

SHORT STORY

O.V. VIJAYAN (Translated from Malayalam by the author)

As Vellayi-appan set out on his journey the sound of ritual mourning rose from his hut, and from Ammini's hut, and beyond those huts, the village listened in grief. Vellayi-appan was going to Kannur. Had they the money, each one of them would have accompanied him on the journey; it was as though he was journeying for the village. Vellayi-appan now passed the last of the huts and took the long ridge across the paddies. The crying receded behind him. From the ridge he stepped on pasture land across which the footpath meandered.

Gods, my lords, Vellayi-appan cried within himself. The black palms rose on either side and the wind clattered in their fronds. The wind, ever so familiar, was strange this day--the gods of his clan and departed elders were talking to him through the wind-blown fronds. Slung over his shoulder was a bundle of cooked rice, and its dampness seeped through the threadbare cloth on to his arm. His wife had bent long over the rice, kneading it for the journey and, as she had cried the while, her tears must have soaked into the sour curd. Vellayi-appan walked on. The railway station was four miles away. Farther down the path he saw Kutthihassan walking towards him. Kutthihassan stepped aside from the path, in tender reverence.

'Vellayi,' said Kutthihassan. 'Kutthihassan,' replied Vellayi-appan. That was all, just two words, two names, yet it was like a long colloquy, in which there was a lament and consolation. O Kutthihassan, said the unspoken words, I have a debt to pay you, fifteen silvers. Let that not burden you, O Vellayi, on this journey. Kutthihassan, I may never be able to pay you, never after this. We consign our unredeemed debts to God's keeping. Let His will be done. I burn within myself; my life is being prised away. May the Prophet guard you on this journey, may the gods bless you, your gods and mine.

The dithyramb of the gods was now a torrent in the palms. Vellayi-appan passed Kutthihassan and walked on. Four miles to go to the train station. Again, an encounter on the way. Neeli, the landress, with her bundles of washing. She too stepped aside reverentially.

'Vellayi-appan,' she said. 'Neeli,' said Vellayi-appan. Just these two words, and yet between them the abundant colloquy. Vellayi-appan walked on.

The footpath joined the mud road, and Vellayi-appan looked for the milestone and continued on his way. Presently he came to where the rough-hewn track descended into the river. Across the river, beyond a rise and a stretch of sere grass, was the railway. Vellayi-appan stepped on to the sands, then into the knee-deep water. Schools of little fish, gleaming silver, rubbed against his calves and swam on. As he reached the middle of the river, Vellayi-appan was overwhelmed by the expanse of water. It reminded him of sad and loving rituals, of the bathing of his father's dead body and how he taught his son to swim in the river; all this he remembered and, pausing on the river bank, wept in memory.

He reached the railway station and made his way to the ticket counter and with great care undid the knot in the corner of this unsewn cloth to take out the money for the fare.

'Kannur,' Vellayi-appan said. The clerk behind the counter pulled out a ticket, franked it and tossed it towards him. One stage in my journey is over, thought Vellayi-appan. He secured the ticket in the corner of his unsewn cloth and, crossing over to the platform, sat on a bench, waiting patiently for his train. He watched the sun sink and the palms darken far away, and the birds flit homewards. Vellayi-appan remembered walking with his son to the fields at sundown; he remembered how his son had looked at the birds in wonder. Then he

remembered himself as a child, holding on to his father's little finger and walking down the same fields. Two images, but between them as between two reticent words, an abundance of many things. Soon another aged traveler came over and sat beside him on the bench.

'Going to Coimbatore, are you?' the stranger asked. 'Kannur,' Vellayi-appan answered. 'Is that so?' 'The Kannur train will be at ten in the night.' 'Is that so?' 'What work do you do in Kannur?' 'Nothing much.' 'Just traveling, are you?'

The stranger's converse, inane and rasping, tensed round Vellayi-appan like a hangman's noose. Once you left the village and walked over the long ridge, it was a world full of strangers, and their disinterested words were like a multitude of nooses. The train to Coimbatore came, and the old stranger rose and left. Vellayi-appan was again alone on the bench. He had no desire to untie the bundle of rice. Instead he kept a hand on the threadbare wrap; he felt its moisture. He sat thus and slept. And dreamt. In his dream he called out 'Kandunni, my son!'

Vellayi-appan was woken up from his sleep by the din and clatter of the train to Kannur. He felt for the ticket tied in the corner of this cloth and was reassured. He looked for an open door; he tried to board the compartment nearest to him.

'This is first class, O elder.' 'Is that so?' He peered into the next compartment. 'This is reserved.' 'Is that so?' 'Try farther down, O elder.' The voice of strangers.

Vellayi-appan got into a compartment where there was no sitting space left. He could barely stand. I shall stand; I don't need to sleep; this night my son sits awake. The rhythm of the train changed with the changing layers of the earth, the fleeting trackside lamps, sand banks, trees. Long ago he had travelled in a train, but that was in the daytime. This was a night train. It sped through the tunnel of darkness, whose arching walls were painted with dim murals.

The day had not broken when he reached Kannur. The bundle of kneaded rice still hung from his shoulder. Oozing its dampness. He passed through the gate into the station yard, the dark now livened by the first touch of dawn. The horse-cart men clumsily parked together did not accost him.

Vellayi-appan asked them, 'Which is the way to the jail?' Someone laughed. Here is an old man asking the way to the jail at daybreak. Someone laughed again. O elder, all you have to do is steal; they will take you there. The converse of strangers tightened around his neck. Vellayi-appan suffocated.

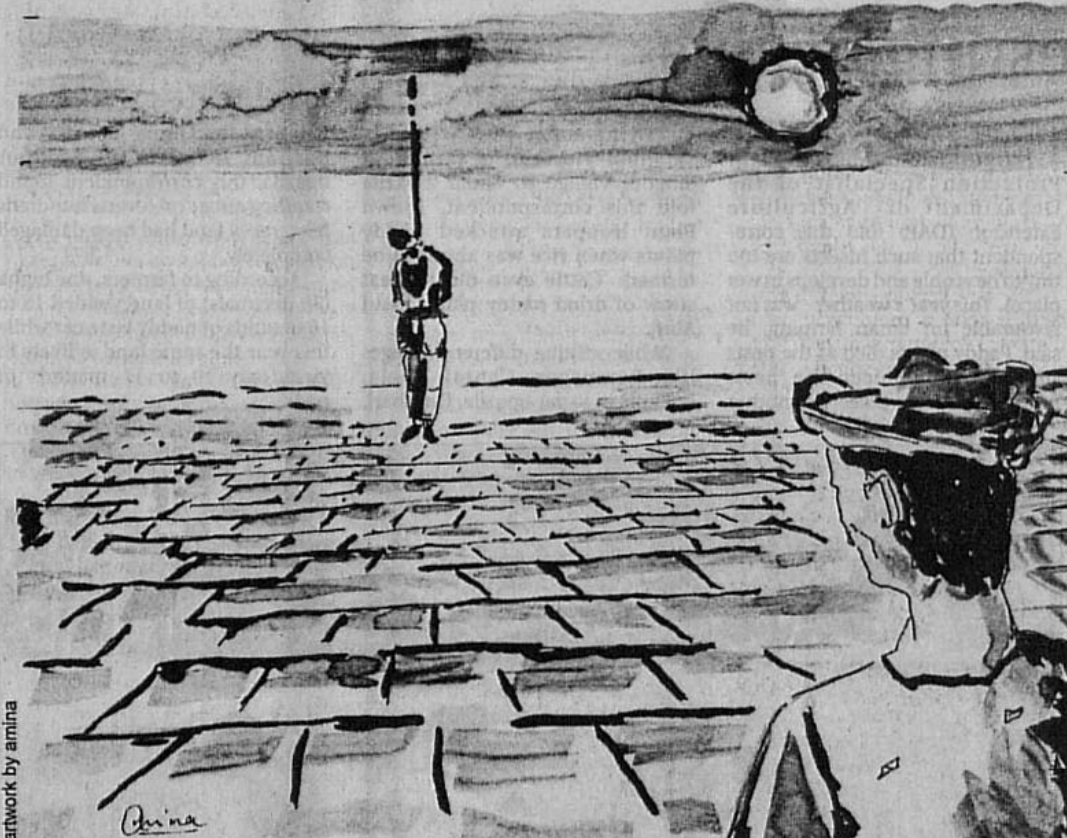
Then someone told him the way and Vellayi-appan began to walk. The sky lightened to the orchestration of crows cawing. At the gate of the jail a guard stopped him, 'What brings you here this early?'

Vellayi-appan shrank back like a child, nervous. Then slowly he undid the corner of his cloth and took out a crumpled and yellowing piece of paper.

'What is that?' the guard enquired. Vellayi-appan handed him the paper; the guard glanced through it without reading.

Vellayi-appan said, 'My child is here.' 'Who told you to come so early?' the guard asked, his voice irritable and harsh. 'Wait till the office is open.'

Then his eyes fell on the paper again, and became riveted to its contents. His face softened in sudden compassion.



artwork by amina

'Tomorrow, is it?' the guard asked, almost consoling. 'I don't know. It is all written down there.' The guard read and reread the order. 'Yes,' he said, 'it's tomorrow morning at five.'

Vellayi-appan nodded in acknowledgement, and slumped on a bench at the entrance of the jail. There he waited for the dark sanctum to open.

'O elder, may I offer you a cup of tea?' the guard asked solicitously. 'No.'

My son has not slept this night and, not having slept, would not have woken. Neither asleep nor awake, how can he break his fast this morning? Vellayi-appan's hand rested on the bundle of rice. My son, this rice was kneaded by your mother for me. I saved it during all the hours of my journey and brought it here. Now this is all I have to bequeath to you. The rice inside the threadbare wrap, food of the traveler, turned stale. Outside, the day brightened. The day grew hot.

The offices opened, and staid men took their places behind the tables. In the prison yard there was the grind of a parade. The prison came alive. The officers got to work, bending over yellowing papers in tedious scrutiny. Form behind the tables, and where the column of the guards waited in formation, came rasping orders, words of command. Nooses without contempt or vengeance, gently strangulating the traveler. The day grew hotter.

Someone told him sit down and wait. Vellayi-appan sat down; he waited. After a wait, the length of which he could not reckon, a guard led him into the corridors of the prison. The corridors were cool with the damp of the prison. We're here, O elder.

Behind the bars of a locked cell stood Kandunni. He looked at his father like a stranger, through the awesome filter of a mind that could not longer receive nor give consolation. The guard opened the door and let Vellayi-appan into the cell. Father and son stood facing each

other, petrified. Then Vellayi-appan leaned forward to take his son in an embrace. From Kandunni came a cry that pierced beyond hearing and when it died down, Vellayi-appan said, 'My son!' 'Father!' said Kandunni.

Just these words, but in them father and son communed in the fullness of sorrow.

Son, what did you do? I have no memory, father. Son, did you kill? I have no memory.

It does not matter, my son; there is nothing to remember any more. Will the guards remember? No, my son.

Father, will you remember my pain?

Then again the cry that pierced beyond hearing issued from Kandunni, Father, don't let them hang me!

'Come out, O elder,' the guard said. 'The time is over.'

Vellayi-appan came away and the door clanged shut.

One last look back, and Vellayi-appan saw his son like a stranger met during a journey. Kandunni was peering through the bars as a traveler might through the window of a hurtling train.

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Vellayi-appan received the body of his son from the guards like a midwife a baby.

O elder, what plans do you have for the funeral?

I have no plan.

Don't you want the body?

Masters, I have no money.

Vellayi-appan walked along with the scavengers who pushed the trolley carrying the body. Outside the town, over the deserted marshes, the vultures wheeled patiently. Before the scavengers filled the pit Vellayi-appan saw his son's face just once more. He pressed his palm on the cold forehead in blessing.

After the last shovelful of earth had leveled the pit, Vellayi-appan wandered in the gathering heat and eventually came to the seashore. He had never seen the ocean before. Then he became aware of something cold and wet in his hands, the rice his wife had kneaded for him in the morning. Vellayi-appan undid the bundle. He scattered the rice on the sand, in sacrifice and requiescat. From the crystal reaches of the sunlight, crows descended on the rice, like incarnate souls of the dead come to receive the offering.

O.V. Vijayan broke new ground in Malayalam literature with his novel Khasakkinte Ithasaram (The Legends of Khasak, 1990).

Letter from SAN FRANCISCO

SALMA RIDHAH

It was a couple of days after the elections and we--Mike, Tom, Mei, Nancy and I--were wallowing in post-election blues. Even the sun, even the Presidio, even the Golden Gate bridge looked glum. Nothing seemed like fun anymore (not even the old 'Taliban TV guide' I found behind the sofa: 'Allah McBeal', 'Husseinfeld' 'Just Shoot Everyone, 'Veilwatch'), while my father, who is newly retired and has time hanging on his hands like bad drapes, kept calling me up to say 'This is terrible, Salma, this is terrible' till I had to tell him, 'Dad, I know. This is the fifth time you've called me up to say that. Now go bowling.'

It was only when I put the phone down that I remembered my father is Indian, which believe it or not is something I forget once in a while, and Indian dads don't go bowling.

Mike then had a brainwave. 'Let's go to my mom's place in South Carolina.' We all knew instinctively it was either that or Prozac! His mother lives in a beach house down there, and we had all been there before, but that was years and years ago, and though we kept making plans to go over there again, something or the other kept coming up and we hadn't been there in ages. But now seemed to be the prime time to go. 'We won't even look down at the red states below us in the plane' Mei said, meaning all those states in the great 'heartland' which had voted for Bush. 'We'll pretend the United States is just one big doughnut.'

'But South Carolina went for Bush. It's in the South, remember?' Mike said. We all sighed. Unless we wanted to go up the East Coast, to the north-east, or stay at home, there was really no escaping the right-wingers. The only other option was Canada.

'Maybe' Tom said, to divert us from our sorrows, 'the in-flight movie is going to be great and we won't have to think about it.'

The movie turned out to be Bull Durham. And even though I am not a sports fan, and can't get teary-eyed about baseball like Nancy, who has beautiful gray eyes, grew up in New York and is a Yankees fan as all get-out, Bull Durham I have to admit has its



moments. Like when Tim Robbins pitches in black garters. I always have to wonder how everybody else kept a straight face in the movie.

But then we found out that we were restless in South Carolina, too. The beach house was great and the breakfasts Mike's mom fed us were delicious (maple syrup from a friend's place up in Vermont that was the last thing in pure scrumptiousness) but the Atlantic was really too cold to frolic in and that week a raw, blustery, kiljoy wind sprang up from nowhere ('the White House' said Mike's mom darkly), so we were stuck indoors watching the boob tube, and that kicked in the old blues again. Plus my dad kept calling up, with conservative talking heads shouting in glee on the TV in the background. 'This is terrible, Salma. Now they are going to level Falluja.'

'Dad, get a dog.' Something had to give! We hadn't come all the way from 'Frisco to veg in sweats indoors. Again it was Mike: 'We can either go up to Kill Devil Hills where the Wright Brothers flew their planes, or we go down to Key West, Florida.' Kill Devil Hills is in the Outer Banks, up in North Carolina.

And even though we knew that it was probably kitschy as hell and full of gift shops in makeshift garages, we all went

thumbs-up for Key West, simply because it was the longer drive. We piled into Mike's mom's Honda Civic and hopped onto I-95 south. It got warmer, more 'country', more pickups, and when we stopped in Savannah, Georgia for lunch the friendly waitress began every sentence with 'Ya'all...'. We kept telling Mike now that he was in S.C., his 'down home' accent was coming back, and how he kept saying 'yeeup' instead of 'yes'.

Somewhere before Miami Nancy mentioned that 'Papa' Hemingway had lived in Key West and that we could go see his house, which was a big tourist attraction. Ernest Hemingway, writer, journalist, big game hunter, sports fisherman and bullfighter extraordinaire, a genuine celeb in the '40s and '50s. He moved there, we learnt later, around 1928, then lived there continuously from 1931 to 1940.

I didn't know much about him. In my sophomore year I had read A Farewell to Arms and A Moveable Feast. Though I remembered one line from A Farewell to Arms, it was more the latter book that had stayed with me, sketches of famous America expatriate writers and artists in Paris in the 1920s.

'Do you remember his portrait of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas?' Mei asked us, searching in her bag for Kleenex.

On Bush, Hemingway and Key West

read them.' 'I have. It's coming back to me now.'

'So how come you know so much about him?' Mike asked Mei.

'My dad loved him. We had all his books in the house when I was growing up.'

'The son of a Chinese immigrant who loved Hemingway?'

'Yeeup.'

From Florida City we scooted over to Highway 1, which went all the way to Key West, the last island in the string of islands at the tip of Florida called The Keys. We kept a loud count of the mile



Papa with Castro

'Yeah, I do,' I said. 'Don't you think that was a subtle hatchet job? They came out like such creepy women. I always thought that the big he-man felt threatened by a brilliant lesbian intellectual like Stein.'

'Right,' said Nancy. 'He couldn't shoot her or mount her on the wall.'

'Hey, Nancy, "mount" is not exactly the word I'd use here,' Mei said theatrically. She, like Nancy is older than me, used to be a lawyer, but has ditched it all for black lipstick and acting lessons. 'Of course,' she said after we were done with our cackling, 'the best thing that happened to him was Martha Gellhorn, but he couldn't hold on to her.'

'Martha who?' 'Gellhorn. His third wife. They had a hot thing going when he was still married to Pauline, but she was too independent for him. She married him, but divorced him later. I imagine she couldn't take it any more, sucking up to the great man.'

markers that began with Key Largo, the first island on the string. Straightaway we could see that it was getting touristy, with 'shacks' pitching discounted 'longnecks' (which is

Americanese for beer in a bottle) and hotdogs. Bridges linked the islands, and the best one was the seven-mile bridge between Boot Key and Big Pine Key, which we hit with perfect timing in the evening to drool over a fabulously technicolor sunset. Key West was alive and hopping when we got there at night, a cacophony of lights and loud voices. We checked into a motel and did laps in the swimming pool with other tourists, mostly British. It was peak season, the pool bartender told us, and we had been lucky to get rooms without reservations.

We chomped down our burgers and called it an early night. Morning confirmed what we had only suspected at night: that Key West was very touristy indeed. After breakfast, we walked around what the residents of Key West call the Conch Republic. It was more like Tacky Town, Plastic Pomp, all done in garish Florida

pastel colors. A warm wind rushed through the palm trees. On and around the pier were the usual fake 'town characters' and 'street artists': men on stilts, mimes, clowns, sleight-of-handers, chess matches, trombone players, Jimmy Buffet posters and T-shirts. Down side streets were shops crammed with gimmicky stuff, bars and saloons, and paintings done by artists sitting beside their works laid out on the pavements. I and Nancy bought a painting each. Mine was of shrimp boats at rest in a wharf, and her's of sunset at the pier, which sounds terribly clichéd, but the artist was a silent, four-faced young girl who we concluded was obviously a talented runaway from home and both of us wanted to offer her our support.

Around 11 o'clock we went to see Hemingway's house. There was a long line ahead of us, lots of German tourists, lumpy ladies in khaki shorts. The Hemingway house, made from native rock mined from the surrounding land in 1851, is a two-storey Spanish Colonial, a style that favored arches in wraparound verandahs, wooden shutters, high ceilings, plenty of light and a Mexican adobe feel to it. It was swampy hot inside, and our guide, an overweight, short man who kept mopping his forehead with a large bandanna, told us that one reason was that Hemingway's second wife, Pauline, who was the one he lived with here, removed the ceiling fans so that she could hang her imported chandeliers. Cats are everywhere, the descendants of cats Hemingway had, some of whom were six-toed, and there were a lot of their great-great-grandkids around. As were trophy animal heads on walls. The tour is quite good, with every detail faithfully pointed out to visitors: Pauline's Spanish tiles, the style similarity between the Deacon's bench downstairs and the bed in the master bedroom upstairs, the boys' room where Hemingway's sons Patrick and Gregory lived, the replicas of the original Miro painting and Picasso sculpture from his Paris years. In fact, it was John Dos Passos who in Paris told Hemingway about Key West, and it was here in a little studio at the



Hemingway writing

back that Hemingway worked on Death in the Afternoon, Green Hills of Africa, For Whom The Bell Tolls, and many of his short stories. We climbed up the stairs to the studio where they still had the portable Remington. Back in the old days there was a plank Hemingway would walk to get to it. One slip, and it was a twenty-foot drop to the paved patio below! In the boys' room there was a very old photo of Hemingway in his WWI Red Cross Uniform. He was wounded in Italy and fell in love with his nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky. It was this experience he used for A Farewell to Arms. I didn't like the Attenborough movie, though, with Sandra Bullock as a fatuous Nurse Catherine, looking as if she was waiting for her nails to dry.

But later, at Sloppy Joe's, we women agreed that Papa's house and his legend left us cold. Sloppy Joe's is the bar where Hemingway drank and roistered with his 'manly' buddies. Nearly every bar in Key West boasted of having had Hemingway, but Sloppy Joe's was the 'authentic' place. It was crammed to the rafters with tourists, half of them wearing 'Papa Lives On' T-shirts. We ordered 'Papa dables' his favourite drink. A mix of Island Rum, grapefruit juice, Grenadine, splash of Sweet & Sour, club soda and fresh-squeezed lime. All the waitresses and waiters looked like seasonal help, Europeans too, with tanned, fit bodies, people out of a Calvin Klein ad.

It turned me off, those animal heads mounted on the wall of his house, 'Nancy scoffed, looking at the 119-pound sailfish caught by Hemingway that still hung on one wall. 'Big game hunting! More like white man goes slaughtering in Africa. Bet you Papa was just another imperialist at heart.'

'You can't judge him according to later standards,' said Tom. 'And that super-macho stuff about walking the plank every morning? Who was he kidding?'

'Fairy-chested fiction, too,' said Mei. 'Me and the world going at it mano a mano. I don't think his writing has worn well.'

'Oh come on,' Tom said, 'he won the Nobel prize, didn't he?' 'Nobel prize, shobel prize. Bunch of Swedish men.'

'Well, your dad liked him.' 'So? My dad was in the Second World War. He probably had fantasies about meeting up with a cute white nurse.'

'Cute white nurse? I asked.

'Male insecurity?' Mei said. 'All that chest thumping makes you think there was something deep in the closet.'

'Easy, guys,' said Mike, looking at the big bartender. 'You don't want to say it too loud in this place.'

We ordered a second round of drinks. Cuba Libre this time.

'Do you think he would have voted for Bush?' Nancy asked, checking the menu. 'What's conch fritters?'

'I don't know, he certainly looked the type. Beard, beer gut, a good ole boy.'

'No way,' I said. 'Every thinking man is an atheist' is the line I remember from A Farewell to Arms. That's not a Bush guy. You gotta give him that.'

'He loved guns, hunting. The gun lobby voted for Mr. Texas National Guard.'

'But Hemingway loved cats, too. The Bushes are dog people.' This from Mike.

'Besides, A Farewell to Arms is anti-war,' I said, 'which sure wouldn't provide Dick Cheney's meal ticket.'

'Yeah, he wasn't what you'd call a big Christian,' Mei said slowly, lost in thought. 'Hemingway's thing was the world's a cruel, screwed-up place, religion was a bad deal, and you had to make do as best as you could by not talking too much.'

'Something to be said for that,' Tom jumped in quickly, now that things were going Papa's way. 'Besides, didn't he live in Castro's Cuba?'

'Yeeup. Old Ernest did live in Castro's Cuba and by all accounts the Fidelistas were fond of him. They have statues of him over there. Nope, I can't see him going for Bush...'

It was a thought that made our day. Papa's one saving grace, that after one look at Bush he would probably have boarded the nearest fishing boat and paddled like blazes for Cuba.

Salma Ridha works for an alternative newspaper in the Bay area.