

Usha K. R.
from *Monkey-man*

2

Too late he remembered the gradient. The scooter bucked and spluttered, and a spasm of pain seized him, reminiscent of the morning, and he cursed afresh the planners of NR Colony and the makers of Milk of Magnesia. SVK's house was situated on a sharp upward incline, right in the middle of it, just where unwary drivers started fighting with their gears. SVK would never know what that meant for he had never owned a vehicle of any sort - not even a bicycle. The house too was as he remembered it - one of the old 50s Trust Board houses where all the rooms opened out into a central 'hall' and the bottom half of the walls was slicked over in green oil paint.

He had not waited for Jairam, nor had he left word; he had just sneaked away well before 1 o'clock.

SVK's son - one of the twins, Lenin or Stalin, he could never tell which was which, was standing at the gate. The only time in SVK's life when his wife was known to have made trouble was when he had named their sons and SVK had insisted that Lenin and Stalin would be their 'given' names. She called them Rama and Krishna. And so, they were, properly, S Lenin Rama and S Stalin Krishna in the school registers.

Lenin hurried forward as soon as he saw him. He clasped him by the hand and his eyes brimmed over.

'How is he?'

'Not well, not well at all. We are afraid ...'

'Don't say that ...'

'It was Gorbachev—'

For a second his mind boggled. Had there been a later third-born, about whom he had not known?

'My father could not believe how he betrayed the movement ... the USSR.' Shrinivas Moorty was nonplussed. He could only press Lenin's hand in return.

Then he heard afresh, as if it were only yesterday, 'The USSR!' bell-like, SVK's ringing tones in class saying - 'The USSR!' - The United Soviet Socialist Republic - summoning up a far away paradise, of scarves and samovars, proud peasants, tireless workers and clean, piston-pumping factories, which they would all reach one day - which in reality SVK Sir had not seen and had no hope of visiting.

So it was true, the story making the rounds that SVK had taken the break-up of the USSR personally. Since then, it was said, he had started going downhill. His evening visitors were lectured about the 'counter-revolutionary conspiracy', how it was a 'plot by the CIA' and uncharacteristically, SVK would not hear of anyone opposing him; he who had encouraged debate and promoted controversy would not allow anyone to slip in a word edgeways.

The coffee in SVK's house as always was excellent. Unlike Jairam and a host of others, he had not stayed in touch with SVK after the first few years. But everything was exactly as it was when he had been a student and a regular visitor. The metal chairs were as he remembered them, the only items of furniture in the room, and the photograph of SVK's parents on the wall, the only ornament that SVK did not consider a symbol of bourgeois decadence. SVK Sir's wife, exhibiting her intransigent streak, would not budge when it came to her plastic-bead animals in the show case, assembled just above Deutscher's volumes of Stalin's and Trotsky's biographies. Also eternal were the noises from the kitchen - the clinking of steel vessels and of glass bangles as the unknown sari-clad shoulder scrubbed vigorously at the kitchen sink.

In his illness, SVK appeared to have united all the rival Marxist factions. At the other end of the room

Shrinivas Moorty recognized Bhupaty, quite bald, now DGM of a nationalised bank, in those days, a Trotskyite. He himself and Jairam had been members of the Circle for the Study of Dialectical Materialism, set up by SVK, while Bhupaty had belonged to the opposing Circle for the Study of Scientific Socialism. He did not know whether the study circles were still active but in its salad days, the CSDM met every Thursday in the modest premises of the Centre for the Study for Socialism, above hotel Shanbhag in Gandhi Bazaar, where sometimes they had coffee, which SVK paid for, and discussed the classics of Communist literature, from The Communist Manifesto, to Anti-Duhring and even Gorky's Mother. The CSSS, on the other hand, moneyed, decadent, met at Hotel Ginza in the posh Cantonment area, and no one quite knew what they did there but there were rumours of Chinese food. In the one public debate between the two factions, he remembered Bhupaty's fervent Trotskyite declaration of 'permanent revolution' and Jairam's own weak, sober, reasoned response. Bhupaty had trounced them, slipping in a last ringing accusation of 'petty bourgeoisie revisionism'; Jairam had been all at sea.

Bhupaty had not noticed him. He was deep in conversation with two others whose faces seemed very familiar but whose names escaped him. After some searching he recognized one but he still could not remember his name. He had been an adherent of AIDS0, the All India Democratic Students Organization, which owed allegiance to the hard line SUCI, also known as the Zalim Lotion Party for like the mysterious Zalim Lotion, the SUCI existed largely on the white-washed walls of the city – so the other Marxist parties claimed. And then the third person's name came to him in a flash. At the same time too he realized that SVK must be very ill indeed; perhaps he was on his deathbed.

'It's the nose, I can recognise it anywhere. Alfie man—' Even as he put out his hand he was regretting his uncharacteristic spontaneity for the three men had broken off and were looking at him uncertainly.

'Oh Shrinivas Moorty,' Bhupaty said tepidly. 'So you heard ... You're here too ...'

But it was the other man, the nose that Shrinivas Moorty was interested in. For Alfie, Alfred Rosario had been neither CSDM nor CSSS nor AIDS0 but part of FUG, the Freedom Unlimited Group, which both the CSDM and the CSSS said was funded by the CIA. Alfie had gone on to study comparative religions at Heidelberg and become a Buddhist. Somewhere in between, for a brief while, Shrinivas Moorty and Alfie had developed an intense friendship, sitting in Cubbon Park and discussing matters of consequence, till the policeman, who regularly weeded out pimps and prostitutes from the park, had shooed them away.

'So what are you doing these days, Alfie?'

'Oh! Teaching ...' Alfie was looking beyond Shrinivas Moorty at something at the other end of the room.

He had heard that Alfie had disappeared for some time and then surfaced in a non-traditional, non-conformist boarding school, set in acres of land in the Western Ghats.

'Most of us have ended up as teachers ...'

'Chosen, Shrinivas. Chosen. Not ended up – Bhupaty, they've come out. Will you find out—'

The door to the only bedroom in the house opened and Jairam came out in a hurry (So, Jairam had arrived before him!), followed by a short stout man whom he recognized as Prabhakar Rao.

It was only when he saw Prabhakar, striding forward with such authority and with finality that he was reminded again how serious the matter was. 'We're shifting him immediately to hospital—' Prabhakar put his arm round Lenin's shoulder. 'I've called for the ambulance.'

Jairam came towards them. 'Ridiculous ... the man can barely breathe and they've shut him up in that cold dark room ... I told them ... Prabhakar anyway has asked for an ambulance ... no time to be wasted he has to get back to his meeting. The CM is waiting ...'

'And we have ours at three—' Shrinivas Moorty said but Jairam had already walked away to talk to Prabhakar.

Prabhakar Rao was now Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister and was reputed to be truly dynamic, with the rare risk-taking ability in a bureaucrat. He was known in his circles as the Turnaround Man, for any department in any degree of shambles he could turn around within two years. His methods were what he impatiently described as in keeping with the spirit of the law and not the letter. Shrinivas Moorty remembered him in college as President of the Toastmaster's Club. Extempore speeches on any subject had been Prabhakar's forte as he had on his finger tips ready reckoners in politics, philosophy, history, religion and science and was known to read five newspapers a day. On his last outing at the Toastmaster's Club he had made a brilliant speech, extempore, on Vedanta and its Impact on International Relations and won a prize for it. It was only later that it was pointed out that he had read his topic wrong - he was supposed to speak on Détente and its Impact on International Relations. But it was too late; he had been awarded the prize, much to the chagrin of his arch rival from a women's college, a serious-looking girl with a long plait who had gone on to join the UN. He was just as ready, Prabhakar had declared, to come back and speak on Détente, only, they'd have to give him the prize a second time.

There was a stir at the back of the house and a small procession of women came from the backyard into the room, crowding it. Shrinivas Moorty recognised several of them as SVK's former students, some of them his class mates and they all wore expressions of concern. Mrs SVK came first and Prabhakar and Lenin spoke in low, urgent tones with her, while Jairam, Alfie and Bhupaty waited in a respectful semi-circle. The women formed a second, uncertain ring round the men.

And then he saw her, the last to come out from the backyard, and his heart did a little flip - of pleasure, of guilt, even after all these years, and also, of relief.

'Hi Geeta,' he said as casually as he could. She smiled and his mind was set at rest.

'Come, let's go out. These people are busy. You don't have to hang around do you. I'm dying for a smoke.' She held his elbow with an old familiarity and he slipped again into the role of escort, twenty five years rolling back in a moment.

They stood under the lone tree in the backyard, in relative privacy, and with her back to the house, she undid the gold clasp of her handbag, while he looked her over. Why, he wondered, had Geeta not outgrown her trousers and graduated into something more womanly, like a sari or even a salwar-kameez. For her jeans only seemed to show up the impedimenta of her hips, and her T shirt the droop of her bosom. He was glad immediately that Lily did not wear trousers, though she would look good in them too, he was sure. That was one thing about Lily. Clothes looked good on her.

'Benson and Hedges?'

'Yes, the same.' She leaned back, smiled and blew him a smoke ring and once again, his affection for her surfaced, despite Jairam, despite everything.

She held out the packet to him but he shook his head.

'No? Never? You want two cigarettes perhaps ...' she giggled suddenly and he smiled at the memory of the incident.

They had been sitting in her balcony, he, Geeta and another girl, he could not remember now. Those were the girls' early smoking days and both of them had audaciously struck up in the house, knowing that there were people about. Geeta's parents were known to be liberal and many other girls had sighed over her good luck, but casual though they were about her friends, even they would frown upon such bad habits as smoking. And sure enough, the girls had had just enough time to hand him their cigarettes before Geeta's aunt walked in. She had given him a severe look and after he left, Geeta a lecture about the influence of 'such boys'. Later, much later, when Geeta announced that she was getting married to a class mate, the aunt had said, not to that boy who smokes two cigarettes at a time, I hope, and Geeta had replied in all truth, no, not to him.

'I've tried to give up,' she said ruefully, flicking at the ash with her long fingernail.

'Hey, watch it—'

‘Sorry ... this is one bad habit that just persists.’

‘You seem to have acquired several others. What’s with these rings ...I notice that Jairam too wears a similar Sai Baba ring. And I remember he wouldn’t let your father give him an engagement ring ... said he didn’t hold with men wearing ornaments ... And that red tilak? Getting religious, is he?’

‘Not religious, spiritual ...’ she touched the ring on her middle finger defensively and changed her cigarette to her ringless hand. ‘You need to draw inwards as you grow older ... your intellect can’t sustain you forever, you know ... the whole man ... even Marx wouldn’t object ...’ she added, recovering her self-possession.

‘Have you settled down in your flat yet?’

She looked up quickly, alert for any innuendos, any trace of mockery or envy, and was satisfied that his remark was innocent.

‘We’ve moved in but the workers still come in every morning.’

About ten years ago Jairam had bought shares in a fledgling information technology company. A friend of theirs from college who was one of the partners had made them an offer when the company had initially gone public. Jairam had bought every single share on offer, borrowed money and bought more in the open market. Shrinivas Moorty had refused, despite Jairam’s advice. One was never sure, he said, how these things would turn out. He would rather trust the nationalised banks and their savings certificates, than these instruments of virtual value. Shrinivas Moorty had joked that there was no shark worse than a lapsed Marxist and Jairam had retaliated that only a fool would fail to recognize that the wheels of the economy were turning. When the share market boomed a few years later, Jairam sold part of his shares and bought a duplex flat in a quiet upmarket area – away from Ammanagudi Street where he had grown up.

Jairam had had an elaborate *gruhapravesha* ceremony some months earlier. The flat was a grand split-level construction, and after a conducted tour Shrinivas Moorty had summed it up as ‘US-returned affectation competing with Indian nouveau riche glory’. There had been so many people that Shrinivas Moorty found himself pushed from the kitchen – an open kitchen with an ‘island’ in the middle to house the cooking ‘range’, into the large pooja room—large enough for Jairam’s father to do a *sashtanga namaskara* in front of the deity in comfort, to prostrate himself so completely that all his limbs would touch the floor. The door of the pooja room was carved intricately into niches, like a bee-hive, with a bell suspended from each niche. Jairam had not stinted on the black polished granite which was there wherever it could be accommodated and the wash basin, Shrinivas Moorty was perplexed to find, was a large glass bowl in which, if you spat, the membranes in your spittle would be refracted in the layers of the thick glass. All the toilets were Western style – not a single squatting-on-your-haunches type Indian one, Jairam’s father had been heard complaining loudly in the middle of the ceremony. Some of the furniture—chairs made of pale slats of wood with mattresses for cushions – had already arrived as had the bunk beds in the children’s room. The smoke from the *homa* had filled the rooms and the chanting of the priests had boomed through the building from which the scaffolding had still not been removed. Shrinivas Moorty had been embarrassed for Jairam, at the vulgarity of the whole affair and was about to remark upon it in an undertone to Lily when he caught the expression on her face. Lily had been silently contemplating the flat all along, noting every detail, her eyes turning cold with what he thought was disdain, but understood later to be envy. They did not stay for lunch for she complained that the *homa* fumes had given her a headache. The beautiful heavy silver cup that she got as a gift from them she locked away into the cupboard immediately, as if she could not bear the sight of it. She refused to come to their house in the evening for dinner, despite his coaxing, despite his inviting Balu and Suppi as well. Her envy had angered him, he had thought it cheap. It was only later that he deduced that her silence and her sulks had been directed at him; if only he had played his cards right, if only he had been a little resourceful, she must have been thinking, that grand flat could well have been theirs, hers.

That evening, the newly consecrated flat was cleared of the remains of the morning’s *homa* and before dinner they were subjected to a variety entertainment show by the children of Jairam’s extended family. Jairam’s son and daughter, dressed in satin costumes had ‘break-danced’ in front of an admiring audience. As the tempo of the music increased, their dancing grew more frenzied – the boy’s spectacles misted over and he had to stop for a minute to hand them over to his mother, who watched anxiously from

the sidelines. That evening, standing on the balcony all by himself in their brand new tenth floor flat, distanced equally from the fun and games going on inside and the panoramic city lights which stretched below, he acknowledged that he had moved away irrevocably from Jairam and Geeta, at one time his closest friends.

‘My in-laws will be moving in with us,’ Geeta grimaced as she lit a fresh cigarette with the butt of the previous one. ‘I’ve told them not now. Let’s settle down first.’

He said nothing to that. Don’t grudge them their son’s success, he wanted to tell her, you were a late entrant. The image he carried of Jairam’s father, ‘Imperialist’ Radhakrishna, was of a short, bald, stocky man, in a banian full of holes and a dhoti turned up at the knees, eternally standing in the sun supervising repairs to his compound wall. Like his own house then, Jairam’s too had constantly been in need of repairs and there was never enough money to get it all done at once. ‘They’re old,’ he couldn’t help saying, ‘and will keep to themselves ...’

‘That’s what you think—’ her belligerence was more over his support for them. ‘His father keeps arguing with him for every little thing. And Jairam has so much on his mind these days ... take SVK’s illness. It’s Jairam who’s been doing all the running around – those sons of SVK’s are useless. BNS is paying for the treatment of course, but they turn to Jairam for everything.’

BN Swamy. His largesse accounted for so much. One of the first among their pre-university batchmates to go abroad after his degree, BNS was among the first wave of successful entrepreneurs to emerge from Silicon Valley – the real one. He was a legend in the business circles, the subject of endless articles in the press – even his stodgy middle-class marriage had been worried to its core on the pages of a gossip magazine for any symptoms of romance, and his success was documented in a case study which was essential reading in so many business courses; the young lecturer of Business Management, the one who dressed in a raincoat, taught the life and achievements of BNS with awe and pride – BNS had been a student of the National Trust College. And BNS had paid his debt to his alma mater in full. The Bennehalli Nagasimha Swamy Trust had decided to gift the college a new building to house the new courses to prepare the students for the new world. All facilities would be state-of-the-art. They would compete with the best anywhere in the world. ‘I barely had enough money to pay the fees and the principal waived them so many times. I owe whatever I am today to the National Trust College and my teachers,’ he declared when the college had a special ceremony to honour him. He was particularly grateful to SVK, the sun in the teaching firmament. And so it was BN Swamy who had under-written all the expenses of SVK’s long drawn-out treatment for a failing heart, down to his frequent flights to Madras to consult the specialist there.

It was over this, the sharing of the spoils of the BNS Trust in a way, that the rift in the staff committee had opened up and which would be fought to the finish in the 3 p.m. meeting, if Shrinivas Moorthy had his way.

‘As the administrator of the BNS Trust ... that’s another headache, it’s been giving him sleepless nights. He says he cannot understand the stubbornness of the committee, that they cannot read the writing on the wall ... he only wants the best for the college ... to abide by BNS’s instructions ...’

He grew alert at that half-wheedling tone, he remembered hearing it before. Surely Geeta was not trying to influence him to change his mind ... Had Jairam put her up to it? What did she think? That they were back in college and she was playing one off against the other as usual?

‘I’ve thought the matter through—’ he began rather brusquely and stopped. Jairam and Prabhakar had come out of the front door of SVK’s house followed by the others and they were all crowding into the porch. And then they saw SVK being carried out on a stretcher into the back of an ambulance that was standing outside the gate.

Shrinivas Moorthy hurried forward for he had not seen SVK at all; he was sidetracked into the garden by Geeta as soon as he entered the house. The ambulance doors banged shut just as he reached. Jairam got into the front with Lenin.

‘You boys,’ Mrs SVK clutched at Jairam and Prabhakar, ‘You are truly loyal to him ... you have saved my mangalya.’

