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The Solitude of Emperors

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Published by Phoenix

Extract

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Prologue

They are the invisible ones, the ones who were too small, weak, poor or slow to escape the onrush of history. No obituaries mark their passing, no memorials honour their name and we don't remember them because in our eyes they never existed. Yet we ignore them at our peril, if only because their fate today could be ours tomorrow; history is an insatiable tyrant.

I have never been much good at ritual or ceremonial homage – I blame this on my parents, who never really taught me – so I have had to invent a private rite of remembrance for Noah, a man who was ignored by almost everyone for as long as he lived, but who, in his death, affected me more powerfully than I would have thought possible. I can picture his mocking smile now, for the ceremony I'm about to conduct takes its inspiration from a somewhat bizarre funeral I saw him preside over all those many years ago. It is the middle of winter in this northern city, and even though the bitter cold would deter most from setting foot outside a heated room, I have always been stubborn and determined once I have decided to do something, and so I shuffle through the wind and snow to the cemetery closest to my house.

Once there, I look for a grave with an angel on its headstone; there is a crust of snow on the grave and I scrape it off, unroll the plastic mat I have brought with me, and sit down. Noah wouldn't have liked this cemetery, it's too neat and formal; he believed the dead were entitled to comfortable lived-in surroundings. He would have missed his beloved trees: the great peepul with leaves like flattened spearheads and the jacarandas that flung sprays of blue into the

deeper blue of the Nilgiri sky. Here the maples are bare, and the evergreens are too dull and uniform to have appealed to him. But there is nothing I can do about the surroundings, so I begin to unpack the rucksack I have brought with me. I take out a bottle of rum, a cigarette packet (I do not smoke and the cigarettes have been replaced by two joints that I have procured with some difficulty from a Bolivian colleague), a cheap plastic lighter, a CD player and, finally, a manuscript. I sprinkle some of the rum around the grave to propitiate the dead, put the headphones on, and am preparing to light up a joint when I hear the sound of an approaching vehicle. I am grateful for the cover of the snowstorm because I doubt the groundskeeper whose vehicle this must be would understand if he caught me here.

In the twelve years since Noah died, I have performed this ceremony annually – in other cemeteries, other cities, in Madras, Bombay, in London, a city I passed through on my way to Canada – and every time I've carried it out surreptitiously, for it is not something that can be explained away easily. The vehicle sweeps past, its driver an indistinct figure in the cab, and silence descends again. I apologize to Grace MacKinnon (1902–1972), whose grave I have temporarily taken over, switch on the CD player, and to the sound of Jim Morrison singing 'Riders on the Storm' I light the joint. The first drag sets me coughing uncontrollably; I wait for my agitated lungs to stop protesting, take another hit, then perform the final part of the ceremony. I pull out a torch from the rucksack, switch it on, shake the snow off my manuscript and begin reading aloud the last chapter. I have neither the effrontery nor the imagination to make this the sort of book Noah would have admired, but my years as a journalist have equipped me with enough tools to thread together a coherent, sturdy narrative. In the course of the decade it has taken me to complete the book – by any accounting that would be deemed slow, slightly over a chapter a year, but I should point out that it has gone through five drafts – I think I have finally put down a version of the events of the winter of 1993/4 that I am satisfied with. More importantly, I feel I understand the man at the centre of them better.

Noah told me once that the dead remain with us for as long as we need them and I have begun to see what he meant. I sensed his

presence from time to time as I attempted to recreate his life and the events leading up to his death, and the book has benefited as a result. I should say at this point that I am aware that this account is different from the version put out by the police and the government commission of inquiry that investigated his death; in my defence all I can say is that nobody else recorded the witness of the dead.

I

The final kick

I am of the school that believes a journalist should never become part of the story he is covering, and the only time I broke that rule, the consequences were disastrous and signalled the beginning of the end of my career.

I did not set out to become a journalist. I hadn't grown up yearning to write about corrupt government ministers or the daily injustices that took place in our teeming cities and villages. All I wanted was a job, any job that would take me out of K—, the small town in Tamil Nadu that I was born and brought up in. I can write about it calmly now, but back in 1990 when I was looking to escape from K—, I was filled with the desperation that anyone who has sought to leave small-town India with a second-class degree from a third-rate college would readily understand.

K— sprawled haphazardly beside one of the national highways. It had the standard-issue refuse-filled streets, open drains, ugly residential sections, hospitals, a cinema or two, clamorous bazaars, open-air barber shops, temples, mosques, churches, the scanty shade of neem trees, cows, crows, bicycles, beggars and sunlight so intense that by mid-morning everything in town was wrapped in a shimmering skin of heat – a stereotypical small town, then, with little to distinguish it from the dozens of others that were strewn across the great South Indian plain. The two things that set it apart from its fellows were a temple and a hospital. The temple, which was dedicated to Lord Shiva, had been constructed sometime in the eighth century by a minor ruler of the Pandyan dynasty, and possessed an unusual architectural feature – in the courtyard that fronted the main

shrine stood a dozen stone columns that, when struck, produced the saptha swarangal, the basic notes of Indian classical music. The temple at K— was not as well known as the Nellaiyappar temple, with over a hundred musical pillars, which lay an hour and a half to the south by bus and attracted hordes of tourists and pilgrims, but it was a source of pride to us and its annual festival during the Tamil month of Aani was the cultural and spiritual highlight of the year.

Our pride in the Shiva temple didn't extend to its surroundings. It stood at the end of a street full of litter, and just beyond its precincts cows munched placidly on discarded banana leaves and flower garlands, while beggars and stray dogs fought over the right to occupy the best spots to importune worshippers for food and alms. In the evening, their ranks were swelled by what appeared to be the entire male population of K— between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, who waited for the young unmarried girls to appear, chaperoned by their mothers, for evening worship at the temple. The girls would arrive at a set hour, their jewellery and the corrugations of their richly coloured saris catching the dying light and turning them into worthy handmaidens of the Lord. In a marvel of contrivance and skill, they would manage to peer up from beneath their eyelashes at the waiting boys, while simultaneously affecting not to notice them – for the benefit of their mothers – and delicately picking their way through the garbage strewn in their path. The boys would giggle and shuffle their feet and the girls would press on towards the entrance of the shrine, their mothers waddling along beside them, looking severe. The entire process lasted no more than a few minutes but neither side could have done without it, it was the closest thing to public contact between unmarried men and women in town.

If the temple was the epicentre of the arts, spirituality and romance, The Balaji Medical Centre represented the height of modernity. The gleaming new hospital complex on the north-eastern edge of the town had been completed in 1975, seven years after I was born, by a native son who had made good in Austin, Texas. Unacknowledged by his adoptive country, he had decided to memorialize himself in the town he had always congratulated himself on escaping from – until he had turned sixty and had begun to think about how he

would be remembered after he was gone. Being a good self-publicist and an even better businessman, he disguised this giant act of the ego with the trappings of patriotism ('I have long felt the need to do something for India') while quietly taking advantage of the cheap land prices and tax breaks extended to him by grateful municipal and state governments. Nobody in town had ever been treated in the hospital's private wards, it was too expensive, but its high white walls and celebrity patients certainly gave K— something to boast about. To find work at the hospital was the goal of the more ambitious of my college classmates.

Neither the temple nor the hospital complex made me like the place of my birth any better. There were things in general that contributed to my disenchantment such as the lack of opportunity, the slow pace of life, the petty jealousies and small concerns of the people I associated with, but besides these there were specific things that stoked my desperation.

The first of these had little to do with me but with my parents and their romance. My mother taught physics at the women's college and my father economics at the government arts and sciences college I went to, and I felt they lacked the ambition and the guile to advance any further in their careers. Or perhaps they were happy just as they were, muddling along with no real expectations of life, part of the generation of Indians born on the cusp of independence, with no big ideas to fight for, as the previous generation had had, and without the breathtaking ambition of succeeding generations. Their greatest achievement, as far as I could tell, because we didn't talk about such things, was getting married to one another. For they had married for love, and more audaciously across the caste divide – a titanic achievement in small-town India in 1967. My father was a Brahmin, and my mother belonged to the Chettiar caste, and they had attended the same college in Salem, their home town, where they had fallen in love. When they announced their intention to marry, my father's family promptly disowned him, and my mother's father, a thin-lipped old martinet who was the headmaster of a secondary school, and whose progressiveness extended only as far as letting his daughter attend college, locked her up in her room and began scheming with the extended family to send her to the most distant relative he could

think of. For three days she had endured the lashings he administered with a belt and a diet of kanji, and then, in a plot line borrowed from Tamil cinema, she had sneaked out of the house – aided by her browbeaten mother – while her father had his afternoon siesta, wearing two saris and carrying a bottle of scented coconut oil and a large black umbrella, the only things she could think of taking with her in the nerve-racking excitement of her escape. Soon after they were married in secret, the couple left Salem for K—, where they had lived quietly ever since. In my more charitable moments I would grant that the drama and tension of their marriage might have so depleted my parents that they had no option but to spend the rest of their lives just getting by.

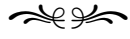
My father's family eventually came round, especially after he assured them that I would be raised a good Brahmin, although he didn't intend to do much about it, a legacy of his having been a closet communist as a student. My mother's father never forgave her, not even when I arrived on the scene, which she'd hoped would be the occasion for at least a modest reconciliation. I never met my maternal grandfather as a result, and the few memories I have of my grandmother, who died a few years after her husband, are of a faded woman who dressed always in white, and took me to the Murugan temple every time we visited her in Salem.

My parents' crossing of caste lines had not only largely cut me off from my extended family – something that everyone else in town seemed to possess – it also marked me out as an oddity, a mongrel. It wasn't so bad because I was still a Brahmin and did not have to endure the various humiliations someone lower down the caste ladder would undoubtedly have had to put up with, but I would never fit well into K— society. This was a condition somewhat exacerbated by my parents' unconventional attitude to religion. My father's brief flirtation with communism had further diluted any lingering effects of his religious upbringing. I cannot remember him ever going to the temple in the years that my mother turned her back on religion, but neither did he believe in communism enough to delete religion entirely from his life. My mother, from whom I have inherited my stubbornness and a slow-burning temper, had been so enraged by her own family's treatment of her that she shut religion

– which she blamed for her father's inflexibility – out of her existence and mine for the longest time. She allowed my mild-mannered father to fulfil his promise to his family by investing me with the sacred thread and other outward accoutrements of Brahminism, but beyond these token gestures I grew up without religion except for my periodic visits to my grandmother in Salem. By the time my mother had got over her fury, and the house began to fill with the strains of M.S. Subbulakshmi singing bhajans through the speakers of a cheap two-in-one cassette player, and the sweet scent of incense filled the store-room that had been converted into a puja room, I was in my teens and it was too late. I would occasionally accompany her to the temple, and dutifully munch on the sweet prasadam that was handed out, but I developed no more than a nominal interest in religion.

This, more than anything else, kept me from feeling completely at home in K—, for it was around caste and religion that the lives of its families and community revolved. In school and in college the Brahmin boys hung out together, the various non-Brahmin Hindus, depending on their numerical strength, formed their own groups, the Christian boys were separate, and had there been any Muslims in the educational institutions I studied in I have no doubt that they would have stayed within their own community. Most of the boys I knew went to the temple regularly and observed without question the myriad prohibitions and injunctions imposed upon them by the hierarchy of their faith. I was only tolerated, as I have said, because I was still an upper-caste Hindu.

I faced numerous little indignities, none of them dramatic or interesting enough to dwell on, but over the years they deepened my sense of alienation, and made me even more eager to escape to the big cities where I'd heard you could do as you pleased, marry who you liked, go wherever you wanted. An incident that took place during my second year in college made my decision to leave emphatic.



The results of our year-end exams had just been posted on the college noticeboard and I was mortified to discover that I had only managed a second class. Although I didn't yet have a clear idea of how I was

going to find employment once I had graduated, I knew these marks weren't good enough.

The boys who had done well were planning to celebrate with ghee dosais at Saravana Bhavan, a popular restaurant in the main bazaar, before going on to a film at Gaiety Talkies, a ramshackle three-storey cinema painted a lurid shade of pink that was the best of the movie theatres in town. Although a couple of boys I knew invited me to join them, I declined. I simply wasn't in the mood.

Disconsolately I set off for home. We lived about a mile away from the college, just off a large open stretch of ground called Gandhi Maidan on the western side of town. Although it was just after five in the evening, it was still very hot. The road ran straight as a ruler between the dirty red shell of earth and sky. All about me, the town moved to its usual torpid rhythm. Farmers rattled along in bullock carts, clicking their tongues and twisting the tails of their bullocks as they attempted to get the ponderous beasts to move faster, an occasional auto rickshaw buzzed past and everywhere there were dense throngs of people on bicycles or on foot returning from work or going to the bazaar or temple whose gopuram towered over the buildings that surrounded it. I noticed none of this. My mind was wrapped around the low marks I had scored, and how much harder I would have to work in my final year if I was going to raise my percentages.

I reached the maidan and briefly surveyed the scene in front of me – a group of boys playing cricket in the middle distance, a fiercely contested hockey game in the far corner of the enormous field, a buffalo herder travelling along in the wake of his lumbering beasts, elderly gentlemen taking their evening constitutional either singly or in pairs. I heard the tinkle of a bell behind me, and stepped aside to let the cyclist pass, but he dismounted instead. It was Srinivas. We had been through school and college together, and a shared dislike of sports like cricket and hockey and the mindless pranks of the more boisterous elements among the Brahmin boys had fostered our friendship. Both of us were very studious and determined to succeed, but while my ambitions were still rather vague, Srinivas had focused with remarkable intensity on getting into the Indian Administrative

Service. He was not fazed by the fact that hundreds of thousands sat the entrance exams to the IAS each year; he was sure he would get in and if his marks were any indication, there was no doubt that he would, because he always came first in class. When he heard about my results, he commiserated with me, and then to my surprise he invited me over for coffee. In all the years I had known him, he had never once invited me home, which I'd found odd because one of the features of small-town life was the amount of time people spent visiting each other to trade gossip, news, and just pass the time. Even I, despite my mixed-caste status, was a regular in the homes of the boys I was friendly with.

Srinivas's parents were ultra-orthodox Iyengars who lived deep within the agraharam, the Brahmin quarter. I had been introduced to his father, an ascetic-looking schoolmaster, whom I would see from time to time around town, resplendent in a turban, caste marks, and a long, high-collared coat that he wore buttoned up to the throat even on the hottest days, but I had never met his mother, and so as we plunged deeper into the twisting lanes of the agraharam my gloom began to be replaced by a sense of anticipation. When we arrived at his place, a row house indistinguishable from the others that surrounded it, except that the kolam drawn outside the front steps was more elaborate than any of the others in the street, Srinivas put his bicycle on its stand, preceded me up the steps into the house, and asked me to sit in the enclosed front veranda while he went and got the coffee. This was the usual practice during visits to the homes of non-family members, and I thought nothing of it. I made myself as comfortable as I could on the stiff-backed folding chair, balanced my bag against the wall so that its contents wouldn't spill out, and waited.

I could hear Srinivas talking to his mother inside the house. A short while later, he came out bearing two plates on which there were squares of the halva the town was famous for, a deep honey colour and glistening with ghee. He handed me a plate, sat down, said the coffee wouldn't be long, and indicated that I should begin eating. I had just taken my first bite when the coffee arrived. Srinivas's mother didn't come out to the veranda, but held out a small round stainless steel tray to her son. He took the two glasses of coffee and

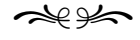
before I could get up and greet his mother she had vanished into the depths of the house. Srinivas had handed me my glass, taken his own, and begun blowing noisily on it preparatory to taking a first sip, when I was struck by something about the scene. In any other context I might have set aside what I was witnessing with a shrug, classifying it as yet another aspect of K— that displeased me but not something to make much of. But coming as it did on top of my despondency over my marks, that afternoon in Srinivas's house was what finally made me determined to leave town, just as soon as I could. And it was all over a plate and a glass, it is often on such small things that lives turn.

I was about to drink my coffee when I noticed how pretty the glass was. It was obviously expensive, with a pretty yellow pattern scrolling around the top half, its sides free of the air bubbles that were common in the cheaper glassware hawked in the bazaar. The plate, which was also made of glass, had the same elaborate texture and scrollwork in yellow, and had I been a visiting professor from Germany, say, here to do research into the musical pillars of the Shiva temple, I might have felt honoured by the fact that my hostess was offering me my coffee and snacks in expensive, virtually new glass crockery while her son made do with a stainless steel tumbler and plate. But I was from K— and I knew exactly what my plate and glass signified – that I was not clean or non-polluting enough to eat and drink from the same crockery that members of the household used. Because I was sort of a Brahmin and a friend of her son, Srinivas's mother had served me with the glassware I was using, but its fate would be the same as that of anything used by a person who didn't belong to their religion or their exact caste and sub-caste – it would be gingerly taken to a separate shelf in the kitchen, where it would await the ministrations of a servant who would clean it and put it back in its segregated shelf until it was drafted into use again when the next unclean visitor arrived.

In my rage and humiliation it was all I could do to restrain myself from hurling the plate to the floor. Gently setting it and my glass aside on the small table between our chairs, I rose and left Srinivas's home without saying goodbye. He knew precisely why I was leaving, and made no move to stop me, nor did he offer me an apology; this

was the way things were and you either accepted them or walked away if you could.

I wandered aimlessly for a while, trying to get a grip on myself before I went home. Through my anger I wondered at the fortitude of my parents. What must they have had to put up with, how had they coped with the incivility and insults that would almost certainly have been their lot when they had arrived in K— a couple of decades earlier? Presently I found myself beside a large rectangular tank that abutted the temple. Although it was intended principally for devotees, it was also used by the poor people in town, and the boys from the college would often come here to gawk at the younger prettier women as they bathed fully swathed in their saris. It wasn't much, but the sight of taut firm buttocks and nipples outlined against thin wet cloth haunted the dreams of K—'s youth, and on certain days it was hard to find standing room on the steps of the tank. It was deserted this evening except for a couple of male devotees who were bathing a little distance away – standing knee deep in the water stripped down to their sacred threads and dhotis, scooping the green scummy water over themselves. But the bathers weren't what held my attention, it was the fish which lived in the tank and were fed iddlis by the devout. I had once observed a young woman, barely out of her teens, feeding the fish, her hands cupped and delicate as conch shells, flowing out and over the water with the grace of a classical dancer and I had been entranced. But today the pale and monstrously bloated fish revolted me as they writhed like snakes in the opaque water, between the legs of the bathers, over and around themselves, coiling and uncoiling in a gelid white mass. They should have been gliding through some fast-flowing river, I thought, instead of circling sluggishly within the confines of the tank. They seemed to symbolize everything that was wrong with K—.



I spent all of the next year studying with a vengeance, and narrowly missed a first. It was a better result than I might otherwise have hoped for but who was going to hire someone with a second-class degree in economics? Nevertheless, I began frantically applying to

every company I could think of. I wasn't discriminating in the least – anyone who advertised for candidates with an undergraduate degree received an application from me, along with perhaps a hundred thousand other small-town graduates. I didn't receive a single invitation to even a preliminary interview for any of the positions I applied for.

Months went by, and then, in the way these things sometimes happen, everything fell into place quite accidentally. Besides his glancing interest in communism, there was only one thing that truly interested my father, and that was the news. Before he set out for college every morning, he would spend an hour with *The Hindu* and his morning coffee, and not even my mother, who ruled his life in every other way, dared to interrupt his daily communion with his newspaper. He would pore over every page, reading aloud editorials he thought were well fashioned, disagreeing vehemently with others, excoriating the paper's subeditors for lapses in grammar and style and finishing off the exercise by tackling the crossword. Although he would dutifully plod through the business and sport pages, he was only really interested in the news and the editorial page. He would scrutinize and ponder every word in these sections carefully, to the point that I sometimes wondered if he should have been a journalist and not a college professor. Perhaps that was what lay behind the eagerness with which he fastened on to the newsworthiness of our disappearing servant, seeing a story there that none of us had quite thought about.

Raju had come to us when he was fourteen – a sullen, clumsy boy who had run away from his poverty-stricken village, some sixty miles south of K—. The third son in a family of fourteen and therefore entirely without prospects, he had been recommended to my mother by Savitri, one of the women she went to the temple with. In the two years he had been employed by us, he had displayed no aptitude for cooking, and cleaned with little or no application, but he came cheap and was reasonably clean and honest, so he was given a mat and some utensils of his own, and wages that he never saw because he was always borrowing against them.

On the morning of his disappearance my father complained loudly about having to drink black coffee, and my mother explained that it

was because Raju hadn't yet brought the milk from the government dairy. In fact, she said, she hadn't seen him since the previous night. He normally slept in the courtyard outside the house but he wasn't there and his mat was neatly rolled up and stored in a corner of the kitchen; the utensils he used were still in their usual place but the cheap cardboard suitcase that my mother had bought him for Deepavali the previous year was gone. We hurriedly searched the rest of the house to make sure that nothing else was missing, then I got on my bicycle and pedalled to the dairy to get the milk, cursing Raju for being so inconsiderate as to leave before he had finished his morning duties. What was the world coming to, my mother lamented, servants came and went these days, they had none of the loyalty of retainers of the old school, who willingly sold themselves into servitude for generations, why her parents had had their Gopal for forty-five years, and so on and so forth. We'd heard it all before: Raju was the third servant we'd employed in five years. Someone else would turn up in due course, and there the matter would have rested, except for a curious fact. Two days after his departure, my mother announced, upon her return from the temple, that Raju wasn't the only servant who had disappeared; Savitri's cook had gone as well. Apparently, a recruiter from a Hindu right-wing organization had happened upon a group of young men who were either unemployed or held low-paid jobs and persuaded some of them to participate in a scheme to manufacture and transport consecrated bricks to Ayodhya, a dusty town far in the north, where they would be used to build a magnificent temple to Lord Ram.

For months now we had been hearing about this and other initiatives by sectarian political parties, including a massive procession on wheels that had passed through numerous small towns and villages drumming up support for the building of the Ram temple on the site of a sixteenth-century mosque, which, it was alleged, had been constructed by a Muslim invader after he had destroyed the temple which had originally stood on the spot. This campaign in particular alarmed most of the people we knew, because it seemed calculated to bring ordinary Hindus out on to the streets to avenge themselves on their Muslim neighbours for a centuries-old insult that neither party had had anything to do with. For days my father

had muttered and seethed at the breakfast table about 'barbaric northerners whipping up communal sentiments' but now that the issue was no longer academic he exploded. I cannot remember too many occasions on which my father became truly angry, but this was one of them. The first sign that he was about to lose his temper was that his ears would redden. They did so now, and my mother and I braced ourselves.

'Abominable,' he ranted. 'These people are giving every one of us Hindus a bad name. But now they have gone too far, pouring their poison into the ears of a simpleton like Raju who can't read or write or count. What do they intend to do with him, transform him into someone who can be controlled at will? Their plan should be exposed.'

This wasn't the moment to point out that my father wasn't being original; it was precisely what a number of editorialists and TV commentators had said, so my mother and I simply exchanged glances and did not contradict him.

'We must do something, get a reporter here to do a human interest story, a view from the front line.'

His audience of two didn't bother pointing out that the national media had other priorities, especially now. Riots had broken out in many of the towns and villages that the procession had passed through, thousands had been arrested, and it was doubtful that anyone would be interested in the story of a sixteen-year-old domestic from K—. But we had underestimated the depth of my father's outrage. He wrote to the editors of *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* suggesting they send a reporter out to K— to follow the trail of Raju and others who had been brainwashed into making common cause with the extreme right wing. When neither newspaper bothered to send him a response, he had another idea.

'Why don't you write the article?' he said to me one evening while we were gathered in our small, cluttered living room watching the news on television.

'Me?'

'Yes, you. Your command of English is adequate, you can do the research, you're from here, and you're not doing anything at the moment.' He paused, casting around for the clincher. 'And I will

help you,' he said. It was thus that I was launched on a career that I hadn't even thought about till then.

Raju's trail had long gone cold, but this was of no importance to my father. He sent me off every morning to interview anyone who might have known him or Savitri's former servant, and in the evening he would bring me books, borrowed from the college library, by famous journalists – Khushwant Singh, Frank Moraes, James Cameron, Kuldip Nayar – all of which he insisted I read to get a feel for journalistic prose and the art of constructing a good piece. Initially it was my father's enthusiasm that propelled the project along, but I was soon fully committed as I began to channel my own simmering rage and frustration into the story.

In the end, it wasn't an especially good article; we were amateurs, and simply did not have the skill to craft a great piece of journalism. I did not keep a copy of it, but I still recall its rather baroque opening line, which owed more to my father than it did to me: 'On 6 October 1990, P. Raju travelled further than he had ever done in his young life, a journey both temporal and spiritual.' I remember we looked in our battered *Concise Oxford Dictionary* to get the exact meaning of 'temporal' and several other words that were much too ornate and ponderous to feature in a normal piece. It didn't exactly surprise me that none of the major newspapers and magazines that we sent the story to bothered to reply, with the exception of *Time* magazine's office in New Delhi, which sent us a standard two-line letter of rejection. Undeterred, my father set his sights lower, and we sent out another batch of photocopies of the article with the same result.

Some months after we had first sent out the article, he came home from work, visibly excited. He pulled from his briefcase a very unglamorous magazine, printed entirely in black and white with no perceptible attempt at design, not even a proper cover, merely the title in a rather becoming shade of green over the table of contents. *The Indian Secularist*, the masthead read, and beside it, in smaller letters, Vol. 20: issue 11.

The magazine, which he had discovered in the college library, comprised forty-eight pages of closely set black type rather like an academic journal. Most of the articles were semi-academic in nature and concerned themselves with issues of sectarian and communal

conflict. Besides these, there was a round-up of international and domestic news and on the last page an editorial by Rustom Sorabjee, the paper's editor, printer and publisher. But what had especially caught my father's attention was a column entitled 'View from the Front Line', in which various committed citizens, and occasionally the paper's regular contributors, wrote about instances of communal conflict or amity they had witnessed in their daily lives. 'This is where your article will appear,' he said; 'there couldn't be a better match.'

We mailed a revised and updated copy of the piece to *The Indian Secularist*'s offices on Carmichael Road in Bombay, and ten days later there was a reply. On a postcard, in copperplate handwriting, Mr Sorabjee wrote that he had admired the piece and was willing to publish it if I was open to making some editorial changes.

I was about to dash off a reply, my enthusiasm now as great as my father's at the prospect of seeing our piece about the unfortunate Raju published, when my father stopped me.

'If he likes your article, maybe he wouldn't be averse to employing you. Why don't you write and ask him about a job?'

He brought home a pile of back issues of *The Indian Secularist* the next day, so my letter to Mr Sorabjee could make suitably enthusiastic references to the magazine, and after several attempts he finally approved my letter of application. My wait for the post from that day on took on the same sort of intensity it had in the days when I had first sent out applications for jobs. This time Mr Sorabjee did not reply as quickly, and I began to lose hope. However, three weeks later I received a response. In his neat script Mr Sorabjee apologized for the delay in getting back to me, but said he'd had to attend to a personal matter out of town; if I was still interested, he would be pleased to invite me to an interview in Bombay. I would be reimbursed second-class train fare to and from the city, and as soon as he had the dates of my arrival he would have me booked into a lodge near the office.



The day before I was due to leave for Bombay, my father suggested we go for a walk in the maidan. This was unusual because we didn't

often do things together; there was always a certain distance between us. We walked for a while in a somewhat awkward silence, then my father began talking about inconsequential things – it was clear that this was quite difficult for him. I wondered whether he saw in my departure from K— to the big city something that he should have done twenty years ago; was his hope that I make something of myself intricately bound up with his own long-abandoned dreams? It is often true that the most profound things surface at the end of a protracted conversation, and so it was that after we had completed a circuit of the maidan and were walking back home my father began telling me a story about a cousin of his back in Salem who had been a brilliant athlete in his youth, a long-distance runner. He participated in and won his speciality, the 10,000 metres, in every inter-collegiate and amateur sporting event in the district. His greatest rival for the mantle of top distance runner in the state was a man who studied at Loyola College in Madras. The two had raced against each other once before, but not since they had each grown to be so dominant in their event. The big showdown would take place at the annual inter-collegiate event in Madras, and there was an extra honour the athletes would vie for – a chance to try out for a spot on the Indian Olympic team.

My father told me that his cousin decided to add an extra element to his training routine – he travelled to Madras a month before he was due to compete and ran every morning on the soft shifting sands of Marina Beach, dragging a rickshaw behind him. His endurance had always been a feature of his athletic excellence but now he raised it to a different level.

On the day of the race, the stadium was packed. The Madras man had the stands full of raucous supporters, while my father's cousin ran virtually alone, with just my father and another boy to cheer him on. He ran a magnificent race, and as the runners came up to the last lap, the crowd fell silent, for the Salem boy looked as fresh as when he had started out, whereas his rival looked exhausted, the breath heaving out of his slender body in great waves. My father's cousin was in the lead by a few feet, a position he had held for most of the event, and as the gong sounded he raced confidently into the last circuit. His rival held on, barely, and then midway through the lap

came the moment the fans had been waiting for, the final kick that would carry one of them to victory. The athlete from Madras, who until then had looked on the verge of collapse, reached deep within himself, found one last pocket of energy, and began accelerating forward. He drew level with his rival, and then began to surge ahead. When my father's cousin looked for his own kick he found nothing there. He could have run another 10,000 metres without any problem – he had enough stamina to spare – but during his long hours of training on the beach with the rickshaw, which had invested him with prodigious endurance, he had neglected to practise the final sprint that would separate the victor from the rest of the field.

'What it comes down to in the end is timing and the last push forward. You've done everything you can to prepare, Vijay,' my father said, 'just don't ever forget the final kick.'