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Suspect

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He was tired of flying continuously for more than a day. It was more than half an hour since the aircraft touched ground. The runway resembled a highway with bumper to bumper traffic, not with cars but with aircrafts. Traffic jams in this megacity are not confined to roads; even airports are not free from them.

Damodaran peeled out disposable socks from his feet and started massaging them. Poor feet, he thought: pumped blood from the heart reached there last, narrowing down to a very thin stream. The feet are destined to bear the full body weight all through but they are hardly credited as an attractive body part. Damodaran, for a moment thought himself to be just a foot in society, for his earnest helping mind was never recognized. But he harbored malice to none.

He did not expect his son to come to the airport to pick him. Gautham never bought a car, not because he couldn't afford it, but because he identified himself with the urban class who refused to drive in the city,

considering it as a status symbol too. Damodaran found this strange for, he was only familiar with palatial cars and houses as status symbols of the affluent.

Damodaran insisted that his son not show up at the airport to escort him; alone he was quite capable of taking a bus connecting to the subway train to reach home. He hated all airports mainly for one reason: its security check. Each time he finished this ritual, he felt like being raped. Long lines in immigration counters tested his patience. During his past journeys, waiting for the checked in baggage was another irritant. After anxious moments when he spotted his bag in the conveyor belt, he felt as if he had won a lottery.

This time his luck ran out. After the last bag appeared in the belt, not finding his, he walked towards the missing baggage desk. He was annoyed when the Hispanic girl at the desk asked him to search the unclaimed baggage cluster before lodging a complaint. Not finding his bag there too, he cursed the airline in a raised voice attracting the attention of the people around. The girl from the desk rushed in there and pleaded with him to calm down. Keeping a cool demeanor, she searched all the bags and found one bearing his name tag. He was really embarrassed especially when she touched his check and said “getting excited is good in your old age but not for a stupid bag”.

“Naughty girl” he murmured. He felt sorry for forgetting to thank her. He was concerned about the state of his

mind. It was dreadful to think of Alzheimer's syndrome striking him.

After clearing the customs check and stepping out, he found the weather a little chilly. He stopped for a minute and pulled out his wind breaker jacket from the suitcase. While wearing it, he noticed some one picking up his bag. For a moment he was perplexed, afraid that some mugger was stealing his belonging, the usual thing in the city. Before shouting for help he was surprised to see the guy touching his feet and addressing him 'Dad' Now he was in shock identifying Velu Chami, his servant boy during his long years here. He had grown up to be a decent looking young man.

"Are you not dead?" this was what Damodaran wanted to ask him, but refrained from saying so.

For a moment Damodaran thought that Velu Chami's ghost was standing before him. He pinched his ear to make sure that he was in the real world. All these years he had believed that Velu Chami was dead. He was in a coma and in the ventilator last time Damodaran saw him. He didn't know that Velu Chami had narrowly escaped from the murder attempt on him. Not even in his dreams had Damodaran ever thought of killing anyone. However circumstances had forced him to arrange Velu Chami's murder. For a moment he wanted to forget those dreadful events.

With an artificial smile pasted on his lips, he queried Velu Chami.

“How did you know that I am arriving today?”

“Gautham asked me to pick you up.”

“Then why didn’t you bring him too?”

“Dad, I took a couple of hours leave and came straight from work. Picking him up from our house could have taken another hour at least, so I was afraid, I may not reach the airport in time.”

Damodaran was amused when Velu Chami mentioned his house as our house.

“Are you staying with my son?”

“No Dad, I am married now and have two sons, both toddlers. I bought a house at the outskirts. I am working as a cath lab technician. My wife Daisy is a nurse and we both work at the same hospital.”

Velu Chami narrated his life story in a few sentences.

“How do you do dad? Am seeing you after such a long time.... You won’t believe it, Gautham is your prototype, his voice, his walking style and gestures are exactly like yours.”

“Do you see him often?”

Damodaran definitely wanted to hear more about his son’s well being.

“No dad, occasionally he calls and that too to run some errands. Since meeting him first he has stepped into my house only once to borrow my car. He doesn’t like me dropping into our house without prior notice.”

Damodaran was not surprised to hear this. He realized that his son was very much a private person unlike him. Velu Chami mentioning his house as our house again amused him. He remembered the day when his imported servant boy stepped into the house for the first time. Tired and sleepy the twenty year old Velu Chami then was a nervous wreck. Except his mother tongue Tamil he knew no other language. Now he spoke Americanized English without any accent.

It was more than ten minutes walk from the terminal to the parking lot. Velu Chami was blabbering about how happy he was to see his foster father again. Every time he addressed Damodaran as dad a guilt ridden shock wave crept through his nerves. He was a cruel father who had tried to kill his foster son, Velu Chami wanted him to sit on the front seat of the car, but he refused. Old habits do not die easily. In his sub conscious mind Velu Chami was still his servant boy. Velu Chami removed the kids seat and play pen from the back seat, making room for Damodaran to sit.

“You are supposed to use the seat belt even if sitting in the back seat.”

Poor Velu Chami thought his dad’s refusal to sit on the front seat was to avoid the seat belt.

“You just drive, don’t bother about me.”

That sounded like an order rather than a request. Damodaran remembered his stern instructions while giving driving lessons to Velu Chami. How soon he has

turned out to be a seasoned driver, he wondered. He realized that cars were a passion for his young servant. He was not surprised when Velu Chami turned out to be a good auto mechanic also. Fetching old cars from auctions and selling them re fixed at a higher margin was more than a hobby for him. Acute technical sense compensated Velu Chami's lack of formal education. He learnt computer assembly work very easily, helping Damodaran in his part time business. No wonder eventually he landed in a lucrative profession. Cath lab technicians were well paid in this country.

Velu Chami was actually smuggled into this country. He was born illegitimate to a tribal woman. Damodaran met him while vacationing in a resort town at the Western Ghats. Room boy Velu Chami served him well. His smartness impressed Damodaran and wanted to tip him lavishly. To his surprise Velu Chami refused money and requested him to take him to America. Damodaran took it as a joke but collected his profile, knowing well that a visa to America is a dream for someone like Velu Chami. In spite of that, he gave word to the poor boy that his American dream would be fulfilled. Damodaran arranged a home music troupe to tour America. It was sheer luck that Velu Chami's role as a flutist, in a singer group was not suspected by the visa issuing consul.

Velu Chami happily became a part of the Damodaran family. Not knowing his real father ever, he was thrilled to call his saviour, 'dad'. Damodaran realized that America was surely a melting pot where Velu Chami had melted in

very easily. Within a few months he could speak English without any accent, for he had never spoken that language before. Even after living in this country for many years Damodaran still spoke English with an Indian flair which prompted his son to remark.

“Dad why don’t you speak like Velu Anna?”

His wife giggled on hearing this which really irritated him.

While relaxing on the car seat, half asleep, Damodaran was walking down his memory lanes.

“Dad, we have reached home.”

Velu Chami got out of the car and opened the gate wide enough to park inside. Damodaran noticed that his house looked new now. Gautham had done quite a bit of maintenance to the house. All the old windows have been replaced by new ones. He could smell the new paint, apparently beautifying the house was recent work to please his dad. The lawn was mowed well, he noticed an X’mas tree at the corner. He remembered planting it as a seedling years ago. He felt happy to see his house in better shape than when he had left. He could have sold it and got rich, but he was sentimentally attached to it, mainly for the reason that his son was born there. His dream of handing it over to his son was being fulfilled now. His current trip was exclusively to legally transfer the house title to him.

Gautham came out of the house and escorted him inside.

“Nice to see you old man.”

He touched his son's cheeks with trembling hands and smiled. Gautham's sense of humor didn't hit the target this time. For his son, he was an old man, for Velu Chami he was dad, Damodaran felt uncomfortable. He felt bad when his son didn't invite Velu Chami in. He couldn't help murmuring.

"How can you be so rude to him?"

"Come on dad, he hardly has time to sit around. Nice of him to take a break from work to pick you up."

Gautham was grown up, a real practical man, avoiding unnecessary niceties, he thought.

"Thanks Velu Anna, see you later."

Gautham shut the door and was in a hurry to serve dinner to his father and surprise him. He could hardly wait to receive compliments from his cooking guru, his father. Damodaran was pleased to see his favourite items on the dining table, Uncleben's rice, Sambar and fried butter fish. He was tired of blank airline food for the past two days. He hogged spicy food as if he was starving. He complimented his son.

"You cook better than me."

"Like father, like son."

He enjoyed Gautham's comment. He was proud of his son. Conversing with him brought immense pleasure. His views on American socio-political scene were novel. He was neither conservative nor liberal in his views, just an unbiased observer. When he was hired by a multinational

book publishing company as staff in its editorial wing, Damodaran was not surprised. He did groom him up to fit the job. He remembered his efforts to make him a voracious reader. The New York Times Index had been his favorite reading item when he had been just five years old.

Wearing his son's jogging suit, Damodaran went out for a morning walk at the park near his house. The narrow creek at the Parkside still looked filthy. Water pollution remains a curse of the city for ever. A very wide river flows through the heart of the city but drinking water was transported from Catskill Mountains, sixty miles away. He remembered driving through Rip Van Wrinkle Bridge near Catskill mountain years ago. The story of the mythical hero sleeping continuously for twenty years was one of his lessons in the school text.

Suddenly he was repulsed to see a dead pit-bull dog at the creek. He was sure that someone had deliberately killed the ferocious breed dog. Crime scene in the city was spread even to the animal kingdom, he thought.

Damodaran left the creek side and started walking through the park side road. Cars passing by had head lights on to beat the foggy morning air. A half hour walk tired him so he sat on the park bench but soon realized that the spot was where Velu Chami almost got killed. He got shivers thinking about it. A sense of fear engulfed him. He started walking back home, thinking about Carlos, the notorious pirate, whom he had hired to kill Velu Chami. Carlos goofed up at the attempt, like many times in the past on his pirate adventures. His pick up van missed

hitting Velu Chami who sensed danger on seeing a fast moving vehicle at the wrong side of the road aiming to hit him. He had jumped into the creek hitting his head on a rock. A profusely bleeding Velu Chami had been spotted by Carlos. The killer in him in a minute had turned as a saviour. Carlos had summoned an ambulance from a nearby phone booth but had not gone with him to the hospital. Instead he had rushed to the Caribbean bar where Damodaran was waiting anxiously to hear about Velu Chami's death.

"All fucked up, I missed that dud."

Carlos was panting. It took him a few minutes to explain the failed murder attempt. Damodaran was confused as to why Carlos had rushed Velu Chami to the hospital instead of letting him bleed and die.

"Killing ok, but seeing blood and doing nothing is not me."

Carlos was getting philosophical, but Damodaran thought the guy had turned cuckoo. He cursed his fate in believing a lunatic. But he still wanted to keep his word with Carlos for doing him a favour. He tried to pass him the paper bag containing the promised money in cash.

"Man, pay me only after he is dead."

Damodaran was confused about the value system that Carlos cherished. He wondered how extreme trends of cruelty and compassion could exist in the same person. Even after a few months of acquaintance he never knew where Carlos had come from. When asked about his nativity, he claimed to have more than two dozen

passports, mostly from Latin American countries. Passports were essential tools for professional pirates, he stated. Why had he left that lucrative profession and come to this country as a wet back doing odd jobs? He took some time to answer the question.

“Man, I was tired of killing.”

His cool answer was perplexing to Damodaran, but it triggered an idea in him to use Carlos to finish off Velu Chami. To his surprise, Carlos agreed to do the dirty job for a paltry sum.

Damodaran sneaked out of the Caribbean bar. Carlos didn't notice him leave. At that moment Damodaran didn't want to see Carlos any more in his life. He regretted meeting him which was the cause of all misery now. He rushed to the city hospital to check if Velu Chami was still alive. He had a glimpse of him in the ICU with the help of a nurse whom he had known years ago. Velu Chami was in a coma, but chances of recovery was good, the nurse told him. Hospital records showed Velu Chami as a Hindu man, however his name was missing. The cause of injury was recorded as a suicide attempt. Damodaran was relieved to see that, He then realized why Carlos had stepped in to save Velu Chami. Carlos had pretended to be the good samaritan to make the police believe that the accident was actually a suicide attempt.

Damodaran quickly came back after the morning walk. His usual quota of four miles walk was reduced to half. A tempest was brewing in his mind due to past events.

Gautham was waiting to have breakfast with him. Damodaran looked at the dishes; Raisin Brawn brand cereal, bacon, sausage, egg in sunny side up style, toast, coffee percolated. Watching enviously his son drinking strong coffee without sugar and milk, he commented.

“You are fully localized now.”

“I have to get a girl friend too for that.”

His son’s quip made him repeat what he earlier heard from him.

“Like father, like son.”

They laughed together. Damodaran really wished to spend the rest of his life with his son.

“By the by Velu Anna called, he wants to have lunch with you on Sunday.”

Damodaran wanted Gautham to go with him to Velu Chami’s house but he flatly refused.

“I have better things to do than eating his sambar and poriyal.”

Gautham made fun of Velu Chami calling him robot Chami.

After the fatal accident he almost turned into a Cuckoo, always chattering. He hardly remembered his past. He was lucky to get a saviour, an Indian priest employed as the hospital vicar, who took him home, nursed him for months till he fully recovered. Velu Chami couldn’t refuse when the priest asked him to marry his cousin sister who was a

nurse. Velu Chami was elated to marry a nurse who could always get a better alliance than him. The poor guy never knew that the priest had an illicit relationship with the girl and wanted the affair going smooth, even after her marriage. He was baptized as a Christian which he thought was the right thing to do in his adopted country. A regular church goer, he came directly from Sunday mass, accompanied by his wife and two children to pick up Damodaran.

“This is my dad and God.”

Velu Chami introduced Damodaran to his wife. His voice was cracking with deep emotions.

This time Damodaran had to sit on the front seat, the back seat was occupied by Velu Chami’s wife and two children. Damodaran felt uneasy during the hour long trip. He had a close look at Velu Chami who was dressed in full suit, apparently his church going dress. He looked well groomed and handsome. Damodaran couldn’t believe that this was the same guy he had once tried to kill. He pulled a sad face, looked outside ignoring the people in the car.

“Are you ok dad?”

He nodded his head, but his mind was unwinding events in the past.

Velu Chami’s transformation from a village boy to an urban youth was unbelievable. His over smartness occasionally bothered Damodaran but his wife had always a soft corner for their adopted son. She insisted on

sending him to school. After finishing high school equivalency, admitting him to community college was also her idea. The poor woman never imagined that college campus would convert Velu Chami to a play boy. Damodaran sensed this, noticed his car being misused by Velu Chami to entertain his dates. He looked askance at it instead of confronting him.

Velu Chami becoming a full time student made it necessary for Damodaran's family to hire a part time baby sitter to look after Gautham. That was how Neeraja, a Caribbean teen age girl appeared on the scene as the villainess. She was a nymph who, trapped Damodaran easily by her charm. Her closeness to him was never suspected by his wife. The innocent lady was only happy to see Damodaran cajoling with Neeraja since they didn't have a daughter. Neeraja started with giving back massage to Damodaran, gradually progressed to front massage and full fledged sex. Middle aged Damodaran felt like regaining his youth. Incidentally he found out that Neeraja was courting Velu Chami also. Furious, Damodaran shouted at her.

"How could you do this bitch?"

She coolly answered.

"You are no match for Velu He gives shock waves in bed."

Shocked, Damodaran realized that he was between the devil and the deep sea. He even contemplated committing suicide but looking at the genuine innocent face of his wife and thinking about the future of his son, he refrained

from it. He thought of firing Neeraja from her job but was afraid she would spill the beans. He discussed with his wife the option of asking Velu Chami to find his own boarding somewhere else, but she was adamantly against it. The thought of his wife getting a hint of his middle age sex adventure made him an alcohol addict. He was a regular in the Caribbean bar nearby where he had met Carlos for the first time. They became drinking buddies, and Damodaran found solace in pouring out his sorrows to an unknown Caribbean outlaw. He never expected Carlos to come out with a solution to end his worries forever.

“I will finish him man, give me a few bucks.”

In a drunken stage, Damodaran agreed to the deal immediately. But a few bucks demanded by Carlos turned out to be five thousand dollars. A shrewd Carlos insisted that he would act the next day itself, because he didn't want Damodaran to have second thoughts if given more time.

Velu Chami was narrating his life story throughout the long car trip.

“I was upset not seeing you around when I came back to my senses. Anyway it was very wise of you not to mention your name as my local guardian in the hospital records. Otherwise close to a million dollars could have become year liability as hospital bills.”

Damodaran was relieved to notice that Velu Chami didn't suspect any foul play in the tragic accident. He responded philosophically.

“Tragic events come together, not solo. When you were in a coma like a dead vegetable, I got a call from home informing me of a car accident, which caused fatal injuries to my parents. I had to catch flight in an hour’s time. At home, taking over the family business was a natural outcome. I never knew that I was leaving this country for good.”

Damodaran was lying. He had a blank expression on his face. Velu Chami listened carefully without asking any questions, which made Damodaran doubtful as to whether he believed all that he had heard.

“You could have at least informed me of your marriage.”

Damodaran complained without any sincerity.

“Dad, you don’t know how much I searched for your whereabouts. I was really surprised to see Gautham at our house last year. Before that some locals were staying there. I assumed you had sold the property. I did tell your son to inform you of meeting him.”

Damodaran was not surprised at Gautham thinking that finding Velu Chami was important news to convey.

Velu Chami’s ranch style house impressed Damodaran. The compound was big with many apple trees and a vegetable garden. He pretended to be thrilled on seeing all these, but immense guilt in his mind made him very uneasy. He was trying hard to believe that Velu Chami showing so much affection was real.

A typical Indian lunch was served. Velu Chami refused to sit with him at the dining table. He acted as his old servant serving him rice, curry etc... which he had done many years before. Now Damodaran was almost convinced that no trace of his past cruel act was visible anywhere around.

Velu Chami was upset when Damodaran wanted to leave soon after lunch.

“Dad please come back and stay with me for a few days”
Velu Chami pleaded.

Damodaran nodded positive but he didn't mean it. He was in a hurry to escape from the suffocation of blind love.



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Madhu S Nair is a prolific writer in Malayalam, Language of Kerala State in India. He published more than 25 books, mostly travelogues, dozen stories and two novels.

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