘Pency is a perfectionist isn’t she, she doesn’t talk as she massages.’ ‘Oh but she smiles very softly’ said Nimmi defending her friend.

Nimmi's hands drew curves on Mohana's bodies that were slightly different from the curves Pency drew. As Mohana closed her eyes and listened, she heard the soft swishing sound of the massage. She felt the oil drip on her skin and slowly begin to move on her body, making unusual patterns. Pency had segmented her body into ten different sections. The legs, right and left, the hands, right and left, right shoulder to right leg, left shoulder to left leg, stomach, back, neck and face. There was a single long stroke, short strokes, circular strokes, curved lines and sharp angles that Pency drew with her hands on Mohana's body.

The last three days in Mohana's life were the most thrilling she could remember in a long time. Her sister had suggested that she could get massaged. 'It is exciting Mohana! Don't miss it', she had said over the phone and in some kind of a mixed emotional state, Mohana had got herself registered into a massage center for a five-day therapy.

Mohana touched a rough shell and kept it close to her ear. The sound was vision to her. She had been born visually impaired and in some ways she was limited to four senses. It was always difficult to live around people who could see. They always chose things by what they saw and to Mohana, things had to be felt. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt something.

She constantly felt she was touching a friendly ghost. It wasn't that people didn't try to help her; it was just that they seemed oblivious of her visual impairment. For instance when she asked them how a sunset looked, they described it using beautiful words and colours. She wondered if they were being rude or if it was sheer innocence. When she tried to describe to them what a sunset meant to her, they never understood. It seemed they were merely being nice to her by sparing some time for her. Mohana didn't understand why she always thought it was *their* world. After all she was a part of it.

As she passed by the table, she picked up a book and instantly placed it back. How did it matter if there was some brilliant picture on the cover? Perhaps it was a

photograph. There would be a concept for the picture and there would be different colors, none of which held any meaning to her. She could read the books in Braille, listen to them being read out, but could she ever touch the cover? There was a certain element of pain, in the things she couldn't see. Mohana laughed. It was almost an obsession to laugh. She hoped she was not intruding as she touched a tree trunk.

3

Nimmi's hands had some kind of joy about them. They moved as if they were singing.

Mohana could almost hear the tune as she lay down. She seemed to enjoy massaging. Mohana wondered if Nimmi and Pency were artists, would their art be more valuable to the blind? They might know so much more about the nuances of touch. But the touch of massaging was very strange. It was devoid of emotion. It was a relaxing and healing touch, but it couldn't be categorized into the known emotions of touch that Mohana was familiar with. It wasn't that of a teacher, or of a mother. It wasn't that of a lover or a sibling. It was, as it had to be, the touch of a massage therapist, distant yet close, purposeful yet undemanding. Pency's hands had a

certain fondness. It seemed as if they slowly took possession of the body as an object of art. And then with each touch, they renewed the life in it; after all massage is an art of rejuvenation.

Perhaps more than the hands, Mohana enjoyed the neem wood under her naked skin. The neem had been smoothed, but there was a slight bulge at the center. Mohana felt as if the wood had not been tamed. She could feel the texture of the wood as she turned, she could feel the underlying roughness and as the oil on her body slowly merged with the wood, she had an uncanny feeling of becoming one with the ancient neem.

4

Mohana had been walking on the seashore when she suddenly felt the difference in the sand. What is this thing here, she asked her cousin. Her cousin was perplexed. There is nothing under your feet Mohana. It is just sand he said. But Mohana refused to move. She could feel it under her feet, something brilliant, just under her feet. But her cousin assured her that there was nothing except a sudden reflection of the sunlight on the

receding waters of the wave. ‘And anyway how could you feel light!’ he said and laughed. But to Mohana that light was touch; she knew its brilliance. ‘Oh it’s the light!’ she said and laughed. ‘It must be brilliant.’ Her cousin was kind, ‘Of course it is, it is hurting the eye’, he said.

Light was warmth to Mohana. ‘Is it yellow lights in the room Pency?’ She asked. Pency said ‘yes, it is yellow light flowing out of a fractal glass lamp.’ Mohana liked Pency’s choice of words. She had always known light as a flow. ‘It is good!’ said Mohana, ‘white light is harsher.’ Pency’s hands moved on her back assuring her that her feelings were right. Mohana didn’t really know the colours, but she had learnt to name the colour of the lights by asking her sister. Each time there was a shift in the intensity of light, she tried to find out what colour it was. Perhaps it was fortunate that Mohana wasn’t blind to light. She loved playing with lights. ‘Ofcourse’ said Pency, ‘white light would never make you glow like this.’ She was silent for a while. She must have felt the way Mohana had felt when she touched the trunk of the tree, as if she had intruded into a private space by looking at Mohana’s body. ‘Ah ofcourse Pency!’

Mohana said, ‘your hands would lose their directions if my body didn’t glow’ and they laughed together. Pency hands seemed to have a greater fondness as she helped Mohana get down from that neem table.

5

Mohana remember asking her mother how water looked when she was about six years old. ‘Water is transparent and doesn’t have any colour dear’, her mom had said. But Mohana never understood. To her water was like the different feelings inside her. Tap water was different from the water in a puddle. The river was different from the sea. Water was harsh to her sometimes and soft sometimes. The way the waves crashed on her legs in the sea, water seemed like ceaseless dynamic anger or a playful venture. But the way water lapped at her feet by the lakes, it seemed like silence and calmness. Tap water was different from these. It had direction, it was more like a planned flow of thoughts; the water in a puddle was more like a surprise, some kind of abruptness. Mohana had always identified water to her feelings and she loved the way the warm water flowed through her oily skin after the massage. Water seemed to have

acquired a new avatar. It wasn't distinct and different from her anymore. It was becoming a part of the textures and patterns on her body.

6

Mohana had conjured up the form for many of the objects and people in her life through the smells she associated with them. It wasn't often that people remembered to give her a handshake or a hug, so that she could remember them. She always took recourse to smells at such times. It seemed strange to her that people didn't mind exchanging their identities. More often than not, she came across people with similar smells about them. Their deodorants were the same or their perfumes were the same. Perhaps they wore the same flowers. At such times it would be difficult to distinguish them.

The oils being used for the massage had a distinct smell to them. As soon as Mohana entered the room, she could feel the smells drifting in the air. A smell wasn't just an aroma to Mohana. It was a touch. She knew an aroma could completely change the way her body felt. To her the act of inhaling was an act of touch. As she smelt the

oil, she felt herself relaxing and Pency's hands guided her to the table. Today was the last day. Pency's hands were gentle today. She never spoke about it being the last day, but her hands spoke of a thousand different things. They spoke of tiredness, of a craving to be understood, of a great sensitivity. On the last day, they strangely spoke of love. Today the massage was a caress and it was as sensitive as a drop of tear.

'Pency, your hands are crying' said Mohana suddenly and Pency laughed. 'Hands don't cry Miss Mohana' she said softly. 'But I can feel them...' started Mohana and then thought better of it. Perhaps it was kinder to let Pency speak less about her hands. Her hands were seeking comfort on the last day. They sought to be recognized for what they were worth and Pency was the true professional, she refused to accept their emotions; After all her hands were her profession. As Mohana left, she held Pency's hands in hers. She touched them and felt the hands for the first time with a special emotion. 'Ah! Pency' she said, 'your hands are real.' Pency didn't laugh. She quietly led Mohana to the entrance. As Mohana was about to leave, she whispered into her ears, 'my hands Miss Mohana, they are life.'

Since the first day of her massage, Mohana had re-learned to touch many different things. Everything began to hold a new meaning for her. She could feel the life force of any object. As she touched the tree, she moved her hands along its trunk. She wasn't scared about intruding anymore. Her hands had no particular emotion, but a strange fondness caressed the tree.

Early in the morning Mohana smelt the jasmine flowers and suddenly she felt her hands touching the earth and its life forces. She wondered if she was standing in front of a mirror and she stretched to touch her reflection. She felt a strange pair of hands enveloping her. She didn't shudder at the touch. She knew it was safe.

She heard the familiar words. "Do you sometimes feel that this world doesn't belong to us, I mean the ones who are visually impaired." She laughed at the stranger and said, "Well Sir, perhaps you should get a massage done..." She helped him across the familiar footpath and added... "I hope you find someone whose hands are life."

8

Pency was helping someone else onto the table. The room was silent and her hands began to move. The human body was an object of art and slowly her hands would infuse life into it. But as she touched this strange object she wondered how far her hands had meandered through Mohana's mind. Pency never made a relationship with any of her clients. But strangely, she had loved Mohana's eyes; Mohana's million eyes as she watched each one of them open to the touch of her hand.

Inside her room, Mohana patiently carved a million eyes on a textured block of wood. She touched them carefully, sculpted patterns into them and when she finished she titled her sculpture 'Hands'





Srivi Kalyan (Srisrividhiya Kalyanasundaram) is an educator, writer, designer, illustrator and artist. She has authored and illustrated several children's books as well as stories for adults. She is an award

winning writer and illustrator. Her collection of short stories: *Mahadeva and other stories* won the second runner up in the Oxford Book Store e-author 4 contest in 2006. Her illustrated essay: *What would life be like without fear* won her second prize in the Royal Commonwealth Essay Competition, *the world's oldest global writing prize for young people* in 1997. Her children's book: *A Pearl, A costly pearl! Did you find any?* was shortlisted for the Katha Chitrakala Award in 2005.

Srivi is the Founder-Director of Fooniferse Arts Pvt.Ltd (www.fooniferse.com), an India based company and enjoys the excitement of being an entrepreneur. She works at the fluid and exciting intersection of arts, media and education. Her work and workshops draw in the rich connections between language, art, performance, thought, and play.

She graduated from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and worked with Sesame Workshop India as their Creative Director. Several of the children's educational products that she has designed for Sesame Workshop India have also been adapted in other parts of the world. You can view her works on her website: www.sriviliveshere.com

