

***Flower Queen***

*I dedicate this book to the memory  
of the gentle water lily under whose  
sweetness I bloomed*

# Flower Queen

Inspiring ordinary Indians to make a difference

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## Preface

The nature of the Flower Queen case demanded a quick recall of details, which was why I maintained a journal. This journal has now metamorphosed into this book, still retaining the original journal dates as chapter titles. I have changed the names of several people to protect their identity, changed the tense, included dialogues, and introduced suitable quotations at the beginning of each chapter.

A friend was curious as to why I was making *this* journal into a book. She was alluding to the fact that I normally write and review biblical articles at home, while doing software-related documentation for a living. Although, I had no conscious motive, I know now that three issues sustained me through the incidents mentioned in the book and subsequently drove me to write the book itself.

The first issue is all about being a good citizen. My mother gave me my first lessons in Christian doctrine and taught me to say my first prayer. It was also my mother who taught me our National Anthem. With her, I could never have spoken of national leaders disrespectfully and gotten away with it. Not that she was against analyzing their actions. It was disrespect that she would not tolerate. From her and from the schools in which I studied, I learnt civic sense—of not littering, of taking care of library books, of not cheating in exams, being charitable and so on.

The second issue that burned within me was the fact that we—who prided ourselves in being educated and forward looking—were often totally hypocritical. We know that caste system and untouchability is evil; but do we allow our maids to ever sit with us in the living room or at table with us? For centuries, some communities of fellow Indians have been treated as less than human beings. You and I have no business to allow any custom that is a fallout of that period to continue. Things will not change overnight. When empowering people who work for us becomes our mission, we will find that they may either be overwhelmed by it, or the new freedom may go to their heads. Either way, a little patience and

firmness will make them settle down. The question is whether it matters to us.

The third reason for writing this book is to impress upon you that if I could do what I did, you can do it even better. You will realize as you move through the book, that I was hardly qualified to do many of the things that I ended up doing. My stupidities and ignorance show up as I recount the story of how I was swept along by the current of wanting to help Flower Queen and how I managed to muddle along.

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**14 September 2002**

*When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not.*

*- Georgia O'Keeffe*

## I

She knocked on my door and sold me some flowers for my hair in the last week of July 2002. She did it again the next day and I asked her to continue this saying I'd pay her three rupees for a length of threaded jasmines. At first the flowers were fresh and nice but as the days went by, they got yellower and not so fresh at all. She tried to compensate this by adding other flowers, sometimes roses. Not just her flowers, she too wore a jaded appearance.

One time she asked me if the flowers were useful or if I took them only because I felt sorry for her. Another time she asked if I could give her some work to do around the house. I already have two fine people working for me and had to refuse her.

Her name was Maharani, which means 'queen'. But we called her Flower Queen. I cannot recollect who came up with this title, maybe it was one of my children.

Sometime towards the end of August, she said that she wanted to rent another house.

"I don't like my house *Amma*<sup>1</sup>. Never stay in a house with the house owner living nearby. Never do it. Owners are a nuisance. My owner watches all my movements. He wants me to be back in the house before dark but I want to be free." She was silent for a while and then came closer before continuing.

"I have some money that should come to me. When it comes, I'll pay you back. Can you help me with the house advance now?"

"What is this money that you are talking about?" I was curious. Having a rich relative turn up suddenly, die, and bequeath the estate to one is the stuff dreams are made of.

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<sup>1</sup> Tamil for woman (literally mother)

“I will bring the bank receipt tomorrow. Then you will understand.” She also mumbled something about not feeling so good, and about memories that were troubling her.

She did bring the "bank" receipt, which was actually a receipt for a deposit in a well-known chit fund called Latchimi Benefit Fund. The money had been deposited about six years ago when her husband was alive.

So she had been married. She gave me a very confusing picture about her husband's death.

“People think he died in an accident—that a motorbike hit him.” She came closer to me as she continued:

“Even the *vakeel*<sup>2</sup> says this, but I know that they murdered him. They did not stop with that. *Amma*, his daughter tried to kill my son.”

“His daughter?” I probed.

“His other wife's daughter.”

So she had a son. Her hazy blithering included others who did various things to take her money. I could not make out much from all this gabble.

“Bring your son one day when you come, Maharani.”

“Alright *Amma*, I'll bring Sanjay and you must advise him. He refuses to go to work these days,” she said broodingly.

“He used to be such a good boy. He has changed now. It's all because of my husband's daughter. She mixed medicine in his tea for a whole year and this has made him ‘mental’. *Amma*, he studied in Green Valley English School. But he discontinued school and now he cannot even read.”

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<sup>2</sup> Tamil for lawyer

Green Valley English School is a well-known school. I was skeptical and could not imagine any progeny of Flower Queen studying there. As if sensing this, she produced several fee receipts and school certificates and gave them to me. I studied them. They were Sanjay's school documents all right and mentioned the names of both Maharani and her husband Baskar as parents. But the school was not Green Valley English School but some other English school. When I looked up at her face, I saw that it bore a look of triumph. As if to say—You did not believe me but I have proved it to you.

She also had much to say about many things including her experiences as a child artist in Tamil movies. Some of her rambling was downright weird and I felt that maybe she was schizophrenic. Then why did I not brush aside her stories as a lot of bilge water? I think it was because I wanted to help her and was looking for something to tell me that she was being truthful. The Latchimi Benefit Fund receipt was one tangible thing that proved her truthfulness. The fee receipts were true too. Maybe they did not tally with her claims exactly, but they tallied with her heart. She really felt that it was a bank receipt, just as she really thought that her son had been studying in Green Valley school.

## II

When she came to me the next time, she was mostly incoherent, but her son was with her. His name was Sanjay, a fair and beautiful lad of 15 years. It was hard to believe that he was her son. But he was not forthcoming with his opinion about anything. He would occasionally smile and at once become serious as if he remembered something all of a sudden. My husband and I spoke to him about the fact that he should work but could not get much of a response from him. I thought that perhaps he did not want to say anything in his mother's presence and asked him to come the next day.

Every time Flower Queen opened her mouth to say something Sanjay glared her into silence. So she just stood by looking woebegone and wretched. Once we were through with speaking with Sanjay, Flower Queen began to speak again.

“All these people, shame on them, reminding me about my childhood.”

“Who are these people, Maharani, who are bothering you?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered, “but they tell me the truth about my childhood. I now remember my days as a child actress very clearly. I earned so much money but I have not seen any of it,” she sighed.

I did not know what to make of this. The poor have so little as it is. If she wanted to make believe that she had been watched by people in the movies and loved as a child star, why should I grudge her that small joy. Sanjay and his mother prepared to leave.

"Sanjay has gone and gotten married. Is marriage needed for him at this age?" Flower Queen announced. I looked in Sanjay’s direction questioningly.

“She is blabbering some nonsense,” he smiled.

Flower Queen started walking down the stairs. She had a peculiar way of walking, swaying from side to side. Her sway was graceful when she was happy but most of the time it was a slow and dejected sort of swaying. This time as she walked down the stairs, the swaying was purposeful. Sanjay followed her down.

When they reached the ground floor, Flower Queen did a right-about turn and came up again leaving Sanjay downstairs.

“I want to pay back the 'tiffin' *amma*. She has given Sanjay and me breakfast for two months. When the money comes from the bank, I will repay you.”

“Maharani, your money is not in a bank. It is with a chit fund company. Many chit funds have gone broke and closed down. Let’s hope that Latchimi Benefit Fund does not close shop. Even if the money does come, it could take a long time. You keep mentioning that money as if you are getting it tomorrow.”

“If you don’t want to help me get my bank money, I can ask someone else,” she answered rather resentfully.

“Take me to the 'tiffin' *amma* and I will pay her what you owe her.” I did not want to give Flower Queen any money. I did not even know if such a 'tiffin' *amma* existed.

Flower Queen did not like this idea and walked off in a huff without a word. I just prayed for wisdom. How do you convince a sick woman that you have her best interest in mind?

Sanjay did not come the next day or the day after. But Flower Queen came and crossly took back the papers that she had given me.

She was back again another day asking if I could help pay the tiffin loan. That day Omana my cook and Yamuna my helper were with me and were properly introduced to Flower Queen for the first time. Sometime during the conversation, they told her that I was a good person and totally trustworthy.

Within a couple of days, Flower Queen brought back the papers for safekeeping telling me that her *vakeel* will be asking to see them soon. I told her that the only reason I was keeping them with me was that I was worried she would lose them. In fact, she had torn up an old ration card that she had earlier given me because it was not valid anymore. I was glad to have the papers back before she destroyed something else.

### III

I went with her to see her house and pay the 'tiffin' *amma*. Her house that was just a little shack was quite spacious, and even had a small cooking area. The 'tiffin' *amma* stayed in the opposite shack and was quite nice, offering me a chair to sit down. I met the 'tiffin' *amma*'s daughter too. Come to think of it, they were a nice family indeed to feed Flower Queen and Sanjay for two months without much hope of remuneration.

The ground between Flower Queen's shack and the 'tiffin' *amma*'s shack was a square one with each side measuring about 30 ft. Flower Queen's shack and the house owner's shack lay on one side of the square. On the opposite side was the 'tiffin' *amma*'s shack,

which was adjacent to an empty dilapidated shack. The road by which we had come and a mucky Cooum tributary formed the other pair of opposite sides.

The next time I saw her, Flower Queen wanted desperately to shift to another house because her house owner wanted her to vacate. The two women who work for me—Omana and Yamuna— were curious about her and I studied their reaction; maybe they would intuitively find some thing devious about her that had escaped me. But while they thought she was dotty to the core, they did not distrust her intentions.

And it was Omana, my cook, who found a house in the slum where she lived and took me to see it one Tuesday morning. It was my first trip into a Chennai slum, although I have visited slum homes in Bangalore and Madurai. It was another world—another India. Anyway, the hut that Omana and I checked out was about 7 ft x 7 ft in size with an electric light. In spite of the rains of the previous night, the floor was dry, indicating that the thatched roof was in good condition. Omana assured me that the house owner was dependable, as she had stayed in one of his houses for seven years. He asked for an advance of 1000 rupees and a rent of 300 rupees. I was satisfied.

But when Flower Queen came home she was reluctant to come with me.

“No *Amma*, I don’t like that area. Low-class people live there.” Obviously, affectations and hang-ups about caste and class run through the cross section of our society. As for me, Omana lived there and she was honest, clean, polite, and hard working. How much higher can you go than that?

“Very high-class people live there Maharani. Moreover, you have no money. You must take what is available.” I just managed to keep myself from blurting out ‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’

When I took her to see the house, I could make out that she hated the place. The house owner was an elderly gentleman who spoke to us very kindly.

“You will have no problem here. The thatch is new. When will you be occupying it?”

“The neighbors are not the good sort.” Flower Queen was feeling very superior.

“Oh no, on the contrary, they are very nice and friendly.”

“These houses are in a cluster—so close to one another. I know people will come and bother me and talk to me. I do not want to talk to anyone.”

“If you do not want to talk to anyone, I will tell them all not to disturb you,” the good gentleman persevered. But Flower Queen was determined.

“Your house is so small. It will be enough only for my things. Where will my son and I sleep?”

“I can make a loft for you with a large plank of wood. You can keep your things there. There will be ample room for you then.”

“This house is only for my things,” she persisted. I had to intervene because Flower Queen was getting on my nerves and I did not want to overstay our welcome.

“Sir, I’ll let you know by this evening if we will be taking this house.” He repeated his offer about fixing up a loft. We came away leaving him confused and wondering what had gone wrong.

Now that Flower Queen did not want that house, I asked her what she was planning to do. Her reaction disappointed me and my disappointment bordered on irritation. But I wanted to understand her mind and what it was that she wanted in a house.

All of that morning, we went on foot, slum after slum, looking for a house. What a pair we made—an undernourished little woman swaying from side to side and an obviously well-fed woman—walking in the hot and humid Chennai sun.

It was well after noon, in an area called Sai Nagar, that we found ourselves seated in another small house, which had two pukka rooms and a thatched shed. It also had an area in front that could be

used to build a hut. So we had a choice here, depending on our budget. Flower Queen wanted one of the pukka rooms. The advance was 3000 rupees and the rent was 300 rupees. I stood my ground; we could not afford the place; no way. Then she finally agreed to the yet-to-be constructed hut in front for an advance of 1500 rupees.

There was a young man living in that house who was not very bright and he let the cat out of the bag that there was a ghost frequenting the place. The more the mother tried to play down the story, the more the man spilled out the 'evidence'. This and some other problems about water drainage and other things made Flower Queen rethink. Although I had resigned myself to going wherever Flower Queen went that day, I was beginning to feel impatient. As in every place, I profusely thanked the lady of the house and off we were on our search again.

To cut the long story short, we settled for another house that would be ready in a couple of days; the flooring was being laid. I paid 1000 rupees as advance. Rent would be 300 rupees. She could occupy it in three days time on Friday.

Now we were left with the job of convincing Flower Queen's present house owner to let her stay till Friday because he had wanted her to vacate immediately. The 'tiffin' *amma* and her daughter welcomed me, and I then spoke to the owner. He had many complaints about Flower Queen such as the fact that she did not respond to him when he asked her for his rent. He did not have to strain so much to make me believe that.

I tried to calm him down by telling him that she was not in her proper senses because of her problems. It was settled that she would leave on Saturday because Friday was an inauspicious day according to him.

But on Friday at around 5:30 p.m., Flower Queen reported to me that her house owner had beaten her in the morning and had threatened to throw her things out. It was too late to shift now. It was actually too late for me to be visiting that slum. But with Omana for safety (grumbling that her cooking was being interrupted) on one side and Flower Queen on the other in the auto

rickshaw, I went to her house armed with a new lock we bought for 20 rupees on the way.

When we reached there, the 'tiffin' *amma* acknowledged our presence but not with the usual exuberance. When we were inside Flower Queen's house, I called the 'tiffin' *amma*'s daughter, a young woman of about 20 years.

“What happened?” I kept my voice down because I did not want the house owner to know that we had come.

“What happened was not good. That man beat her in the morning.”

“Why did he do that?”

“I am not sure. He was asking her something and she did not reply. That is how Maharani always behaves. How can he beat her? We could not interfere because he is not a decent man and will start shouting at us. We live here and do not want to irritate him. But we were very angry and sad.”

How despicably the house owner had behaved during the morning's altercation! I was thankful that even though, I had not taken Flower Queen's words very seriously, I had still acted and come. Once again, she had been telling the truth.

We locked the house. Flower Queen said that she would sleep at some 'good' person's house in the 'Round'<sup>3</sup> for the night. I told her to come back and shift her things to the new house first thing in the morning.

That night her son, Sanjay, finding the house locked came to me. I found him much more communicative than he had been the other day. I told him how some of what his mother said came from her own mind but that she was not lying at all. However, others would

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<sup>3</sup> referred to an area in Thirumangalam where small circular houses had been built many years ago. Later, after shops and other tenements were constructed around it, the circular nature of the houses was not obvious anymore from the main road. Still the name 'Round' stuck

not believe her because she mixed up so much of imagination with reality. He surprised me by saying that some of the unbelievable stories had some element of truth in them. For instance, the thing about poisoned tea could have something to do with a yellow liquid that he remembered his father mixing in their tea. He also narrated to me that when he recently went to the house where they had lived with his father, the neighbors commented that if he had died that day, he would be dead six years. But Sanjay felt that his mother's suspicion about his half sister and some other relatives was baseless.

About his own work, he informed me that he had got a job in a tea shop and promised to join soon. I felt uncomfortable around Sanjay and did not trust him. Something told me that tackling Sanjay was also not going to be easy. But I was glad to see that his house owner's treatment of his mother angered him very much. Any normal reaction in Sanjay made me happy. He had not eaten and I gave him some money for dinner.

The next time I met her, she was unhappy about the new house because a corpse had been brought in a lorry to be burned in that area.

“The wind blew the smoke over my house and inside through the door. I feel sick thinking about it. I don't want to stay there. I don't like the house.”

“Stay there for some time. You have only just moved there. When your financial situation improves a little, we can change to a better house.” I tried to cheer her up.

There was another time when she said that she needed a job that would fetch her 50 rupees a day. Now, this works out to 1500 rupees a month, which is what a full-time cook working for an upper middle class family might earn. Other times, she said she could not work anymore.

It seemed to me that all I was doing was finding ways to motivate her to go on and that too one day at a time.



**14 October 2002**

*And just as I became assured  
My lame foot would be speedily cured,  
The music stopped and I stood still,  
And found myself outside the hill,  
Left alone against my will,  
To go now limping as before,  
And never hear of that country more!*

*- The Pied Piper of Hamelin by Robert  
Browning*

Her memories (or was it her imagination) about her childhood had been coming back to her more clearly of late. She said that she was born in Chennai and had lived with her parents and brothers and sisters in the area that is now the Annanagar Tower Park. They had been told to vacate the place, and the tower had been built. This corresponded with the fact that the area had indeed been cleared out in the 60s, when the World Trade exhibition was held there. This is another case where the words 'World Trade' and 'tower' go together along with 'shattered dreams.'

Her father's name was Pitchai, and he had been a firing *mastry*<sup>4</sup> in Poonamallee Road. Her mother was Muniamma. Flower Queen was their seventh and last child. She had studied up to Standard Eight, and some of her classmates still lived in Arumbakkam. Flower Queen mentioned one Muniamma Nadar who had a shop there.

She remembered that she had acted in Tamil films like *Panathotam*, *Asaimugham*, and *Kungumam*. According to her, she had acted in some 40 films. From those days, she remembered Asokan the actor. In *Asaimugham*, she had acted as MGR's sister.

Our neighbors have a pair of crutches that they keep in the landing room on top of the stairs and she told me that the crutches always reminded her about her song with MGR in that film where he used crutches. (I had seen her inspecting the crutches several times; could there be any truth in these memories?)

She recalled MGR telling her that he would bequeath Satya studios to her. She also remembered that one time, two men—who she said looked like my husband Philip—gave her father some papers and told him to give them to *paapa*<sup>5</sup> when she came of age. They also spoke to Flower Queen before they left, telling her to take her mummy and daddy with her and claim *it* when she grew up. They also gave her parents a Canara Bank passbook and a pen; both were

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<sup>4</sup> mason

<sup>5</sup> Tamil for baby/child

blue in color. She was of the impression that these men were from the housing board and that she was eligible for some property at the back of Rohini Flats in Thirumangalam.

She then mentioned one Dr Reeves and his wife Pamela.

“Pamela *Amma* is now in Bangalore,” Flower Queen told me, “The doctor is old and lives in Chennai. He tried to steal my money. But Pamela *Amma* is nice.” One could never be sure with Flower Queen for she spoke a homogenous mixture of truth and fancy. It was easier to throw away some of the truth along with the fancy. One had to strive if one wished to recognize all that was true, running the risk of being unable to strip it free of the fancy, which so closely clung to it.

“Take me to your *Vakeel* Maharani,” I asked.

“I am feeling bad. You are spending so much for me. I do not want to take you. It will be expecting too much from you.” Any normal reaction from her was welcome. But I needed to see that lawyer.

And we went at 8:00 p.m. by auto rickshaw. I did not know what to expect but as I mentioned earlier, there always seemed to be a germ of truth in everything she said, and so I believed a lawyer would materialize.

She wanted me to take the road opposite the Annanagar Bus Depot and go to an area called Kaveri Kudiyirupu. There were two roads that fit this description but she pointed to the 18<sup>th</sup> Main Road, and we turned into it. She looked for a tea shop, and we found one near Kaveri Kudiyirupu. But this was not one she recognized. We went a little further down and she said that this was not the road at all because there were a row of vegetable shops on it whereas the road she wanted had only one vegetable shop.

The only explanation for this anomaly (other than the whole thing being a figment of her imagination) was that we were looking at Kaveri Kudiyirupu from the wrong end. I directed the auto rickshaw to go to road parallel to the 18<sup>th</sup> Main Road. As soon as we entered the parallel road, Flower Queen recognized it as the right place, and sure enough there was a solitary vegetable shop and the tea shop to boot.

We got down and walked down a side street to the lawyer's house. The lawyer materialized at last, a man in his 50s. He had a grownup daughter and son in the house. His wife received me well though she did not know me.

The information I got from him was this:

- The man had died in an accident.
- Flower Queen's suspicions that others had claimed the money were unfounded as no one could have claimed the money from the court. The money would come to her alone.
- But we'd need to get the death certificate and legal heir certificate. We'd need to include the other wife's name also; otherwise we could be accused of suppression of truth. But the money would come to her only and to her son.
- The compensation would be calculated by freezing on a monthly income of about 1500 rupees for the man. The compensation would definitely work out to over a lakh of rupees of which the greater part would be in her son's name for him to claim after he became a major.

We agreed that I'd meet him on 16 October at 8:00 p.m. at which time he would give me other papers that would help us when we went to the 5<sup>th</sup> Circle Corporation Office to apply for the required papers.

**2 November 2002**

*According to the American Standard Bathroom Habits Survey, thirty percent of Americans would be willing to spend more than \$10,000 to make their bathroom the ultimate dream bathroom.*

*According to the survey, a majority of Americans choose a whirlpool as the number one item they want in their bath. American Standard's whirlpools have ergonomically correct head and arm rests for maximum comfort and strategically positioned jets to create ultimate relaxation.*

*As homeowners increase the size of their bathrooms, they are experimenting with armoires for storage, music or television and chaise lounges for reading and relaxing. Vintage furniture is also making a splash in the bathroom.*

*- Pioneer Thinking*

She did not come as planned and when she did come, we talked for a while and fixed up another date, one that she would not keep either. She had some weird stories to tell. One of these featured her son disappearing into thin air.

“Sanjay often goes to the cremation ground near the house. I see him walking around among the dying embers. The smoldering fires do not hurt his feet. Then a strange thing happens. He just disappears.”

“Does he come home later?”

“I find him in the house after some time.”

Another problem she faced was that her house did not have a toilet or bathroom near it and the house owner did not seem inclined to remedy the situation. I did not have a solution to that one.

“Do you want to take a bath here?” I asked her. As long as she did not come and occupy the bathroom during rush hour, I did not mind.

“I have already had a bath. I closed the door of my house and had a bath inside. After I finished I used a broom to clear out the water and dry the house.” Using a living room as a bathroom is innovative indeed. But the truth of the matter is that the bathroom of every single reader of this book is far better than Flower Queen’s living room, and her toilet was the bank of the Cooum between twilight and dawn.

Standing in the rubbly lane in front of her house, I have watched the filthy water of the Cooum waterway that runs by. A photograph taken of that spot would look pretty in a dreamy sort of way. However, the water is unbelievably filthy because of effluents from various industries, animal husbandry and the washing of clothes along its banks. It is also used as a toilet and bathroom by slum dwellers like Flower Queen along vast stretches of the bank. Normally, rivers close to the sea are cleansed by the tides. Unfortunately, in Chennai, sand bars block the mouth of the river and prevent tidal mixing and there is no flowing water in the Cooum during most of the year either.

From that vantage point I have seen Flower Queen's home contrasted against the backdrop of Arihant Majestic Towers in Koyambedu where hundreds of families stay in comfort with the best of modern amenities. They even have a water treatment plant. The irony is not lost on me. I remember an old lyric that says, "The good things that you've got are for many just a dream. / So be thankful for the good things that you've got."

Flower Queen finally came last week and we went to the lawyer's house. I realized that I did not know his name although we had visited him once before. He was not home but his daughter was, and we got the phone number from her and the lawyer's name—K.Sattanathan. We decided to call before going the next time.

The next time was on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October. I called the lawyer's house and was told that he had gone to Delhi and would be back on the 31<sup>st</sup>. So we called again on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November. He was home. When we went to his house, he welcomed us. He told me that I should get the death certificate first and the legal heir certificate next. He even dictated the petition for the latter.

"Get these certificates and then come back to me."

"How long will it take for Maharani to get her settlement after that?" I was eager to see her settled soon.

"A month and a half," he said.

Meanwhile, I instructed Flower Queen to ask her house owner to start deducting the rent. Flower Queen was to pay me the rent instead and at the end of three months, we would look for another house—with a toilet this time.

She gave me 300 rupees a few days later as the first installment of rent.



**11 November 2002**

*Squelch and squirt and suiggle,  
Drizzle and drip and drain -  
Such a lot of water  
Comes down with the rain!  
- Marchette Chute*

## I

It had been raining for days. Weeks in fact. Flower Queen forgot to bring some papers that I wanted from her. I had some of her papers but I wanted the photocopy of her ration card, which she had torn up, her permanent address, passport-size photos, and whatever else she may still have with her. And now she could not go and get them because her house was surrounded by water. Moreover, her door, once opened would not shut well enough, in such weather, to padlock.

Flower Queen told me that in the episode where the previous house owner had beaten her, he had taken away many of her things.

“That *saathan*<sup>6</sup> took away the beautiful jug, which Pamela *Amma* gave me. He also took away the pretty clips I had. In one house where I worked, the *amma* gave me the clips that her daughters were not using. They were so lovely. I would often take them out of my bag and look at them and touch them. That evil man took them all away. His wife must be wearing them.”

Whenever she recollected the nice things that she had had, she became miserable and wanted me to help her take action against the man.

“Maharani, you live in the same area even now. Let us not make him angry.”

“I am not afraid of him,” she quipped with the nonchalance of fools.

I felt that if she asked him for her things, he would not give them to her, and he would persecute her even more. But she was not convinced.

"Which country's law says that a man can beat up a woman and take away her things?" she argued. My theory that evil men will always

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<sup>6</sup> Tamil for Satan

be there and we cannot always bring them to book did not register with her nor did my idea of allowing God to punish the man.

Flower Queen had also been unwell and I had given her some Paracetamol tablets a couple of days ago. It could not have done much to make her comfortable because she was wet and homeless, and I was not sure where she was spending the night. The good person at the Round had refused to have her because their house was leaking terribly and they had no place for her.

## II

On Saturdays, I conduct a weekly Bible class for my kids and their friends, and for anyone else who cares to come. Omana and Yamuna, who work in my house attend. Yamuna's son and two other children from the slum also come. I invited Flower Queen and she gladly came that Saturday.

She was wet and cold. I gave her a sheet to cover herself for warmth. She sat on the floor with the rest of the kids looking rather ridiculous—bundled up in the sheet. The lesson was about the creation of man. I pointed to Flower Queen and said that although she looked very small and ordinary, in reality she is created in the image of God—very very special. We could only see Flower Queen's face from inside the sheet and she did look rather small, almost cute.

Just before we had a final prayer, the children were coming out with reasons for which we needed to thank God, and one of them said that we should thank God for bringing Maharani aunty to the class. I chanced to see a certain incredulous look on Flower Queen's face.

## III

A cyclonic storm had been forecast for the day and I was afraid that if it rained anymore, her papers would be lost for ever, and she worried about her clothes. So I told Omana to come with us and we

took an auto rickshaw and went to the Sai Nagar slum. The auto rickshaw driver refused to take us after a point and we had to get down and walk.

As we were making our way, negotiating the bricks that had been placed strategically as stepping stones in the water-logged lane, I met her house owner. Predictably, Flower Queen walked off with a pronounced sway, ignoring her. I spoke to the house owner and convinced her that Flower Queen would not be able to stay there for much longer and that she should begin deducting the rent from the advance we had paid. I was relieved that she did not complain.

Once Flower Queen saw her things, she worked herself into a frenzy about the old issue of her things having been taken from her by the previous house owner. Then she began shouting expletives—openly obscene Tamil. Luckily for me, I did not understand most of it but Omana was scandalized. Flower Queen went on and on and on with her verbalized frenzy. Through all this we tried to get her to take what she wanted and come out.

She took her time, much to Omana's irritation. Somehow before the evening was over, I got Omana to understand something of Flower Queen's point of view and the fact that she was not in her right senses. Suddenly, we were not alone. A gang of three little neighborhood children aged about five or six were attracted by the commotion and decided to investigate. They came up to the door and peeped in and were rewarded with an entertaining sight. Flower Queen, who was sitting on the floor folding clothes, screamed even more. She flailed her hands about and accused them of spying. Then oblivious of them, she raged on about some one who had met her at the 'hotel'<sup>7</sup> in the street corner a few days earlier and had commented on how she sat with her legs stretched out in her house.

"Spies, that's what they all are, many of them all over the place," she screamed, "I pay the rent and I can do what I like in my house. I can fold my legs or stretch them out. It is MY wish. Those #%\$@"

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<sup>7</sup> restaurant

men have no business coming near my door. You #%%\$@ people, do you try to peep in all the time? #%%\$@..."

When she began all over again about the #%%\$@ house owner who had beaten her up, I tried to calm her down.

"Maharani, let's go home. It will soon be alright.

"It is all your fault. You do not allow me to fight back. You say God will deal with it. What can God do? #%%\$@..."



**16 November 2002**

*Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of  
fear, not absence of fear. Except a creature  
be part coward it is not a compliment to say  
it is brave.*

*- Mark Twain*

She kept her things in our house and for four nights slept in our house. During the day, she was out and returned at night like a chicken coming home to roost. I was quite worried for the safety of our children in whose room she was sleeping. The first night, I had the kids sleep with Philip and me in our room, Flower Queen having their room to herself. The second night, I let the kids go back to their room. Not that anything had changed but danger is only feared as much as it is perceived, and some dangers seem less dangerous on certain days for no explainable reason.

The third night, I was worried again and stayed awake most of the night.

“The house where you used to sleep at nights, has the roof stopped leaking? Did you check?” I asked her on the fourth night.

“No,” she said.

“The roof is still leaking?”

“Yes.”

That night, I brought all the knives, forks, and other sharp implements from the kitchen to our room. I wanted her to be comfortable but I feared that she might go crazy all of a sudden and try to harm herself or the kids. It was very unlikely for she had no history of violence as far as I knew. However, once or twice, she had accused me of being influenced by her evil relatives, and who knew what her unwell mind might conjure up. What if she perceived us to be dangerous?

On the evening of the fifth day, she decided to leave.

“I’ll go now *Amma*. It hasn’t rained and I think there will be place for me at the Round house.”

“Are you sure you want to go now, it is already getting dark?”

“I’ll go now.” She seemed eager to go.

“When will you come again? We need to go to the Corporation office.”

“Tomorrow,” she assured me, “I’ll come in the morning.”

The next day was the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, and she did not come. But, she came on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

“I could not come yesterday,” she reported, “the *amma* of the house where I work went out and did not come back till after 1.00 p.m.” I had no idea where she worked or why anyone would employ such an irregular person. I waited for her on the third day also, and she sauntered in at 3:30 p.m.

“I came at 11.00 a.m.,” she announced.

“Did you now?” I did not believe her for I had been waiting for her all morning. “Did you ring the bell?”

“I banged and banged on the door and you did not open,” she said with a sulk. “I sat outside for half an hour and then left. Unnecessary expense for me—coming and going by bus,” she grumbled as she unrolled two bus tickets that she had neatly rolled up.

You could die from such a woman! What are doorbells for? All her banging would have had no meaning for me in my room. We hear all sorts of noises in our apartments. We are trained only to respond to the door bell.

I was impatient to get going and asked her to show me the papers that she had. I found that she did not have the photocopy of the ration card. She told me that the lawyer had it. Anyway we hailed an auto rickshaw and went. Just as we reached the Corporation Office, I realized that I did not have her house address. (I could not have known then that the house address was to play a big role in the coming months.)

We were met at the Corporation of Chennai Circle 5 at Taylors Road, by some touts. Since I was not sure if the office was open, I spoke to them. They in turn tried to find out what I wanted.

“Where did the man die?” one of them asked me.

“In Chennai,” I replied.

“Give me the exact location.”

“I don’t know where he died, the opposite party took him and did something to him.” Flower Queen butted in quite unhelpfully.

“Where did they bury him?”

“Who knows,” Flower Queen was at her best. The man stared at her.

All this would have been so hilarious if it had not been quite so frustrating. Here we were trying to get a death certificate in order to claim compensation for the motor accident he was involved in. And Flower Queen was making it look like murder. The man, knowing this was well above his ken, directed me to the Birth and Death Registrar. In spite of my fervent attempt to silence her, Flower Queen repeated her performance there also. But I was able to get some information from the Registrar.

- Any one could apply for a death certificate. I did not need Flower Queen to accompany me. What a relief!
- I had to get the police death report, find out the name of the burial ground, and get the receipt or intimation and the dispatch number and date.
- I then needed to find out if the dispatch had been sent to the head quarters or to one of the zones, and if so, to which one of the 10 zones.
- If I had problems, I had to go to 'court' opposite Rippon Buildings and get the death registered with their help.

We thanked the gentleman and came home. Flower Queen wanted to have a bath. I gave her a piece of soap and she took a bath for 45 minutes. Her hair was not wet when she came out. I wondered if she had gone to sleep in the bathroom. Omana had some warm tea for her.

My next course of action would be to speak to her lawyer Sattanathan and see if he had any reason for sending me to Zone 5. Maybe he knew where the man died and was buried.

**17 November 2002**

*"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the  
Spider to the Fly, "  
'Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you  
did spy;  
The way into my parlour is up a winding  
stair,  
And I have many curious things to show you  
when you are there."  
"Oh no, no," said the Fly, "to ask me is in  
vain;  
For who goes up your winding stair can ne'er  
come down again."*

- *The Spider and the Fly* by Mary Howitt

Yesterday Flower Queen attended my Bible Class where I was teaching my kids the story of Cain and Abel. The kids colored a picture depicting Cain in his fields. Flower Queen took a coloring sheet and some crayons. She did a good job but colored Abel green from head to toe, giving him an otherworldly appearance.

I called lawyer Sattanathan around 8:00 p.m. on November 17<sup>th</sup>, and he told me to meet him. So I started out straight away. I had been there thrice before, but this was the first time I was going alone. Not that I was scared or anything. It was just to do with my peculiar ineptitude when it comes to routes and directions. Quite predictably, I went into the wrong street and up the wrong flight of stairs. When finally we reached the right place, the auto rickshaw driver agreed with me that the wrong house had a strong resemblance with the right one, and this was some consolation.

For the first time the lawyer took me to his office, a *barsati*<sup>8</sup> room. I am not sure how old he was but he had difficulty navigating the narrow stairs. Alone in that office, I felt like a fly talking to a courteous spider. I watched him as he looked up a diary for the reference number to locate Flower Queen's file among scores of files. It reminded me of the File Allocation Tables (FAT) in a computer.

The information I got from him and which I noted down dutifully was as follows:

- I needed to go to the G3 Kilpaukam Police Station on Poonamallie High Road.
- The Crime No/ Case number was 0010/P1/97 and 0030/P1/97
- The case was booked under section 304A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC)

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<sup>8</sup> Hindi for a roofed structure above the roof of a building used as shelter during the rains

- The date of the accident was 20.8.97
- The time of the accident was 20.30 hours
- The place of accident was opposite the Tana Street Jain temple
- The post mortem report mentioned VAR 0010/P1/97
- According to the Post mortem report, Baskar, had died of head injuries.
- He had been an inpatient in GH from 20.8.97- 23.8.97 and had died there.
- The vehicle that caused his death was a motorcycle and the vehicle's registration number was given
- The vehicle owner's name and address had been given and I observed that he lived in the street opposite Purasawalkam Tank.
- The owner had been declared as exparte. The lawyer explained to me that 'exparte' referred to the fact that this person did not attend court sessions. According to him, this could indicate that he had an insurance policy because people with insurance policies would not care to attend court hearings and are eventually declared as exparte by the court.
- I needed to get the Insurance Policy number from the police station.
- If the police station did not have a record of the insurance policy, I could try and ask this owner for his policy number explaining that we would arrange for our own lawyer to discharge his liability and make the insurance company pay the compensation.

- Now, if the police station did not have Baskar's file because so many years had elapsed since the case was registered, I was to go to the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Traffic, near the *Dinathanthi*<sup>9</sup> office.

My mind wandered off, as is wont to happen when one is taking down dictation blindly, and I began to think about what it could possibly mean to discharge some one's liability, when deliverance from the legalese came in the form of a question.

"It is not far from the Dinathanthi office," said the lawyer, proceeding to give me the directions to the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Traffic. From legalese to directions, it was a classic case of "from the fire pan into the fire." My face has always been my greatest betrayer and my blank look was a dead giveaway.

You know where the Dinathanthi office is, don't you?"

"Actually, I don't, but it's OK. I can find out," I managed. He was quite irritated that I did not know where the *Dinathanthi* office was. He tried again by mentioning the Egmore Wesley church. I knew *about* both *Dinathanthi* and the Egmore Wesley church and I noted these down as landmarks, but he was disappointed that my eyes did not sparkle with recognition at the mention of these landmarks. I did not tell him of my adventure in locating his house. He labored to tell me that in that office, the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Traffic, there was an accident cell which housed a record room of accident cases. They would definitely be able to give me enough information to get a death certificate.

I remembered that I had something else to ask him.

"Sir, recently, Maharani was beaten up by her house owner. When that happened, I simply helped her to get another house and shifted her there. Apparently, he also kept some of her things for himself. I

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<sup>9</sup> (Literally translated—Daily Telegraph; a popular Tamil daily

would like to know if there is anything that we can do in situations like these.”

“You could go to the *Ilavasa Satta Oodavi* office or the Free Legal Aid Department of the Tamil Nadu State Legal Services Authority in the High Court. This is right behind the Rajaji statue. Have you seen the Rajaji statue?” My blank face said it all.

“Anyway it is behind the Rajaji statue,” he repeated with finality.

I also got hold of his copy of Flower Queen's ration card. I promised to take a copy of it and return it to him. Unfortunately, it mentioned her son's name as Sasi instead of Sanjay. At least it was some proof that she was married to Baskar. We'd have to explain that Sasi and Sanjay were the same person by producing his school papers that mentioned the names of his parents.

I was not sure if I had actually grown more knowledgeable at the end of this visit. In anycase, I did get a hazy picture of things, a familiarity with words like 'exparte', a realization that IPC meant Indian Penal Code, an understanding of what a fly might feel if it had to engage in a conversation with a spider, and a splitting headache.

I suddenly remembered the auto rickshaw driver waiting on the street.



**19 November 2002**

*Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves; here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs. She took down a jar from one of the shelves as she passed; it was labeled 'ORANGE MARMALADE', but to her great disappointment it was empty.*

- *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

From the ration card copy, I found out that Flower Queen's postal address was given as 129L Nehru Colony, Thirumangalam, Chennai 40.

“Maharani, why did you give the name as Sasi?” I asked her one day.

“Her name is Sasi. That is why,” she explained much to my surprise.

“I thought Sasi and Sanjay were the same person. Who is Sasi?”

“She is my husband’s niece. For some years she was living with us,” she answered at once. “She then went back to her family in the village and ...” Flower Queen’s voice trailed off.

“She went to the village and?” I pursued. Flower Queen thought for a moment.

“and died. She died.” I was not satisfied but Flower Queen adamantly held that Sasi was a niece who had left for the village and died. How difficult can this case get!

On 19<sup>th</sup> November, I went to G3 Kilpaukam Police Station and introduced myself as a social worker. I was soon directed to a little shed, which had a corridor with three little doors that led to three little rooms. The last room was that of the Officer Incharge of Traffic Accident Investigation. He was polite and with his clerk's help was able to quickly trace the ledger with Baskar's record. The clerk opened the ledger to the right page and gave it to the officer who looked at the scrawly writing and clucked his tongue. Then the officer kindly asked his clerk to write the information down in my notebook.

‘Details,’ the clerk wrote and underlined it. Then he wrote the various details of the case one below the other. When he was through, I expanded some of the abbreviations along side. This was what I had at the end of it:

Details

Cr. No: 0010/P1/97 (Crime Number)

U/Sec: 304(A) IPC & 184 MVAct (Under Section 304 (A) of Indian Penal Code and Section 184 of Motor Vehicles Act)

D/O: 20.8.97 20:30 hrs

Deceased<sup>10</sup>. Bhaskar M/A54 (M stands for Male. And A54 is Age 54)

United India Insurance Co Ltd

33- 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Whites Road, Ch.14

Policy No: 010906 – 26/8/97 to 3/4/98□

I happily noted that one of my problems was solved. I had the insurance policy number and did not have to approach the owner of the accident vehicle.

“Is this information enough to get a death certificate?”

“No,” they shook their heads in unison.

“Go to the Inspector of Police, Traffic Admin Office, Traffic JC's Office, Vepery, Chennai 7,” the clerk said to me as my face gave him its blank look.

“AC TrafficOffice is the next building,” the officer intercepted, trying to be helpful.

“The CD file with death report was sent there on 24.1.98,” the clerk stated.

“There is another way,” the officer told me, after a while, “You can approach the doctor who did the post mortem.” He searched in the ledger for the name of the doctor.

“Here it is. The doctor is Dr Mr. Mano. GH 0008/97 PM Number, PM dt 23.8.97,” he read aloud.

“But I have the post mortem report,” I explained.

“She has the post mortem report,” the clerk repeated.

“Oh then you can go and apply for the death certificate directly.”

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<sup>10</sup> deceased, the clerk's spelling

“You will not find the Corporation staff responding to you as we have done,” said the clerk who was the more articulate of the two, “because they are not meticulous in the way they maintain their records. They will have to search for files and they will be lazy to do that for nothing.”

“I will tell them that I am a social worker. Perhaps that will motivate them to help me.”

“No, no. On the contrary, it will make them lose interest in your case because social workers will not pay them anything.” I absorbed what he said but wondered if it were possible to get the death certificate without paying a bribe. I decided that I must give it a shot. But the well-meaning clerk was not through with his advice.

“A little greasing of the palm—100 or 150 rupees should do the trick. They are not like us. We do not take tips for our services,” he finished sounding almost regretful.

Flower Queen came in the evening and I gave her a plate of rice, sambar, and potato fry. As usual, she was the first to have dinner in our house as Omana had just finished cooking. The food was piping hot and looked appetizing.

Before giving her the food, I spent some time talking to her.

“Maharani, the other day, when we went to your house, why did you shout so much?”

“I didn’t shout,” she denied curtly. She was engrossed in pleating the lower edge of the curtain and bunching up the pleats with her fingers to make it look like a flower.

“See Maharani,” I willed her to look up and she did, “Omana and I were there with you when you were packing your things. Who were your shouting at? Were you shouting at Omana or were you shouting at me?”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“No, you remember. Tell me, why were you shouting at us?”

“I was shouting at the evil woman, the tall one,” she replied and went back to playing with the curtain.

“What tall woman?” I was determined to get to the bottom of this. “Apart from Omana and me, there was no one else.”

“See how cunning she is? You didn’t even know she was there.”

I think I already mentioned that one could die from someone like Flower Queen.



**17 December 2002**

*A fool is often as dangerous to deal with as a knave, and always more incorrigible.*

- Colton

One evening in late November, she came and told me that she was going to share a house with another woman.

“She will pay half the advance.”

“And the monthly rent?” I asked, at a loss to know what to do now.

“She will pay half the rent. We are going to share all the costs for the house.” I was almost amused. How could Flower Queen ever manage such cooperation.

She mumbled something to herself and left only to return a short while later.

“Give me the 300 rupees that I gave you to keep,” she demanded. True, she had given me 300 rupees, but that was her first installment to repay me for the house advance that I had paid for her. Also true, that I intended to keep the money she returned to pay the advance for the next house. But that money was not hers to demand. But then, I was not dealing with a logical person. I was dealing with Flower Queen. I gave her 300 rupees.

“Please give me hundred rupees more,” she begged. I gave it to her and she left.

I knew she was not cheating me. I was sure of it. I was also painfully aware that I could not continue to lend her money like this. I had to find another way to rehabilitate her. No enlightenment dawned on me for the moment.

The first half of December was a mad rush because my mother was ill and I was making frequent trips to Madurai. My work as a freelance writer suffered, and my home was not in order. I was glad that Flower Queen did not come. On Saturday, the 14<sup>th</sup>, just when I was rushing to give a four-hour lecture, for which I had prepared until the wee hours of the morning, Flower Queen showed up.

“Have you done anything about getting the certificates and all that?” She asked a direct question.

“Not yet, Maharani.” I gave her a direct answer.

“Return all my papers to me,” Flower Queen blurted out. “I want to tear them up.”

“I am rushing to work now,” I said patiently, “come in the evening, and we can talk about it.”

“For five years you have been telling me that money will come. If it’s not coming, tell me now.” She was at her belligerent best. “O I know you have done so much and all that. But let me tear them up; give them to me now.”

I yelled at her for the first time. I can’t remember what I said exactly but I remember that it felt so good. Like scratching a good itch, it felt so good at the time.

In the evening, she did not come for the Bible class. Much as she had been wrong to speak to me like that, I decided to squeeze in the trip to the Corporation office on Monday.



**26 December 2002**

*And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made and he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth.*

*Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark; for the waters were on the face of the whole earth. Then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark.*

- *The Bible*

## I

I could not make it to the Corporation office on Monday but did so two days later on my way to a client for whom I was doing some documenting. This time, my brisk pace would have discouraged touts and I went straight to Mr Vettri Murugan, the Birth and Death Registrar for Zone 5. I explained the case to him. When he came to know that Baskar had died in the General Hospital, he quickly directed me to his counterpart in Zone 3.

“Go and meet Mr. Manzur Ahmed who is the Birth and Death Registrar in the Zone 3 Corporation office. It is in Puliyanthope, on Perambur Barracks Road, past Vasanthi Theatre, near the Puliyanthopu Police Station.”

Taking note that this was my next clue in this game of Treasure Hunt, I rushed to meet my client.

## II

The next day, she was in low spirits as she dawdled in.

“*Amma*, I gave 600 rupees to that woman.”

“How did you get 600 rupees?”

“You gave me 400 rupees and I got 200 rupees from the house where I work,” she explained cogently. “We went to see a house and that woman paid the house owner the advance. But I don’t like that house.”

“Why did you not tell the other woman that you did not like the house?”

“She gave the advance without discussing the matter with me. I am not going to stay there.”

“Why don’t you like the house?” She may not understand the value of the money she had lost, but I did.”

“There was so much latrine on the road,” she replied promptly, alluding to the fact that the road leading to the house was being used as an open-air toilet.

So, she had not been able to hold on to her money. Maybe, she spent it and offered this story to save face. Or maybe, this story was really true, which was worse, because it meant that she was mentally becoming incapable of managing her life.

“Tell me about Sasi,” I asked casually.

“Ah, they are coming and poisoning your mind,” she said bristling.

“No one is saying anything,” I told her matter-of-factly, “her name is mentioned in your ration card, remember?” I showed her the copy of the ration card that I had, where it mentioned Sasi as the child of Baskar and Maharani. She quietened down.

“Sasi is my husband’s sister’s daughter. She came from the village and stayed with us. She was there when the particulars for the ration card were given.”

“What happened then?” I was enjoying this conversation.

“My husband also had two sons and a daughter from a previous marriage. The boys had died but the girl is living.” Then she was lost in thought for some time. I was going over the different parts of this jigsaw puzzle. This was not a regular jigsaw puzzle either for some dummy pieces were also thrown in. The authentic looking pieces could very well be the dummy ones, and some of the strange looking ones were unquestionably genuine.

“She is not really his daughter but he regarded her as one.” Flower Queen outdid herself this time. However, I had the nagging feeling that she was not coming clean with the story here.

“What is that girl’s name?”

“Meena.” Did I imagine it or did she hesitate for a brief moment before coming up with ‘Meena’. Some other day I'd need to ask her again and see if she remembered the name.

### III

On December 26th, she came home.

“Give me fifty rupees.” She thought money grew on trees, I suppose.

“For what?”

“I will go and look for a house.”

“Ask the woman for whom you work to give you the money,” I told her.

“I stopped working.”

“You stopped working! Then how will you pay the rent? Why did you stop working?”

“I feel too tired. I am not young anymore. In the last house where I worked, the woman wanted me to clean toilets. How can I do that?” Over the years, I have come to a point when I can clean anything including dirty toilets. And yet someone like Flower Queen, who must be more used to a filthy environment, was averse to doing this even though her daily bread depended on it. Just goes to show that the craving for dignity is so strong even in the most wretched of human beings.

“If you do not work, you will have to beg”

“I do that sometimes.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said to myself. But with no hope of income, she could not be given any more money. I put my foot down.

“I cannot give you anymore money. But we have to do something about it. Send Sanjay to talk to me”

“They have given him medicine. Now he has become very disobedient. I cannot bring him here.” So typical an answer. I did want to meet that boy not just to discuss their future but also to corroborate some of the facts that Flower Queen has said—about Sasi and Meena.

“Ask him, Maharani. Let me get you something to eat now,” I offered.

“I don’t want to eat anything.”

“Maharani, I will not be giving you any money. What will you do for food. You need to eat and become strong.” She condescended.

After she ate, I told her that I would look for a hostel or 'home' for her. I explained that a hostel meant that she would have to subject herself to the discipline of the hostel. She nodded but went away silently.

It seemed to me that it would be so hard for someone as undisciplined as Flower Queen to manage hostel life. How do you get this wild and wandering woman to stay confined to the four walls of a hostel? It reminded me of the song the nuns sang about Maria in *The Sound of Music*. “. . . *How do you catch a cloud and pin it down? . . . How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand? . . . How do you keep a wave upon the sand? . . .*”



**23 January 2003**

*"But, don't you realize, " asked the  
kupuna(elder),*

*"that there are miles and miles of beach and  
starfish all along it?*

*You can't possibly make a difference!"*

*The keiki(child) listened politely.*

*Then bent down, picked up another starfish,  
threw it gently into the sea, just beyond the  
breaking waves, and exuberantly declared,*

*"It made a difference for that one."*

*- anonymous*

## I

This is how I managed to get the death certificate: I had to go to the Pulianthope Corporation Zone 3 Office three times. I took my friend Shiela with me. Just before we got out of the auto rickshaw, I told her that we might be approached by touts and that our confidence would send them scurrying away. And so it was. I was actually able to use the man who came up to me to tell me where Mr. Manzur Ahmed was. Mr. Ahmed was polite enough and sold me an application form for 20 rupees. Normally, I hate filling forms but this one was easy to fill. He asked me to come back after two days for the certificate.

Two days later Mr. Manzur Ahmed remembered me.

“Madam, I searched the records. As per our records no Baskar died on 20.08.97.”

I remembered the police station clerk’s word of caution. Surely, this guy was trying to get some money out of me. I soon thought otherwise for he continued.

“One Baskar died three days later on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Are you sure about the date? Come with me,” he said, as he led the way up a long flight of stairs to a record room. There, from a row of files in a shelf, he produced a file and showed me the record.”

“Please check the date and tell me if this is the one.” I looked up my notes and to my chagrin, realized my mistake. I had given the date of the accident instead of the date of death. I was sorry that I had judged him wrongly.

“I’ll need to prepare the death certificate. Please come for it after three hours.” I was just about to leave when he called again.

“Madam, there is a problem here.” The police station clerk’s face came into my mind’s eye again. “The house address you have given does not match with my records.”

“How can they match? The address I gave you is that of the wife, but she was not aware that her husband had died until a few days later.”

I had to make another trip later in the day to collect the certificate. The address was not the only problem I was left with now. When I came out of Mr Manzur's office, I noticed that the age at the time of death on the certificate was 44 and not 54 as mentioned in the police records. I went back and asked Mr. Manzur but he was sure that there had been no mistake on his part while copying the details from the file. I could do nothing more about this. Things just got curiouser and curiouser, like Alice would have said.

Contrary to what I had feared, I did not have to pay a single paise as bribe to get the job done. Maybe there is hope yet for our country.

## II

Meanwhile Flower Queen had become more run down and irritable. She needed a roof over her head and said so. However, she did nothing constructive. Her delusions gave her the courage to dream of houses far beyond her means and she imagined that there were people who would be honored to give her a house to stay in. One time, she wanted me to give her some more money towards the advance for a house in some far away locality. I explained that since she did not have a regular income, she was not to rent a house now. I was not sure how much of what I said registered in her mind.

Meanwhile, I got the email ID of The Banyan, a home for mentally ill and destitute women, and wrote them a mail. I had heard and read so much about this home where the inmates, who were picked up from the street were treated and rehabilitated.

Hello,

I have been helping a destitute woman for the past 4 months. She is awaiting some money by way of compensation from the government and I am helping her get her papers in order and so on. Although I did try and cater to several of her needs, it is becoming clear that she cannot manage on her own anymore. She is getting cheated. She is also not able to stay for long in a particular place. These qualities are proving to be costly for me.

She is not of sound mind. I have documented all my dealings with her and will be able to explain the whole

case quickly without wasting your valuable time. I would like your assistance in the following:

1. Guidance as to how I might be able to help her further to motivate her
2. Is there any place where she can be rehabilitated?
3. Is there any trade or skill that she can learn (As it is, she loves to thread flowers and sell them but does not have the business acumen to do it profitably.)

Regards  
nahomi

I got a prompt reply from a gentleman called Mr. Lionel:

Dear Nahomi

First of all, we would like to appreciate you for the efforts you have been taking to help this woman. As you might be aware, we reach out to mentally ill destitute women, who are abandoned on the streets. We reach out to such persons and reunite them back to their families after providing them adequate help psychiatrically, medically and socially. Now we are also equipped to provide legal assistance for such persons.

Regarding this person we would be able to help her in the following ways

1. Provide her psychiatric help as an outpatient. Our OP works on all Wednesdays from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.
2. She can meet our Duty Counsel on 17/01/03 at 2:30 p.m., at The Banyan to submit her petition for legal assistance.
3. If she is very disturbed psychiatrically and if she has no place to go she can stay here till she improves.

For further clarification, please feel free to contact us.

With Regards  
Lionel

I wrote again.

Dear Lionel,

Thanks for responding to my mail so quickly. I can see that I can use many of the facilities you are offering. Before that, I wonder if there is someone you could suggest from your organization who can spend half an hour with me. I would like to quickly explain all that I have learnt about this woman over these months and what I have observed. I have a close relative who is schizophrenic and this has given me a certain understanding and respect for mentally ill people. I believe this woman needs help and I also believe that my observations will help identify her problem because I have had the opportunity to note down so many things. Once I have explained what I know, you would be able to guide me as to which of the facilities (offered by you) we can make use of.

Since I am also concerned about the legal side of her case, I need some help in sifting through all that she says and carefully keep the truth while discarding the rest. Some of her real story is as fantastic as the imagined parts and I do not want to do her the injustice of throwing away everything that seems strange.

So while your mail was helpful, I could not make out what my role would be when I bring her to The Banyan. If finally she does not want to continue with the treatment or whatever, I do not want to find myself in square one. Even if she does not continue, I need to have learnt something. I hope you appreciate that I would like to come with her and be able to introduce her first. As I explained in the earlier mail, this will not take time because I have documented everything as it happened (in the form of a 'journal'). I can even come once before actually bringing her. Please let me know what you think.

Thanks once again for responding,

Regards

Nahomi

He wrote back once more asking me to call him between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. on weekdays, preferably Wednesdays. A few days later I called him. When he realized that I had no way of knowing when Flower Queen would turn up and that I could not take her to the OP, he told me that I could bring her anytime. He also gave me the idea of taking her there in the pretext of registering for employment.

My brother is a psychiatrist and lives in the US working as the associate division director for health services at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. He was here on vacation, and I asked him to read my journal from the beginning till the entry of Dec 17<sup>th</sup> 2002. He seemed pretty stern while reading it and I wondered what he was thinking. It was a relief that he did not think I was off my rocker, not completely anyway. He seemed pretty sure that Flower Queen was schizophrenic. He reminded me that I was not a social worker in the real sense and did not have the protection that social workers had. He also warned me that if and when the compensation came, I would need to protect myself from being accused of mulcting. She could easily imagine that I had swindled her. There was also the added danger that she would be easy prey to real swindlers. This was food for thought as these things had never occurred to me before.

### III

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> after many days I met Flower Queen, and I called The Banyan immediately. When I called, I was connected to Ms Prasanna, a social worker who asked me to bring her. I thought that Lionel's idea—about taking her to The Banyan in the pretext of helping her to find a job—was good. But I had not bargained for a balking woman protesting that she could not work anymore.

“I have become very weak. I cannot work anymore.”

“I'll tell them not to give you heavy work,” I assured her.

“I don't want people giving me work. They will tell me, ‘Do this,’ and ‘Do that.’ I cannot listen to all that.”

But once we reached, she became very alert but quiet. Things must have looked pretty fishy to her—what with innumerable women, who were obviously mentally disturbed, all over the place. I had to sign a register at the gate. All the while Flower Queen stared at the women disdainfully. And then she told me that she had come there before.

“Ira Amma and her husband brought me here. This is for mad people, isn't it?” Who in the world was Ira Amma?

We met with Prasanna in a small room. There was a calendar in the room that caught Flower Queen's fancy. It had a picture of hands being brought together as if in worship, with the sun in the background.

“That picture mirrors my life. It is about me. See those helping hands? Every time I cross over to the other place, some Christians come to my aid and pick me up.” She said something more about the other (sic) place that I could not make out.

Prasanna watched Flower Queen and felt that she was not disturbed enough to fit into life at The Banyan. But she gave me several addresses and phone numbers of organizations who would be able to help me with Flower Queen and Sanjay too. The organizations were Action for Child Labour, Friends for the Needy (in Puzhal), Madras Seva Sadan, and Udavum Karangal.

Among the disturbed women in the place, one caught my attention. Or may be I caught hers for she kept touching my lips and kissing her fingers.

“Her name is Yasmin,” Prasanna explained , “She is too ill to give any information about her family. Yasmin and Flower Queen were just two of thousands of mentally ill people. I wondered if we would ever make a difference in such a dismal situation.

I remembered a story I had heard about a boy who walked along the water on a beach crowded with dying starfish that had been washed ashore. He bent down scores of times, each time picking up a starfish and flinging it back to sea. Some one asked him what difference it would make when for every one that he threw back into the sea, there were thousands that would surely die on the beach. He flung the starfish he had in his hand into the sea, as far as he could, and said, "It did—to that one."

On the way back from The Banyan, I wanted to meet Sanjay who was temporarily staying with Flower Queen because he had cut his hand. She told me that both of them slept outside one of the Round houses under the open sky. But he was not to be found.

“No use talking to him, *Amma*, he has become mental,” Flower Queen advised.

“Look, who’s talking,” I thought to myself.

#### IV

It was time to go to Vakeel Sattanathan with the death certificate and time also to go to the Egmore Tahsildar office for the Legal Heir Certificate. The Petition letter that the *Vakeel* once dictated to me was as follows:

From  
Maharani Baskar  
(Address to be got from Vakeel Sattanathan)

To  
The Tahsildar  
Egmore  
Nungambakkam Taluk  
Chennai 600 008

Sir,

Subject: Issue of Legal Heir Certificate for my  
deceased husband Baskar

I submit that my marriage with my husband Baskar  
was conducted at Aminjikai xxxxxx temple. I gave  
birth to one male child now named B. Sanjay. Hence I  
request you to issue a legal heir certificate in favor of  
myself and my son.

In this connection, I enclose herewith  
1. Death certificate, 2. Ration card, and 3. Birth  
certificate of my son for your kind information and  
record.  
Thanking you

Yours sincerely

Mr. Sattanathan was the next step.



**8 March 2003**

*After a time he began to wander about, going lippity--lippity--not very fast, and looking all around.*

*He found a door in a wall; but it was locked, and there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath.*

*An old mouse was running in and out over the stone doorstep, carrying peas and beans to her family in the wood. Peter asked her the way to the gate, but she had such a large pea in her mouth that she could not answer. She only shook her head at him. Peter began to cry.*

*- The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter*

## I

Well, I did try to contact the *vakeel*. I'd usually remember to call him during the day when he would not be home, or too late at night. And whenever I did remember at favorable times, no one picked the phone at his end. And so time passed by.

Flower Queen came and went as always.

"Bring Sanjay to see me," I told her, "I want to talk to him." I wanted to see if he could take care of himself. If he could, I needed to put Flower Queen in a hostel.

Around the middle of February, she seemed desperate for some shelter.

"I must find some other place to stay. See, I have started limping. In the house where I sleep, the woman limps. She is passing on the limp to me," Flower Queen announced unreasonably. "So many days have passed since I had a bath. I want to have a bath." Thankfully, this aspiration was very reasonable and noble.

But Sanjay did not come. Meanwhile, Flower Queen fretted and fumed about many things real and imagined. Mostly imagined.

"Tear up my certificates and papers. Tear it up. I have no use for them." My, my, was she grumpy and rude! "You are listening to what the Round women are telling you. They are poisoning your mind against me. Nowadays you do not believe me anymore."

"Why do you blame the Round women for all your problems? We must search for what is wrong in ourselves. It is childish to blame others for everything."

I was fighting a losing battle because blaming others is something that is inculcated into most Indians from early childhood. Whenever a baby falls and cries, the mother beats the floor and says, "Bad floor, *adi*<sup>11</sup> *adi*." As if it is not the baby's fault but the floor's, just as

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<sup>11</sup> Tamil for spank

Flower Queen perceived the Round women to be the cause of all her problems.

My daughter wanted some help with her homework and I left Flower Queen for a while. When I returned to Flower Queen, the Round women were forgotten.

“Every family had a *saathaan*,” she began.

“Yes?”

My husband's sister is our family *saathaan* and brings misfortune to the family.” Whenever Flower Queen said these ‘profound’ things, she took on an expression that looked like something between a puppy and a learned sage.

She flashed her wise puppy look at me another time when she took me into her confidence and whispered in my ear that it would not rain in Chennai till she got a house because she had cursed the city. She predicted that it would rain in torrents the day she got a house.

“Only after I sleep a night in the new house will it rain, you will see.” She also had some kind advice for me

“Do not go out in the sun because the sun will be extra hot these days.”

“Why is that so?” I asked her absent mindedly.

“Because of my curse. I have cursed the city with a dry spell.” Then she continued. “*Amma*, if you walk in the sun, you will go wonky in the head like me. Then you will start roaming the streets as I do.”

I was going wonky already. I also had to keep these stories to myself because Philip said they made him sick.

## II

“*Amma*,” Flower Queen shouted loudly from the doorway. “Sanjay beat me today. Let’s go to the hostel.”

“Let’s go and talk to Sanjay first.”

We took an auto rickshaw and went to the Round. In fact there were many 'Round' houses; each had a cluster of shops and houses around them. A tiny mutton shop and another little mattress cum furniture shop operated out of the Round that Flower Queen frequented. Several tenements were part of this Round as well.

"That is where Sanjay watches TV," Flower Queen informed me pointing to a tenement at the other end of a small passage, which had unplastered brick walls on either side.

I was standing before a very depressing setting indeed—one that Dickens might have used had his stories been set in Chennai. But then in the confusion of many depressing places in this city, he might have missed this location.

A gutter with sewage separated the Round houses from the main Road. The sewage did not stink as much as one would expect but one had to cross over from the main road by balancing on a narrow 'slab' of granite. Way back in the 70s we had beam balancing as part of our gymnastics curriculum in school but that was so long ago. So I preferred to walk some distance and use a broader contrivance. When I crossed over and walked back to the shops, Flower Queen took someone's molded plastic chair and asked me to sit down. (I have noticed that I am invariably offered a chair whenever I go to a poorer part of the city. It does not matter whose chair it is. Those in the vicinity want me to sit too. This offer always underlines for me that I have just crossed over to the 'other India'.)

I did not sit down. The house where Sanjay normally watched TV had a boy, about 12 years old, who was scurrying in and out of the house. He reminded me of the mouse with the pea in its mouth in the story of Peter Rabbit. And I was a bit like Peter preparing to learn something from the mouse.

After some time, I spoke to the mouse-with-the-pea boy.

"Do you know where Sanjay is?"

"Sanjay? He was here just a moment ago."

Suddenly he looked behind me and yelled, "Sanjay, your mother wants to speak to you."

Flower Queen noticed Sanjay about the same time and called out, "See, *akka*<sup>12</sup> has come to see you."

Darkness was falling and I saw a cycle pass by on the road on the other side of the gutter. Another figure in a baggy grey T-shirt ran along and jumped on to perch itself on the back carrier. The poor woman continued to look in the direction where she had originally seen Sanjay. I was quite certain that Sanjay had just given us the slip and this was confirmed when she swore she saw him wearing a long grey T-shirt.

Flower Queen said that he normally went to a particular friend's house and went to look for him there. She was soon back with no success. Then she went to speak to the mutton shop owner whose brother was the boy with the cycle. The mutton shop owner left his shop to come and speak to me.

"Don't worry madam, the boys will be back soon."

"I am not so sure. I think Sanjay ran away because he knew that I had come."

The mattress shop owner, who was an elderly man, joined us too as I continued.

"I want to put his mother in a hostel. But I need to talk to him and find out if he can manage on his own."

"He is a friendly boy, Madam," the mattress shop owner explained, "but he has not yet become responsible and mature. He just wants to play all day long. All of us like him very much."

They went back to their shops. Half an hour of patient waiting paid off for the boys returned. The mutton shop owner held him securely but affectionately around the shoulders and brought him to me.

I tried to speak with Sanjay but he was evasive and would not look me in the eye. He tried to laugh away the situation. But everyone

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<sup>12</sup> Tamil for woman (literally elder sister)

else was serious. This seemed to make him very angry. I could see that this boy needed help. But then his mother needed to be put in a hostel first. I tried to explain to him that if he could assure me that he could take care of himself, I would be able to help his mother.

I thought that maybe he did not like to talk in front of every one. So I took him aside. Strangely, he tried to run away but there were enough people to restrain him; in fact there was quite a crowd now.

“I will be going to work soon,” he offered at last.

“At the tea shop?”

“No,” he shook his head. I did not press him any more. How I hated to separate this homeless child from his mother. I wanted some assurance that he could manage without her.

Another thing bothered me. Sanjay was homeless and if he moved away from the Round, he could lose track of Flower Queen. So I wanted him to understand that danger and take the effort to stay in touch with me.

To complicate matters further, we had shifted our house from the flat on the top floor of the building to one on the ground floor. It was like this. There were two flats on each floor, one on either side of the stairs. And there were three floors. When Sanjay had come to see me some months before, we had been living on the third floor on the left. Now we were living in the ground floor on the right. I explained that the six flats in our building—Block 94—were numbered A, B, C, D, E, and F. “See Sanjay, you came to 94E,” I said, stressing on the ‘E’. “Now, we live in the ground floor on the other side. The flat number here is . . .”

Before I could say any more, he said, “So you are in 94 B now.” I was pleasantly surprised at his sharpness.

Flower Queen was of course there to embarrass me. She had done it before and she did it on this occasion too.

“Some women here are using my name to get money from the government.”

“Give us their names, and we will put an end to this,” the men who had gathered there assured her. Flower Queen responded immediately and began to divulge the 'details'.

“Meera, Rose, ...”

“Maharani, wait.” I then addressed the gathering.

“Don’t worry about what she is saying. Because of her problems she is talking like this. You see, she is very confused. This is why, I want to give her a rest and put her in a hostel for some months.”

Mental depression and other kinds of mental ailments are not understood in Indian society; in the other India— even less. Because of the stigma attached to mental illness, victims invariably lose their dignity in society. So it is advisable to keep mental illness under wraps, if possible. On the other hand, when a mentally imbalanced person accuses someone or hurts someone, what do you do then? Keep quiet? What if someone else’s reputation is at stake? What if someone has been accused and is deeply hurt about it.

Here, we were faced with a classic example of such a situation. If I dwelt too long on Flower Queen’s mental instability, she would lose face with Sanjay and others there. If I kept quiet, we were playing with the reputation of innocent people. I was faced with a trade off between Flower Queen’s dignity and the Round women’s reputation.

I need not have worried about preserving Flower Queen’s dignity for she made every effort to lose it all.

“*Amma*, put my son in a hostel. I can manage. He must be taken out of this place. The people here are making him act so strange. He does not go to work.”

The mattress owner protested by pointing out to several young boys in the gathering. "That boy over there works and takes money home, and this skinny boy here gives his mother a thousand rupees every month. They live in this area. Responsible boys will be responsible irrespective of the area in which they live."

As if in reply to this, Flower Queen said something that had them all stumped. She pointed to the mouse-with-the-pea boy, who had been following the proceedings of this *sabha*<sup>13</sup> with avid interest, and looking in my direction, continued.

“Every morning when Sanjay gets up, he is as tall as this little boy. Imagine how I feel when I see my son like that. Then he grows gradually to his normal height during the course of the day. But this is because of the evil of the Round. Here women grow tall while the men grow to the height of women. *Amma*, it is a very evil place.”

To think that this tirade was about the very people who were giving them some sort of shelter. Darkness had set in. I needed to get home.

“Come home after two days,” I said, hoping to have more information about a hostel for her.

Her eyes had a glazed look and she nodded her head slowly. I crossed the gutter and took an auto rickshaw from the main road. As I was leaving, I saw Sanjay speaking to the crowd. I was too far away, with the gutter between us, to hear anything, but he was waving his hands about and seemed to be both angry and eloquent at the same time.

### III

Two days later she came and I did not have any information for her. I had called Madras Seva Sadan. They had water problems and had stopped taking anyone in. Udavum Karangal said that they took only children. Friends for the Needy told me to call St. Augustine's Home for Men and find out about the home for women.

When I called St. Augustine's Home for Men, the gentleman at the other end had such a strange accent—as if his mouth was full of

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<sup>13</sup> Gathering or council

marbles—that I had so much difficulty getting the number of the women's home from him.

“eish pore she na por she she”

“I’ll repeat it. Please check if I’ve got it right. 8469466,” I persevered. Apparently, I had got it wrong for he proceeded to give it to me again.

“ayee five niyee shev three she she.” I had a new number on my paper now—8597366

“Please repeat the number again,” I requested.

“na por she she,” he clarified repeating the last four digits of the number he gave me the first time. So I had 8469466, 8597366, and 9466 again.

The chasm between that gentleman and me would not bridge itself and the conversation was going no where; so I thanked him and hung up. I decided on 85979466 and dialed hoping to connect with the Women’s home. A woman answered my call.

“Hello”

“Hello, is this St. Augustine’s home for women?”

"This is not a home, this is Finesse Systems."

I then called Prasanna at The Banyan who promised to look into this hostel matter for me. She said that she would call me back. She did not call me for some reason, and I forgot about it till Flower Queen made her dutiful appearance two days later. When she realized that I had no information, she was rude.

“I have stopped working from today because you said that I will be going to the hostel. Please stop persecuting me.”

“Finding a hostel is not so easy Maharani; it takes time.”

“Please forget the idea of putting me in a hostel.” She walked off in a huff, swaying her hips in her characteristic way.

## IV

A few days later, my friend Shiela and I went to the Taluk Office in Egmore to do some preliminary work before submitting Flower Queen's application for the Legal Heir certificate. I expected touts to meet us but none did. I saw a host of clerks sitting around a large hall. Emboldened by my experience at the Corporation office, I wanted to approach a higher official. 'Deputy Tahsildar' sounded high enough. But he was not very knowledgeable and dismissed me as soon as possible telling me that the Round buildings did not come in the Egmore Taluk Office's jurisdiction. He asked the clerks in his room about the Taluk Office where I would have to go. They conferred among themselves and concluded that it would have to be the Ambattur office.

After the Deputy Tahsildar dismissed me, the clerks explained how I could get to that office. They said that I could take any bus going to Avadi via Annanagar, where I live. They also suggested that I get down at the Canara Bank bus stop and drew a rough map showing the way from the bus stop. I thanked God for these helpful people.

## V

One day, Flower Queen raised the issue of retrieving her things from the house that she had not fully vacated. I agreed to go with her and get her things from there to the pavement where she lived. Later, I decided that it would be better to put her things in the big TV box in the loft. That would not trouble me unduly and would be helpful to her.

But she failed to come to me in the mornings when I was free but came in later after I had already become preoccupied with other matters.

"I am expecting an important telephone call now, we will not be able to go today also. Why do you keep coming so late. Come by 8:30 a.m. tomorrow. OK?"

"*Amma*, if you see my face in the morning, you will have bad luck."

It was impossible to plan anything because she seemed incapable of sticking to a schedule and it went on like this for many days.

Then one day she came to me, accusing the women at the Round.

“They are bewitching Sanjay. *Amma*, their bad qualities are getting transferred to him. I cannot stand them anymore. I am leaving the Round. I need a house. All I want you to do is to take my things from the slum and put them in a maidan for me. I know people who will build a hut for me.”

Thankful that she still spoke the language of the real world, though she clearly hovered over the border line of sanity, I pretended to go along with her idea.

“OK Maharani, build the hut and let me know. I will take an auto rickshaw and bring your things directly to the hut.”

“Give me 400 rupees for building the house.”

I used a very casual tone—“I cannot give you any more money for such things. I will only be able to help you with the legal efforts we are taking to get your compensation.”

“When the compensation comes, you can keep it. Only give me the money now.”

“You know I cannot do this. Ouch! Too many mosquitoes, come inside Maharani. Omana will give you something to eat.”

“Tear up all the certificates. What use are they to me when I need money now?”

“What a thoughtless woman you are! Do you realize how much effort has gone into this. Am I a clown or something?” I might as well have screamed at a chicken for all the sense I made to her.

“You give me the papers; I’ll find another lawyer instead of K.Sattanathan.”

“Fair enough. Find another lawyer and I will personally come and give him the papers.” I was amazed that I had learnt to talk in ways that could make enough sense to a mentally imbalanced woman and

stump her. I don't want to be reminded that good communication is preceded by the communicator having gone up or down to the level of the audience.

She lost interest in emptying out her house after that. The poor woman looked terribly run down. She reminded me of my mother-in-law's *uppu kandam*, which are pieces of meat marinated in salt and masala, strung together, dried in the sun for several days, and then stored. We would fry a few of these in oil for a crunchy side dish on days when we were too tired for elaborate cooking.

Another time, she was disgusted with the dangling-carrot compensation that was a distant dream at a time when she was languishing with no place to sleep. She wanted to destroy the certificates as always. But because I would not allow that, she wanted me to take her to the lawyer's residence. There she would ask him herself—why this long wait of five years when others in similar situations had got their compensation money long ago.

I too needed to see the lawyer and give him the death certificate. I had been trying to reach him but no one was picking up the phone. That evening she was back. I called the lawyer's house. His daughter answered the phone. Her father had not yet returned. He would be back in half an hour at 8:30 p.m. and we were to call before coming. He was not back even at 8:40 p.m. I had other work to do after that. So I gave Flower Queen a hot dinner and sent her away.

The next morning I got a call from the lawyer himself. Flower Queen had gone to his place in the morning. She had told him that I had managed to get one of the certificates that he required. And the best part was that she had given him my phone number. Till date this was the smartest thing she had done. I was impressed.

I told him that I would drop the certificate at his residence. Not being sure why the case got delayed all these years, I did not want it to be delayed further for want of a photocopy. So I decided to give him a photocopy of the certificate also. He told me that her hearing was coming up this week. Meanwhile I was to try and get the Legal Heir certificate. In his words, "The Legal Heir certificate will benefit her". When I asked him for her address, he put me on hold,

found her file and dictated it to me. "109 Radial House," he said. I realized that 'Radial' referred to the 'Round'.

On the morrow, Shiela and I took two buses and went to the Ambattur Taluk Office. We could have caught a direct bus but did not know that Ambattur Industrial Estate and Ambattur were not the same. The Deputy Tahsildar was polite but not chatty. He told me that details about the marriage, which temple and so on, were not required. I had to also mention the reason why the Legal Heir certificate was required. On the way back, we went to the lawyer's house and delivered the death certificate to his daughter. I also returned the copy of Flower Queen's old ration card that the lawyer had given me.

## VI

India was playing with England in the first Super Six match when Flower Queen made her appearance at night with a few buckets and some bags. The Round women had laid the last straw, whatever it was, on her back. She would not go to the Round again. She had found a neat place on some pavement where her son and she could sleep. But Sanjay had hit her and shouted at her.

"Put him in a hostel, the Round is bad for his character", she said as she repeated the other "facts' about the bewitching women and the height-anomaly maladies. It was late and the kids were delighted to vacate their study room to allow Flower Queen to settle down there for the night. This apartment had a front room that the kids were using as a study room. A clean mat, a ceiling fan, an electric mosquito repellent. It should have been a comfortable night for her, but it wasn't. I could also lock her out of the rest of the house for the night. This way, I did not have to hide the forks and knives like I did in the last apartment. We had our family prayers in the adjacent room with the children singing robustly. Then we watched the match into the wee hours of the morning. Maybe we were a bit too noisy for her.

The woman was already up when I went to open the front door for her at 6:15 a.m. All she could tell me was that she did not sleep well.

“This house is cold and gives me bad dreams.”

I could give her all three meals and make her live here. I could care for all her needs. I would not be financially ruined if I did that. But I was not sure if that was even the right thing to do. I might end up making her too dependent on me and it was improbable that I would be able to sustain that kind of care. My thoughts were along these lines as she disappeared into the morning street.

**10 March 2003**

*“Yesterday I was a dog. Today I'm a dog.  
Tomorrow I'll probably still be a dog. Sigh!  
There's so little hope for advancement”*

*- Snoopy (created by cartoonist Charles M.  
Schulz)*

## I

I took Flower Queen to the Ambattur Taluk Office. I got some photocopies on the way. The letter was also typed out and ready as follows:

From:  
Maharani  
109 Radial House, 7th Block  
Collector Nagar  
Chennai 600050

To:  
The Tahsildar,  
Ambattur Taluk, Ambattur  
Chennai 600 008

Sir,

Sub: Issue of Legal Heir Certificate for my deceased husband Baskar

My husband died on 23.08.1997 in the General Hospital where he was an inpatient for three days. He had been hit by a motor cycle. The case has been registered under 304A of IPC with the G3 Kilpauk Police Station. (Crime No 0010/P1/97 and 0030/P1/97)

I have been assigned to Lawyer K.Sattanathan for Free Legal Aid and am due for compensation for which I require the Legal Heir Certificate. I have one male child now named Sanjay who was born on 05.05.87.

Please issue a legal heir certificate in favor of myself and my son.

In this connection I enclose herewith, for your kind information and record, copies of the following:

1. Death Certificate of my husband Baskar
2. Birth Certificate of my son Sanjay
3. Assignment document for legal aid

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely  
Maharani

The Tahsildar went through the letter carefully. He asked his staff to take her thumb print and put the necessary seals. Meanwhile he wanted me to get a revenue stamp.

The revenue stamp was available at a little tea *vandi*<sup>14</sup> in the compound. The owner of the tea *vandi* did not have change for the hundred rupee note that I gave him. So I told him that I'd collect the change later. He then offered me a stamp that had 'court stamp' and 'Rs.3.00' printed on it instead of the 'Rs. 2.00' revenue stamp that I had asked for. But it was too hot to bother about such things.

The stamp was affixed by the Tahsildar's staff who put a seal on it too. The Tahsildar wanted me to write something to the effect that I had read and explained the letter to Flower Queen. I needed to put my signature, name, and address too as a sort of witness. He then signed it and told me to meet the Revenue Inspector (R.I.). Only when the staff explained, did I realize that the R.I. Office was not in the vicinity. I was told that it was two bus stops away near the *Puliyamaram*<sup>15</sup> bus stop, very close to Dunlop Playground.

I took Flower Queen to the tea *vandi* and bought her a cup of coffee and a samosa. Summer had just made a blazing entry into 2003. It was HOT. Flower Queen looked more like an *uppu kandam* than ever, and no wonder, for it had been quite a trek from the Canara Bank bus stop, where we got down, to the Taluk Office. To make matters worse, she had been walking barefoot and now had a thorn in her foot somewhere that was irritating her. So I did not take it badly when she grumbled that the coffee was hot and that she had wanted something cool. I decided to get her her heart's desire on the main road as cool drinks were not available at the tea *vandi*. I was relieved to get the change from the tea *vandi* man, and we were off on our return trek.

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<sup>14</sup> Tamil for stall on wheels; literally vehicle

<sup>15</sup> Tamil for Tamarind tree

On the way back, she could not walk properly because of the hot road and the thorn. I asked her if she wanted me to carry her. I said it half jokingly. But for the first time in many months, I saw a real, intelligent, and broad smile on her face. The sun dried the smile away, and we spoke very little till we got to the main road and to the bus stop.

The bus did not come but she was back to her normal self, thanks to the cool drink.

“The Round women are changing the faces of people sleeping there; so they looked very different when they get up,” she informed me.

"Worries and the hot sun can change people," I said, as I hailed an auto rickshaw.

At the R.I. Office, we were told to go to the V. O..

"What is V.O.?" I wondered and learned that it stood for Village Administrative Officer<sup>16</sup>. This excited me somewhat because I had read about the Village Administrative Officer in my children's civics book and I was going to meet one in person.

I found out that this V.O. under whose jurisdiction the Round falls, had his office on Raja *theru*<sup>17</sup> which was the second left after entering Yadaval *theru*, which was the first right after Britannia factory. When our auto rickshaw passed the Britannia biscuit company, the air smelt of Vanilla—hmmm. . . so good. But the first right was not Yadaval *theru*. We soon found the street, which was the third right after Britannia.

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<sup>16</sup> The reason I mention everything as it happened, including things that do not make me look good, is to show the reader that if I could take up something like this, others could do it better. Determination is more essential here than knowledge.

<sup>17</sup> Tamil for lane

The V.O. was dressed in an immaculate white shirt and *dhothi*<sup>18</sup>. He had the bearing of a man who wanted to have the bearing of a king. He was looking critically at the buttermilk he had just been offered. No one could stand in his *darbar*<sup>19</sup> with shoes on, I soon discovered. I had gone in with my shoes on as usual, and was promptly told to leave them outside. When he came to know that Flower Queen did not live at the address mentioned, he said that he would not issue the legal heir certificate because those who live on pavements were not entitled to compensations. 'The nerve of the man', I thought to myself.

"Is there a way out of this problem?" I asked his majesty.

"You can give your name and address but you will have to furnish us with details about you. You will have to produce your ration card and other documents," his assistants offered trying to be helpful.

"Will there be any problem for me because of this?" I asked.

"I am not bothered about that. We have to protect ourselves and that is all that we are bothered about," his majesty said dryly.

"No danger, Madam. Of course, one cannot be absolutely sure though," the assistants added some what contradictingly.

"Come at 2:00 p.m. tomorrow," ordered the regent, "one of my assistants will return to your house with you to ensure that Maharani lives there. You will be interviewed and if everything is satisfactory, we can proceed."

About proof of her living with me, which was partially true, I could only hope that if he saw her buckets under our dining table, her bag in the kitchen storeroom loft, and more of her bags in the kids' study, he would be convinced. I dropped her off at Thirumangalam on my way back.

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<sup>18</sup> traditional Indian dress worn by men comprising a light cotton cloth tied skillfully around the waist

<sup>19</sup> room in Indian palaces where the king would address and interact with people

“Take care *Amma*, that the Round women don’t mislead you,” she called out to me, wearing her wise-puppy look.

I called Philip at his office, apprised him of matters, and asked him to think of something that could go wrong if I gave our address to the V.O. But Philip had come a long way since I first met Flower Queen and seemed to throw caution to the winds.

"What problem can come with giving our address?" he asked rhetorically. It struck me as unusual because until very recently he had been aghast at what I was doing for Flower Queen. Although he had not stopped me, he had felt that this simply was not done. Normal people were not supposed to take these risks. But today he was angry that the Village Administrative Officer had said that people on the pavement were not entitled to compensation.

I also spoke to Prasanna from The Banyan to ask her if anything bad could come out of this. She could not think of anything either. She also invited me to make use of the Free Legal Aid people who would be visiting them on 19.03.2003. I decided to actually accept the invitation and go because Lawyer K.Sattanathan was also a part of this government effort for the poor, and maybe I could learn something. I hoped that they would be able to suggest a sensible way of dispensing the compensation when it came for I worried that neither Sanjay nor Flower Queen were capable of handling the large sum of money wisely. I was also convinced that I was not to involve myself when the money came.

## II

The next day, at the VO’s office we waited for about two hours. During this seemingly endless wait, I met a Srilankan refugee who needed a certificate from the VO in order to apply for a passport. He confided that he was going to tip the VO’s assistant to speedup matters. Flower Queen said that she came here often to collect her quota of free saris from time to time.

Just then I got a call from Philip on my cell phone. He had received a call from the school where our daughters study and had been asked to come to the school immediately because our youngest

daughter Lydia was not well. Apparently, she had become breathless and cold. He had gone to the school and brought her home and she was alright now. The situation seemed under control; so I stayed put at the VO's office.

About two more hours later, the VO's assistant whom I had met the other day, and who now introduced himself as the 'writer', came with us along with another staff member in an auto rickshaw to see our house. On the way, we stopped at another apartment block where the writer checked the residence of the refugee from Sri Lanka. When the writer returned to the auto rickshaw, I wondered how much he had been tipped.

When we reached home, I had to help him fill up a questionnaire. He intended to project me as Flower Queen's guardian so that they could continue to use the Round address as her residential address. If we were to use my address instead, we would have to go to another Tahsildar's office altogether and do the exercise all over again. But there was one problem. A police inspector would go to the Round place to check, and whoever lived at that address had to acknowledge that Flower Queen did indeed live there. The writer also said that he would change the address for the widow's monthly pension from the Round address to mine.

The writer and I decided that we would go to No.109 Radial House and request the occupants to tell the Police that Flower Queen stayed there should there be a check. So we left Flower Queen at home and went to the Round. We soon located No.109 Radial House, whose owner and occupant was one Ms. Mala. She seemed to be very influential in that area and introduced herself as a graduate who had started an organization for deserted women. She had tried to help Flower Queen and had initially allowed her address to be used. But Flower Queen's eccentricities had disgusted her so much that she now refused to have anything to do with her. She was pretty rude to the writer who was with me. The whole situation looked hopeless. So I decided to send the writer and his accomplice away in the auto rickshaw.

I walked them to the auto rickshaw from Ms. Mala's house. During this time, the writer hinted to me several times that he wanted to be paid some money. He explained that he was not a government

official and relied on money given by generous and good people like me. I did not pay him a paise, as usual. Although bribing people is wrong, because it clouds their judgment, in this case, a tip would not have been a bribe as it would have influenced him to render a service that is rightfully mine. In India the greasing of the palm is often resorted to by perfectly decent people to get what is their due. So it was not for any lofty ideal that I did not pay him. It was just that at the time it seemed so revolting that delivery of justice was so arduous a process and that it depended on the whims of the likes of His majesty the V.O. and this poor 'writer'. With hind sight, I feel that I should have given him some money. He left asking me to meet him after two days. I never did.

After sending the duo off, I returned to Mala and spoke to her some more. She was a deserted woman herself who had decided to take control of her life. I cannot recall having seen anyone who treasured a college degree more and she attributed her determination and confidence to being a graduate. Her organization comprised women who needed help but who in turn returned the favor by helping one another. Mala had helped several of them to get houses using government housing schemes. She had similarly helped Flower Queen by enrolling her in the government scheme for widows. As a result of this, Flower Queen received a monthly payment of 200 rupees which the post man brought her. It was also because of this that Flower Queen received free saris from the V.O.'s office from time to time.

The other day, much to Mala's irritation, Flower Queen had run away from the post man who was bringing her the money. When he finally caught up with her, he had to face a verbal torrent.

"I have over two lakhs of rupees coming to me as compensation from the government. Why would I want your measly 200 rupees? Go away."

Mala also told me that Baskar had a daughter through another marriage. He married Flower Queen after the first wife died. This tallied with what I already knew. The only new information was that the first wife was dead. I suppose, this made Flower Queen Bhaskar's rightful wife by law.

We were joined by some women from the neighborhood, whom she introduced to me.

“These women are neighbors, all of them destitute women. I helped all of them and they have all been allotted houses here by the government.”

We all smiled at each other as she proceeded to introduce me.

This lady is trying to help *Naayee*<sup>20</sup> Maharani and wanted to use my address. But I refused; you know how much we have suffered from that woman.”

I was amazed to hear Flower Queen being called Naayee or dog and asked them the reason. I was told that several dogs perpetually followed her about and the name had stuck as a result.

Mala and I exchanged visiting cards and parted. Her visiting card displayed her name as Mala B.A.

Till the end of my visit, she did not budge from her stand that she had enough problems and did not want Flower Queen to use her address. I understood her perspective perfectly and left it at that.

I faced a dead end and felt defeated.

### III

In the morning, Flower Queen came home very angry, accusing humanity in general of selfishness.

“Everyone makes me stay in their house for their own selfish motives, and you also are selfish. You are driving me out.”

“What happened, why are you so tense?”

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<sup>20</sup> Tamil for dog

“It is good to be kind to poor people, not chase them out,” she admonished me. “Where are the papers I signed yesterday? Give them to me and let me go. The government in those days assigned for us to stay outside the city in the forest and not here. I'll take my son and go there. You people are taking ten years to give me this money. I am fed up; I will not wait for even a day more.”

She completed her angry speech with a dash of typical Flower-Queen flourish:

“If I stay here any longer, you will get my face and I will get yours. People at the Round are taking photos of our faces by putting a camera in the ceiling fan and then exchanging faces.” (What was that again?)

She came the next two days to rummage through her things, spreading everything out on the floor and then putting her things back into her bag one by one. On the third day, she came and requested that we go and get her things from the shack.

“*Amma*, Esther Rani has done something to Sanjay. When a child dies, we mourn and get reconciled. But in my case, I strongly feel that my real son is dead. In any case, I am certain that the boy who now masquerades as Sanjay is not my son. So I am left roaming around, looking for my son who is probably dead.” Flower Queen really believed what she said for she sat in a corner and wept silently.

We went to the Sai Nagar house. There was trepidation on my side as to what the house owner would say. It was our mistake after all that we did not vacate. She was not home as she was out visiting some relatives. I called her on my cell phone. She was very kind and told me that the house had been given to new tenants but Flower Queen’s things had been bundled up neatly and kept in a corner. Flower Queen was getting a bit fidgety. Knowing her, this was not a good sign. As a precaution, I told the daughter to disregard whatever Flower Queen might say as she was not in her right mind.

We reached Flower Queen's shack but found it locked because the new tenants had gone out. Flower Queen started to swear.

“Christian harlot #%\$@ has changed my son.” I hushed her and brought her to the auto rickshaw. An old lady started to ask her something and I pleaded with her not to talk to Flower Queen, for we would not be able to handle the situation if Flower Queen was allowed to express herself. I thanked the house owner’s daughter who had been observing all this. I told her that I’d be back in three days without Flower Queen to take the things.

As usual, my schedule went awry. Three days became three weeks, and I went there in an auto rickshaw to get her things. This time the house owner was there but the tenants were out of station. She said that she would call me when they returned. She never did.

One day Flower Queen came and asked me for two rupees. She did not explain what she wanted to do with the money and I did not press her. In fact it was a relief that she left without saying anything.



**19 March 2003**

*“Curiouser and curiouser!” Cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English).*

*- Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll*

I went to The Banyan to meet the Free Legal Aid people. There were two of them—a lady named Santhi and another gentleman. When I explained the case to them, they and Prasanna agreed that we should somehow bring Flower Queen to The Banyan and admit her there. She would be treated with medicines for her condition and fed well. Best of all, she would have an address to show the Village Administrative Officer.

I had a print out of my notes on Flower Queen on the table and referred to it whenever I needed to recollect some detail. This print out comprised the earlier chapters of this book in a raw form. One of the legal experts, the gentleman, took it and started to read it. Presently, he looked up.

“This is interesting. Do you have another copy? Mind if I kept this?”

Of course, I minded. I did not quite know what I would do with the notes but I wasn’t about to give away copies of them either.

“Even if I had a copy, I will not give it to you.” I’m afraid I was a bit blunt but I tried to smile to lessen the impact. He was taken aback but regained his composure quickly.

“It might be worth looking into the matter about the old Tamil movies. I’ll ask around and see if there is some way of doing that,” he offered, “and we can check if there is any truth in her claims.”

**23 April 2003**

*"I bet there's been pirates on this island before, boys. We'll explore it again. They've hid treasures here somewhere. How'd you feel to light on a rotten chest full of gold and silver -- hey?"*

*But it roused only faint enthusiasm, which faded out, with no reply. Tom tried one or two other seductions; but they failed, too. It was discouraging work. Joe sat poking up the sand with a stick and looking very gloomy. Finally he said:*

*"Oh, boys, let's give it up. I want to go home. It's so lonesome."*

*"Oh no, Joe, you'll feel better by and by," said Tom. "Just think of the fishing that's here."*

*"I don't care for fishing. I want to go home."*

*"But, Joe, there ain't such another swimming-place anywhere."*

*"Swimming's no good. I don't seem to care for it, somehow, when there ain't anybody to say I sha'n't go in. I mean to go home."*

*- The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain*

She came a couple of times when I was not at home, never ringing the doorbell but just hanging around for a while before leaving. My chance came when one evening she arrived telling me that she wanted to sleep in our house. She stayed with us two nights and I had enough time to make her feel comfortable about moving to The Banyan.

"Maharani, it might be a bit difficult to stay there because some of the others are not in their right minds. But if you manage it for a few months, your legal problems will be taken care of."

She would normally not have agreed with me. But she had begun to believe that her son was dead now and that she had nothing more to live for. I could see that her heart was breaking. But it was a blessing right now and she came with me to The Banyan during the early days of April—silently—like a lamb to the slaughter.

Prasanna was out of station. She had gone with about 10 to 15 inmates, who were well now, to find their families and see if they would accept them back. I interacted with social worker Sujatha this time. She took photocopies of some of the important papers that belonged to Flower Queen that I had with me.

The staff led her away a trifle brusquely. I wished they had been more gentle. But they were probably so used to marching obstinate and ill women to their dorms. I could see that Flower Queen was taken aback and kept looking back at me in a strange and helpless sort of way. Soon she was out of sight and Sujatha was no where to be seen either, probably carrying on with her next task. Nothing was left for me to do except to go home. I came with my hands full and returned with an inexplicable emptiness.

In the days following this, I called The Banyan a few times. They always said that Flower Queen was OK, except for asking "Why are you keeping me here, I am not mad."

I wanted to introduce some friends to Flower Queen. I decided that the day being Wednesday (the usual day for the Free Legal Aid consultations), it would be a good day to take them to The Banyan. I tried to call The Banyan but their phone was engaged all day. So we went anyway. Prasanna had just left and Sujatha was not to be seen.

I remembered that Lionel had mentioned Anuradha and Seema. Anuradha was not in, and so I spoke to Seema over the phone from the reception area. She said that she would send Vanitha, another social worker to me. But Sujatha came instead and this made things easier.

At first we wondered if it would be a good thing to avoid meeting Flower Queen. We did not want to upset her unduly. But Sujatha felt that it might be a good thing if we did visit her, especially if we could assure her that we would bring Sanjay to see her. Apparently, she had been asking for him. Did this mean that she was becoming saner and realized that he was not dead after all?

We then proceeded to the second floor where a gate was unlocked to let us in. We went through the corridor and into a room where Flower Queen was seated on a sofa. As soon as she saw me she came running and fell at my feet with a big, "*Amma, Amma!*" She was mildly reprimanded by Sujatha for this and made to sit down. We all sat down.

"*Amma*, let me come with you tonight. Only for one night. Only tonight," she pleaded.

"I have things in some people's houses—two houses. I want to collect them and bring them to our house. I have to also repay ninety rupees to someone. Let me do that. Then I can come back here."

"Also *Amma*," she continued after a pause, "I want Sanjay to come to The Banyan and work here." She looked imploringly at Sujatha before adding, "He will work well."

"Alright Maharani, we'll look for him and bring him to The Banyan," Sujatha said. Flower Queen began to say something but Sujatha continued, "But he will not work here. He needs some education and training in some trade."

"Alright, I will go with *Amma* today and bring him back and you can train him." But Sujatha was too clever for her.

"No, you will not go Maharani. We will find him and bring him back." Flower Queen looked crestfallen but Sujatha labored on,

“Sanjay is just a child and this is not the age when he must work. He needs to be taught something.” Flower Queen nodded but within minutes we were back to square one.

“Please let me come for one night.” She repeated this like a stuck gramophone record.

“Tell your mother to let me come with you,” she turned to my older daughter Prisy, touching her and kissing her hands. A wide-eyed Prisy looked up at me for deliverance, self-conscious and thoroughly embarrassed.

“How are you today?” I changed the topic. “Do you have friends here?”

“Nowadays, I say *Yesuvin ratham jeyam*<sup>21</sup> and pray for the power of the blood of Jesus. As soon as I am discharged, I will come home and get baptized.” I was taken aback for she spoke of baptism as if it were as simple as coming home for a bath. But Sujatha was very amused.

“Has Stella been talking to you?” Flower Queen nodded. Apparently, The Banyan had an evangelistic inmate.

“We have to go now Maharani. I will meet Sanjay in two or three days,” I assured her as we left her in the room, “and see you next Wednesday.”

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<sup>21</sup> Tamil for Victory in the blood of Jesus



**12 May 2003**

*“Before I begin, I'd like to recite the Lawyer's Prayer: Lord, please let there be strife and misery among your people, lest your servant starve.”*

*- Neils Bohr*

## I

I went to the Round with my sister-in-law. Instead of Sanjay, I met Alla-ud-din, his accomplice in last time's escapade, and he told us that Sanjay was going to work regularly. We also heard that he was doing fine and came there to retire for the night at 7:00 p.m. every day. We asked Alla-ud-din to bring Sanjay home and he promised to do so. I gave him a bar of Cadbury's milk chocolate to share with Sanjay.

A day or two later I went again. This time I met the owner of the mattress shop. He too promised to speak to Sanjay. I called The Banyan and apprised Sujatha of the situation and asked her to convey this to Flower Queen also.

Wednesday came. But the Free Legal Aid people had postponed their visit to Thursday. Sujatha and Prasanna felt that it would be better for me to come then. So I called and asked Sujatha to tell Flower Queen that I would be coming the next day. She even attempted to get Flower Queen to talk to me over the phone. The attempt did not work well because Flower Queen did not know how to talk over the phone and kept saying, "*Amma, Amma*" without stopping to listen to me. I had a bad throat and perhaps she did not recognize my voice.

On the way to The Banyan the next day (1<sup>st</sup> May 2000), I stopped at the Round to see if Alla-ud-din was there. I met the butcher this time, who also promised to speak to Sanjay for me. Hmm...

At The Banyan, the lawyers were there—both of them—like the last time. We were talking until Flower Queen finally made her appearance. She was all dressed up to go out.

"*Amma*, lets go home. I am ready." We played it down.

"Come sit down first."

"I will come with you today. After I collect my things, I will return here tomorrow itself. Come let us go *Amma*." She saw that I was in no hurry to go and tried again.

“*Amma*,” she said with syrupy sweetness, “I would like to sleep in your house one more time.” After a pause, she announced, “I want to see *Annan*<sup>22</sup>.”

The lawyers cocked their ears and wanted to know who this '*Annan*' was. Maybe they thought that he could be a key relative in Flower Queen's story and were deflated when I told them that Flower Queen was referring to my husband Philip. A drowning man catches the straw, they say, but wanting to see '*Annan*' was the funniest straw one ever heard of; Philip would completely flip out if he knew.

Lawyer Santhi, quickly prepared a draft in Tamil, using my modified version of Sattanathan's draft to the Tahsildar, to apply for the Legal Heirship Certificate again. When we saw that she could sign her name on a paper, we got her to sign. A bit shaky but she did it consistently. It was a good thing we got her to sign at that time, because if we had delayed a moment more, we would have not been able.

“Mad people are biting me. I have not slept for 24 days.” Pretty reasonable. I would not be able to sleep in a dorm with insane people either. It also struck me that the poor woman had been keeping count of the days she spent there.

“Have you acted in movies as a child?” asked the gentleman who had read my manuscript during the last visit.

“Of course not,” Flower Queen retorted, not wishing to get involved in any conversation that would delay her from leaving.

“*Amma*, let's go,” she urged, tugging at my arm, “Speak to them, explain to them that I need to get my things, and they will allow me.” And slowly she worked herself up into a frenzy.

I sat in the lounge with her for sometime until it was time for me to leave.

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<sup>22</sup> Tamil for man (literally elder brother)

“I will have to go Maharani, but I will come again to see you soon. If you make a fuss now, they will not let me come. You want me to come, don’t you?” I could not get to her and she would not let go of me.

When The Banyan's staff came to my aid, she screamed even more.

*“Talk. Open your mouth and tell them,”* she screamed. It may have been in my power to take her out with me. But if I did that, she would be back on the streets. Contrary to her wishful thinking, her son would not listen to her or stay with her. Her latter state would be worse than her former. Here she had food, shelter, safety, and treatment, not to speak of hope of getting her compensation and building a better home for herself and her son.

So a nurse and I dragged her to the elevator, as she screamed the place down. There, with some difficulty, we pried her hands away from mine. The staff, a young girl, held on to her with all her might until the automatic door of the lift closed between us.

On the whole she seemed more disturbed than the last time. But Prasanna felt that she had worked herself into a frenzy only after seeing me. I met the lawyers on my way out and cheerfully commented that she was behaving like a child being left in school on the first day.

But I did not feel cheerful. I went up to the gate and signed the register. I could still feel the warmth of Flower Queen’s grip on my arm. I went back inside the building looking for Prasanna.

“Prasanna, I think Maharani is running a temperature. Can you check?”

## II

On 9<sup>th</sup> May, The Banyan called home when I was in office. My son Tim gave them my cell number, but they were not able to reach me. It was nearly midnight when I came home from the client's office and Tim told me that a call had come from The Banyan and the caller had mentioned the lawyer Sattanathan. It was now too late to find out anything.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, I had a class to teach—a four-hour lecture. It was only in the evening that I came home. In the mean time Prasanna had called and given her residence number, which the kids had faithfully noted on a piece of paper. When I called her, she told me that someone from the Free Legal Aid Department of the Tamil Nadu State Legal Services Authority had called The Banyan.

“Advocate Santhi is on vacation but we got a call from her department. It seems May 13<sup>th</sup> is the date for Maharani's last hearing.”

“Oh.”

“Why don't you call her lawyer Sattanathan and find out what needs to be done,” she suggested.

I was not free that night and could call him only the next day and that too bang in the middle of noisy birthday celebrations at home. I felt that his tone was somewhat brusque, not entirely but here and there. I felt certain that he had been questioned about this case by his colleagues at the Free Legal Aid Department and was not too happy about it.

“The address on the death certificate that you have furnished is not known to us,” he grumbled.

“That address would have been given by those who were with Baskar at the time of his death. We should not expect it to be familiar to us,” I reasoned.

“We will have to go to that address and find out what we can.” By ‘We’, he meant me. Then he said something very surprising.

“Two weeks ago Maharani came and took half of her papers from me.”

“What papers?”

“Important papers like the FIR and others.” I was shocked. Flower Queen had been in The Banyan for one month. Maybe the lawyer was a bit mixed up with the dates.

“But she has been in The Banyan for a month now.”

“Listen Madam,” his irritation was clear, “she came personally and took the papers with her. Ask her to give you the papers.” Ask and you will receive. Simple as that.

“But she could not have come two weeks ago. For the past month, she has been in The Banyan.”

“Madam, please ask her to give you the papers,” he barked.

“But she does not have them with her.”

“I do not have time to discuss this. Just go and ask her for the papers and she will hand them over to you,” he said with finality.

“Sir, I do not think you understand. I admitted her in The Banyan. She did not even take her clothes with her. She has no papers or anything else for that matter with her.” It took me a while to make him understand that she had ABSOLUTELY NOTHING with her. “But I’ll ask her anyway,” I added civilly.

Even if Lawyer Sattanathan were telling the truth, barring his confusion with the dates, it still threw him in very poor light and as a callous person. Why did he give the papers to her when he knew that I was handling her matters for her. In my mind, I could think of only two possibilities. Either he had given the documents shortly before Flower Queen was admitted in The Banyan, or he had lost the papers and wanted to save face.

“Come to my chamber at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> May,” he ordered, “and bring Maharani also.” A tall order indeed.

“It is not easy or safe to bring Maharani to the court,” I said trying to explain how difficult it was to comply with his request, “Can we manage without her?” He seemed to understand the difficulty.

“You or some representative should come and we will see what happens in court. We will try and postpone the hearing by a month,” he said finally.

When I called Prasanna, she said that she would talk to lawyer Santhi who would be returning from her vacation anytime. She would also speak to Flower Queen about the papers allegedly taken from lawyer Sattanathan.

I asked Prasanna about her trip with the ten to 15 inmates. She told me that they had been able to entrust everyone with their families. All but one woman, who they lost on the way because she wandered away from the group. I felt very sad for that one woman who was alone and lost somewhere in this vast country and who may not be fortunate enough to find her way to a caring place like The Banyan this time round. But to Prasanna, it was a successful trip and I could understand why. Social workers like her cannot afford to take the few failures to heart. It would immobilize them. The one woman who got lost was just a statistic and rightly so. Come to think of it, so was my Flower Queen to them.

The next day, May 12<sup>th</sup>, Prasanna called me from her residence and informed me that Lawyer Santhi had just returned from her vacation but still had her mobile switched off. I wished I could contact her somehow. Many of The Banyan staff were on leave like Prasanna herself was. All this meant that I would have to go to the court by myself, and lawyer Santhi would not be available to help.

I too had so much work to do the next day, official and personal. When I put the phone down, I realized that I had long since lost the slip of paper, which had Prasanna 's residential number. It was a lonely kind of feeling.



**13 May 2003**

*Goosey, goosey, gander,  
Whither shall I wander?  
Upstairs, and downstairs,  
And in my lady's chamber.  
There I met an old man  
Who wouldn't say his prayers!  
I took him by the left leg  
And threw him down the stairs.*

- *A Mother Goose rhyme*

The day of the hearing and I was late. Lawyer Sattanathan wanted me to meet him at his chamber at 10 a.m. I had planned on taking the bus but had to take an auto rickshaw, and somehow I reached the High Court by 10.15 a.m. with no clue as to where the lawyer's chamber was. I had my mobile with me and tried to contact Lawyer Santhi but only managed to get to her voice mail service. As I wandered about, this silly rhyme with the word 'chamber' in it went through my head in circles.

*Goosey, goosey, gander,  
Whither shall I wander?  
Upstairs, and downstairs,  
And in my lady's chamber.*

There were lots of black-robed people around the place. My brother, who is a psychiatrist, mentioned many years ago, when I was in school, that the way I argued, I should study to be a lawyer. I looked around imagining how it would have been if I had taken him seriously.

I found out that lawyer Sattanathan's chamber was in Room No. 52. When I reached there, I found that he had not yet come. The room was one that allowed several lawyers to transact business with clients. It had several dark robes hanging from pegs on the walls. The darkness of the robes did not reveal how filthy they were, but a thick film of dust had settled on the stacks of files everywhere. Each file represented a human life and the dust was symbolic of the value assigned to human life by our legal system.

I sat at a desk for sometime correcting some answer sheets that I had brought with me. Then I decided to look for advocate Santhi. A little bit of enquiring and I found out that the Free Legal Aid Department was at the other end of the campus.

As I walked across, I could not help thinking about how grand this potentially beautiful campus must have been at one time but today it was so littered ... and molested. The buildings stood like beautiful women, still gracious and polite, oblivious that they were disrobed and naked.

Advocate Santhi was not there. But even as I was wondering what to do, a man came in and took an effort to help me. He had a notebook with scores of names listed, and Flower Queen's name written was one. The date beside it confirmed what I already knew.

“The final hearing has been scheduled for today.”

“Yes, I am aware of that. I am waiting for Lawyer Sattanathan.”

“Sattanathan? He will be at the Fast Track Court. Why don't you go there? You may find him there. In any case, the hearing will be there only.”

“But he has specifically told me to come at 10 a.m., and wait at his chamber,” I explained.

“In that case, you should wait for him there. I will join you there soon.

I returned to Room No. 52 and found that the lawyer had not yet come. I called his residence. To my amazement, he answered the phone.

“I have been held up. Please interact with my junior Ms. Revathy. Tell her that the “bundle” is in my chamber. Ask her to go ahead with whatever has to be done and I will join you soon.” Well, there was no Ms. Revathy anywhere in sight, and I knew that I had enough time to complete my correction work.

The lawyer arrived at 12.30 p.m. apologizing that he had been held up because of his grand daughter's ‘coming of age<sup>23</sup>’ ceremony and he could not get away soon enough. He chatted with an acquaintance, who had materialized out of no where, as he settled down at his desk nicely. Then someone brought him a mounted blow-up of a photograph that was shown to him. He seemed mighty pleased with it and asked me to take a look. The picture showed him

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<sup>23</sup> Onset of puberty in girls celebrated in orthodox households in Tamil Nadu

with the Shankaracharyar of Kanchipuram. I had to admit, that he looked rather handsome in the picture. But I was getting impatient.

At last the lawyer rose and donned his robe and collar and we made our way across the campus. I watched a very chubby woman in a similar robe. The pleats of the robe at the back made the robe fill with air and she looked very silly. Sillier still was the collar tied around her bare neck for she wore a regular round-necked sari blouse with her sari.

The sun bore down on us mercilessly and I pitied these lawyers who must surely sweat so much under their robes, making the robes twice dirty—dirty from within with sweat, and dirty from without with the dust in the rooms as they hung from the pegs. I even chanced to sight another bright lawyer who had a tweed suit on under his robe.

To my astonishment, I found myself being led outside the gate and across the busy road. The lawyer hailed an auto rickshaw and away we went. We were in fact going to the Fast Track court in the District Collector's Office that had been put in place to speed up cases. When we reached, the judge had left already and had recorded that the case was 'dismissed for default.' Sattanathan told me that we could revive the case. Not knowing any better way, I went along with him as we returned to the High Court campus and got some petitions typed.

One petition was to the Motor Accident Tribunal at Chennai on behalf of Flower Queen where she explains that she has a serious illness because of which she could not come on the day of the hearing. It went on to state,

" My counsel also waited for my arrival till 11.00 a.m. I submit that my counsel along with my representative have rushed to this court and they found that the above said OP was called and dismissed for default. I submit that my default in appearance or the default of my counsel was neither willful nor wanton. Hence it is just and necessary to file this petition with my prayer for the restoration of the above said OP by setting aside the exparte order of the dismissal dated 13.5.2003 and restore the court fee on record for further trial..."

I am sure it can be argued that a young girl reaching puberty is neither willful nor wanton.

The other petition was also to the Motor Accident Claims Tribunal at Chennai but this time it was on behalf of the lawyer himself. It simply stated,

"For the reasons stated in the accompanying affidavit, it is prayed that this Hon'ble court may be pleased to pass an order to set aside the order of exparte dismissal of the above said OP. . . and restore the same and pass such further or other orders may deem fit and proper in the circumstances of this case and thus render justice. "

I smelt some grammar problems in that second petition but the legalese confused the scent and I lost track.

I had to take photo copies of the documents. He gave the documents and the originals to me after signing the original document of his petition.

“You have a month’s time. But sooner the better,” he informed me. I remembered that my meeting with the lawyers at The Banyan was just a week away on 21<sup>st</sup> May.

“Ah!” he said, “we can also try and avoid a trial. We can approach the Motor Third Party Claim Office (MTCO), near VGP office in Mount Road, and get a minimum compensation directly.” He was rattling off these unfamiliar names so fast that I could barely keep abreast on my notes. It’s a good thing I keep a notebook and pen with me perpetually. I did not bother to note down the other landmarks to get to that office. He continued.

“A minimum of 50,000 rupees is allowed but if we mentioned Baskar's age, Sanjay’s situation, Maharani's mental condition, etc., we might be able to get up to one lakh. You will need to approach one Mr. Shanmuga. But we will need the legal heir certificate first.”

This department—Free Legal Aid Department of the Tamil Nadu State Legal Services Authority—was set up to cater to the poor and the destitute. How do other poor beneficiaries manage in this set up? Do they at all? Is it possible for the aged, illiterate, destitute,

mentally imbalanced, battered, molested, and clueless poor to use a system that baffles me who is none of these things?

**21 May 2003**

*Hey, diddle, diddle,  
The cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon.  
The little dog laughed  
To see such sport,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon home.*

- *A Mother Goose rhyme*

## I

An eventful day and there's no better place to start than at the beginning. Flower Queen had been very unhappy and had wanted to go out and see various people and her son too. Prasanna called me in the morning.

“Nahomi, can you take Maharani for an outing. I think she needs a change,” she requested.

“But it might not be safe. What if she refuses to return to The Banyan after the outing?” Having, come this far, I did not want to jeopardize Flower Queen’s prospects.

“That is true,” Prasanna said thinking aloud, “but we could provide some staff from Refuge to go with you.”

“That sounds alright to me. Even if there are just two people accompanying us, it will be wonderful. I can take her to the Round to see Sanjay. She will like that.” And so it came to be arranged that I would accompany her to the Round and other places to which she might want to go.

“Prasanna, I want to meet the lawyers. Today is when they will be coming to The Banyan, right?”

“Wonderful! You can meet them and then take Flower Queen out. Saves you an extra trip to The Banyan. Why don’t you meet the doctor also before you go?”

## II

When I met the lawyers, we discussed Maharani's case and it suddenly struck me that there was no case pending in her name at all. I realized that we had two options before us:

- To get Flower Queen to sign the affidavit that lawyer Sattanathan had prepared and get him to revive the case in court.

- To get The Banyan to be Flower Queen's guardian and get a new case going in the court.

The second option appeared to be the better option for several reasons. But Prasanna said that she would have to ask higher ups at The Banyan and let us know. However, she felt that this guardianship could be arranged. If only we could carry this off. When the money came, it would be dispensed of by competent people. I would be completely safe and no one would be able to allege that I had an eye on the money that was due to Flower Queen. I was also told that the judge in the Fast Track court had a soft corner for The Banyan and understood the cause.

I was more certain of the integrity of the lawyers assigned to The Banyan. Generally, lawyers often arranged to pocket a big portion of the compensations due to their clients. These lawyers, I was sure, would not do that. Whether lawyer Sattanathan was such a person, I did not know, but it was a possibility.

The more I thought about option two, the more excited I became. It seemed like a splendid and viable solution to the problem.

Meanwhile Flower Queen was called downstairs. She made a nuisance of herself and kept popping into the room where the Free Legal Aid people, Prasanna, and I were discussing this matter.

“*Amma*, let me come with you today and stay with you for a few days.” She begged. It did not alarm me that she had shifted from her demand of *one night* with me to *few days* with me. I wish it had.

“Maharani, go and sit down in the lobby. We are planning for you only ... ,” said Lawyer Santhi. Flower Queen ignored her completely and continued doggedly.

“Please *Amma*, get up. I am coming with you.”

The lawyers admonished her several times but she was tenacious.

“See Maharani, I am going to take you out today but only if you promise to come back with me to The Banyan,” Somehow I felt that she was not in any mood to reason. She was as frantic as a woman who knows that there is a cockroach in her dress but finds that the

zipper of the dress is stuck. It's hard to get such a woman to be reasonable.

Prasanna left us to arrange for the outing. During this time Flower Queen kept on disturbing us, making it difficult to do any serious planning.

"I have told a social worker to ensure that the field workers wait for you and Maharani," Prasanna apprised us when she returned to the room.

"Do you think I'll be able to see the doctor today, Prasanna? I really would like to know about Maharani's medical treatment. Think there'll be time?"

"No problem, that will not take long," Prasanna assured me.

"*Amma*, some staff members are forcing me to go with them. I don't want to go with anyone else. I want to come with you only," Flower Queen complained, popping into the room once more.

"I will be coming with you. Don't worry. Just sit outside the room, in the hall, and wait." I was sure that she would make her appearance in the room again. But she did not come in. I was just about to leave the lawyers and go to the doctor, when Prasanna rushed in and dropped a bomb shell.

"The field staff have taken Flower Queen in the van without you. There has been some communication gap."

"But what purpose will this outing achieve?" Prasanna did not answer and I could not keep silent.

"Will the field staff be able to hold on to her without losing her?" I was worried.

I told myself that I was overreacting and that nothing would go wrong. Apparently, I succeeded in temporarily convincing myself that things would be alright soon, because when I left The Banyan, I was more disappointed that I had to leave without meeting the doctor than I was worried that the field staff would lose Flower Queen.

I decided to take the bus home because it cost 45 rupees by auto rickshaw from The Banyan to my residence. I went home trying to make believe that nothing had gone wrong. But deep inside, I felt uneasy.

### III

“*Amma!*” Philip jumped up electrified. I heard her call too. It was 8:00 p.m. when she came.

“Give me some water to drink.” She drank clumsily, water flowing down her chin and neck, and wetting her blouse. She did not try to wipe it off.

“They have kidnapped my son. I want you to lodge a police complaint against them.” I did not say anything. In fact, I did not move. I found that I could not move.

“Why are you silent? Come with me and let us go to the police station.” I did not know what to do or say.

“At least write the address down for me. Give me The Banyan’s address and also give me your address. I want to report you also to the police.” I continued to stare at her incredulously.

“If you go to the police and tell them all this, they will tie you up and put you in the lockup.” That was Philip who had joined us outside after trying without success to get The Banyan on the phone. I wrote ‘BANYAN’ on a piece of paper and gave it to her. I did not write our address for her. If she went to a police station and gave our address, we would not be harmed but we could be called to the station to answer some questions and this would be a waste of our time and energy.

“But this is just one word; it is not an address,” Flower Queen complained.

“The Banyan is very well known. The police will immediately know what you are talking about.” I wished she would carry out her threat and complain against The Banyan. We would then be able to get her safely back to The Banyan.

"Was it not because you had to give me food constantly that you locked me up in that mad people's home? I will not trouble you anymore. Let me take my things and go."

"That is not true," I reminded her, "You needed a permanent address to get the legal heir certificate. If you stay in The Banyan, we can use The Banyan's address." I could not make out if she could understand what I was saying. But I continued.

"Remember, we decided that you would spend a few months at The Banyan till the court case was settled and you got your compensation?"

"But I don't like to live there with all those mad people." This was a legitimate sentiment but she could not know how often I had agonized over this and felt sorry about it. But it had seemed the only way. Moreover, she had not been very sane when I had taken her there.

"You went through a lot of suffering, I know, but it was the only way to get the government compensation. You did all that for Sanjay."

"I have given up hope for Sanjay. Don't talk about him anymore. Don't do anything more for him; it's no use."

"Only now, we have found out how to get the compensation quickly. Even today we were talking about it with the lawyers. You know that, don't you?" She did not react and so I continued.

"Soon we will be getting the legal heir certificate and we are going to start a brand new case for you and finish it quickly." Still no reaction.

"We have plans for Sanjay also. You suffered so much for him. We know that and we appreciate that." She appeared to be thinking.

"I'll go back to The Banyan tomorrow. Let me go now."

All this while, Philip found The Banyan phone engaged. Short of using physical force to restrain her, we could do nothing. She went inside, took her bags and plastic *kodams*<sup>24</sup>, and melted into the night.

When I finally spoke to Prasanna that night, she was apologetic about what had happened. The social worker, to whom Prasanna had given the instructions, swore that she had asked the field staff to wait. The field staff swore that they were not told.

They had gone to the Round and allowed Flower Queen to get down on her own. Flower Queen had raised a hue and a cry about how she was being ill treated. The Banyan staff could not get her to return with them. In Prasanna 's words, "The public also did not cooperate." The people who had gathered questioned the field staff about why they wanted to catch a normal person and confine her. Finally The Banyan staff members were able to round up Sanjay who they then brought to The Banyan.

Once again Flower Queen had been telling the truth, albeit in a distorted way. She had described the event as a kidnapping. Obviously it was not. But how the field staff managed to get him to come with them to The Banyan beats me. They had managed to lay their hands on this boy whereas I could not as much as lay my eyes on him. Prasanna told me that they had spoken to him and had asked him if he had enough clothes to wear. He had said 'no', and she had offered to keep some for him.

Prasanna had taken so much interest in this case and I wish I had been more magnanimous while speaking to her. When she mentioned that the field staff had let Flower Queen go on her own, I think I said something like, "I knew this will happen. What else can possibly happen? Without a clue as to what they were supposed to achieve, why did the field staff take her?"

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<sup>24</sup> Tamil for water pot that is carried by women on their hips.

I don't really blame anyone. It was an accident. Of a hundred things done by The Banyan staff, one or two might go wrong like the woman who got lost during Prasanna 's trip and Flower Queen now. For their own well being, Flower Queen will be relegated to the status of a statistic too. But not for me and certainly not for Flower Queen herself.

## **Epilogue**

*And now, if any are offended with this story of fairies and their pranks, as judging it incredible and strange, they have only to think that they have been asleep and dreaming, and that all these adventures were visions which they saw in their sleep: and I hope none of my readers will be so unreasonable as to be offended with a pretty harmless Midsummer Night's Dream.*

*- Charles and Mary Lamb*

This story details a maze of coincidences, callousness, and carelessness culminating in major bungling. Even the weather allowed for a happenstance. Flower Queen raved about Chennai not having rains till she found a good house to stay in, and there was hardly a drizzle worth the mention till late into the year. We were told that the summer of 2003 was the hottest in 98 years.

Flower Queen's story did not end with this. But from her perspective, the chapter in her book bearing my name had probably ended. With her sad story and her recollections, she probably found other sympathizers. I had taken my lofty place among the many chapters in her life such as the Mrs. Pamela Reeves chapter and the Ms. Mala chapter.

I can well picture Flower Queen's wise-puppy look as she tells the heroine of the next chapter about her curse on the city.

## **25 August 2005 (Epilogue after The Epilogue)**

*This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But, it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*

- *Sir Winston Churchill*

After two years and after the epilogue was written, she appeared again. When I returned home one evening, Omana, hardly able to contain her joy, said that Flower Queen had come to see me, and that she looked as well as one might expect of her.

A few weeks later, she came again when I was home. She said that she had been an inmate in The Banyan for a year, and had become an out-patient after that. She asked for some food, and Omana obliged her with a hot meal. I did not ask her how she managed to get to The Banyan after that night in May 2003, and she did not tell me. Perhaps she did not remember.

A couple of days later, she came again, asking for me to take her back to The Banyan. I hailed an auto rickshaw and away we went. When we reached, she led the way. Even before she got to the reception area, many inmates and staff greeted her. She introduced me as the *amma* who had helped her. At the reception, she was asked if she had come to stay. She nodded.

She beamed her farewell smile in my direction and was soon lost in the sea of healing women.

*For every problem  
Under the sun,  
There is a solution  
Or there is none.  
If there's a solution,  
Go and find it.  
If there isn't,  
Never mind it.  
- Author Unknown*

