

ISSN: 0976-8165

# *The Criterion*

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed and Indexed eJournal

*9th Year of Open Access*

Vol. 9, Issue-VI December 2018

Editor-In-Chief- **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Between Continents

Pranav Mishra

Dear Miss Makena,

It's Srihari writing from Rajahmundry, India. Sorry I couldn't write to you earlier and now years have passed. Four years ago a month after you left, I sat with a pen and a notebook but Amma stopped me. I would know only later that she was jealous and insecure. She didn't want me to make you my friend. She wanted my world to completely revolve around her. Too bad on a mother's part but that's how she was. Not her fault actually. My father had made her life hellish and she was too wretched and lonely.

Then Amma said - no need to write to her. In this world you can't trust your own. How can you trust someone living thousands of miles away? In a different continent. In Africa. A savage at that. I am sorry but these were Amma's words. I had told her that you belong to a tribe.

Things have only grown worse since then. My father has become a perfect demon and our lives have destroyed. We are forever struggling, I and Amma, and it's all because of Nanna. He has forsaken us entirely. He drinks all day long, and seldom comes to visit us, which is in fact better. He has wasted everything he had, and he will try to rob whatever little is left with Amma. He is a demon, a monster, doesn't even love me, his only son, while I still love him.

But I don't want to talk about all that. I don't want to share my pain with you. Amma says it's useless. Yes, while she has urged me to write to you presently, four years later, she has specifically asked me not to share details of our lives here, which is nothing but pain.

Amma knows I am lonely and troubled, and she is no more able to support me emotionally. She is broken down herself, with her waning body and harassed soul. She coughs a lot these days. She has undergone tests and doctor says it's just cough. Supposedly it's a kind of cough that goes on and on and on. Amma has fits of coughing which may last up to ten minutes. She wishes to see blood in it. She says she wants to die early. Amma is not old. She is young. She is only thirty. A few years ago she used to be beautiful. My chest puffed with pride whenever she visited my school, dressed in one of her finest saris. Nanna never visited my school, not even at the time of my admission. Nanna was always driving buses on long routes. But perhaps he was using it as an excuse to avoid his responsibilities.

"I will die soon, Hari," Amma keeps saying. She doesn't know how she frightens me.

"What will happen to me, Amma?," I say. "Why you keep talking like that?"

When I say this, Amma watches me lovingly and kisses my cheek. She runs her fingers through my hair. She would usually not say anything further, but one day she did, watching me through her deep eyes.

“There is someone. He will guide you through every trouble if you don’t lose trust in him.”

“But Amma, I am already losing my faith in Him. It's because of the way He has treated us.”

It was late in the afternoon and we stood by our river, Godavari, you must remember. Amma watched the distant edge of the golden water with sadness in her eyes.

“We have to trust Him. What's written is written. We have to live with it and somehow find solace. If you trust Him, He may allow you to change your destiny.”

Amma talked this way.

She visits temples often. The one at Pushkar *ghat* she visits the most. The gigantic river gives her comfort. She is weak and river's greatness gives her strength. She feels a great connection with the river.

“I want to somehow get dissolved in her water,” She says.

You must remember how we worship Godavari. People from all over our state come to have a dip in her holy waters. *Ghats* here in Rajahmundry teem with these people on auspicious days. Godavari has a special significance in our lives. Millions of people depend on her water. It's because of her that we are rice bowl of India. Even those who don't believe in her holiness consider her with respect. She is a provider of life to millions of people.

In Amma's eyes she stands a bit higher. She bathes in her water twice every day and doesn't hesitate to drink it. “I want to feel like the river,” she says. Why? My little brain tells me it is because she always felt so suffocated in her life. She was brought up in orthodox ways by her parents who won't allow her to play with other children. They suffocated her childhood by making her cook food, clean the house and wash clothes. They were training her for a life of slavery. They didn't bother about her studies, and due to cooking and house-chores she would frequently miss the school. It didn't matter, since her destiny was fixed. Her childhood was not over when she was married to Nanna. She was only fourteen then. Nanna, who is her maternal uncle, is eleven years older than her.

Then Nanna used to take care of her. Though he never liked her bonding with neighbours, and she gradually became comfortable with a lonely life. Barely two years and I came out of her. Amma was sixteen then. She says she can never forget that pain, which she suffered lying over a wasted cot on a very hot day, in Nanna's village where she had been sent a month before delivery.

Amma was a meek creature and Nanna proved to be a stern husband, always serious, forever unsmiling. Though Amma gave her all to please him, Nanna would never praise her. In fact he didn't leave a chance to criticize her. Very bad on his part. Though I always found the house spotlessly clean, and also the clothes she washed. She never missed out on her duties, always did everything on time. She was the first to wake up in the morning and last to sleep at night. She slept for only five hours, despite working so hard. One of Nanna's pet grudges was food, though I always found the fish, *idlis* and *dosas* she prepared to be perfect. Many years ago, I must be five or six then, he stood up from the floor and threw the food on the plate outside the house.

"This is fish curry? This is called fish curry?" His angry voice came from outside.

Amma cried afterwards. She must be wondering how this man had changed after marriage. In her early childhood he would sweetly gift her toys. When she grew up a little he would take her to a round of Rajahmundry. He would treat her with *biryani*, fondly watching her face as she ate. He took her to the river for boating, and to cinema halls to watch movies together. It was always certain they would be married to one other, and Amma believed his gentleness towards her would continue. But here, he had become a dictator. He had developed big airs and he got angry pretty soon.

That was many years ago, Miss Makena. Those were still much better times considering our present condition. Now, I can only dream about those days and wish them to return somehow. Two days ago in the evening, we were walking by Godavari, on Godavari *ghat*, when Amma asked me, "what was that girl's name, Hari?"

"What girl Amma?"

"You talked about her four years ago. She visited your school with her friends. From Africa."

"Makena."

"Would she have forgotten you?"

"No, Amma. I am sure she has not."

"You can write to her, Hari. I regret you don't have many friends."

It's no longer her fault, Miss Makena. Fact is that I don't want to be with other boys. I want to be alone all the time, because they are happy and my life is destroyed. I find it hard to study even. My future is dark and uncertain. But Amma has asked me not to tell you about our sad matters. She just asks me to make a good friend who can cheer me in some manner.

Write to me Miss Makena. I will be impatiently waiting for your reply.

Yours sincerely,

P. Srihari Rao.

\*\*\*

Dear Srihari,

I am sorry to say I don't remember much of that one week spent in your country. I am really very sorry for that. I am a bit busy in my life and I am sorry I may not be a good candidate for a friend this time around, though I feel greatly flattered that someone so far across in the world found me worthy enough for friendship.

Take care, Srihari. It appears life is not too kind to you this time around. Keep the faith. Time is the best medicine.

Cheers.

Makena

\*\*\*

Dear Miss Makena,

I feel very sad that you can't remember me. I thought you would. For me it's difficult to imagine how you could forget me. We did boating together on the Godavari, for one full hour. You requested me to show you around my city, and it was you who gave me your address and asked me to write to you. I am sorry I couldn't write to you earlier and I have already told you the reason. Amma stopped me from writing to you.

It's terrible to write the way I am, but these days I am in very bad need of a friend. I may be sounding like a beggar. The fact is that I am very lonely, and Amma's company is no comfort at all, since her talks are always too dark. I didn't tell you last time but sometimes she rather talks very strangely, and that is apart from her wishing herself quick death. I am sure she is losing her mind. She faces too many demons. Loss of love and trust and the way her heart is shattered, the way her man treated her, the way her parents have chosen to neglect her, the vast loneliness, a sense of betrayal by her loved ones, her working as a maidservant in houses, and all these worries about future, a future which doesn't promise her anything. No she can't give me any joy, her life is too dark and devoid of hope.

Amma can't work in houses any longer. Last month two of her madams asked her to stop coming. Now there are only two houses where she works and we are barely surviving. And I am sure those two madams will throw her out of job too. It is because Amma coughs a lot. Her coughing cannot be cured. She takes syrups and tablets but it's no use.

I am ashamed, Miss Makena, because I am not able to help her properly. I can't work because I have to study, and she stresses on in too. Though in present circumstances I can't concentrate on studies. If you can remember, I used to be the topper of my class, and now it's difficult for me to get passed. I can't concentrate. Amma is so broken and sad, and then our desperate situation, the way Nanna has behaved with Amma and me, and all these fears about future, my inability to get a grip on life, my inability to help Amma. This all makes me deeply scared, confused and ashamed.

But I have started making some money Miss Makena, even though it is not enough. Whenever I strike a coconut tree, I climb it and chop the fruits down. That's a kind of stealing but I don't question myself this time around. I sell the coconuts for rupees twenty a piece, to people walking on the streets - our weather is always so hot, like yours. I sold sixty three coconuts last month which fetched me more than twelve hundred rupees. That came handy. Amma felt proud of me. She kissed my cheeks when I handed her the money. "My good son," she said. She was very touched. She immediately took me to Pushkar *ghat* and prayed to God at the small temple. In the night she told me the reason why she felt so happy. She felt sure I will not be lost after she is gone. I will stand on my feet in some manner.

I don't want to bore you with my sad talks, Miss Makena. Amma advised me so too. She says people run away if you want to share your sadness with them. You can hold them only by sharing your joys. Stupid Amma. How can I share joys if I don't have any? Perhaps she thinks I should be happy. But how, Miss Makena? Just last week, Nanna visited us after many days and he hit Amma right before my eyes. He was very drunk and angry and I could not meddle. I stood there at a corner while he hit my mother. I feel so miserable and so cowardly. Nanna watched me with anger and hatred and went away smiling in a mocking manner. I am sure that he feels I am a coward. Amma must be thinking the same way too. I feel terrible. I wish I could jump into the river from the middle of the long bridge. But I can't leave Amma like that.

Miss Makena, I don't want to bore you with our sad story. I will talk of something else. I have a dog, Miss Makena. I have named him Tiger. He lives in my street and he follows me out of its own. I share with him the *idlis* and *puri-bhaji* I eat from the roadside stalls. I want

to keep him with us but Amma is not in favour of it. Amma does not like dogs, more so because they keep themselves dirty and can't keep the place clean. And Tiger is a street dog after all. He lives in our street. It is a poor street where all houses are small and old. Tiger gets good quantity of rice from our street though. He is strong and can fight two dogs at once. It is heard that he had five brother-sisters but they all died in their childhood.

But why am I writing all this? Since you can't remember me it is not logical to write to you. I just got carried away. I am sorry for that. But you can write to me, Miss Makena, in case you remember something about me.

Yours sincerely,

P. Srihari Rao.

\*\*\*

Dear Srihari,

You appear a very interesting person. Actually, later I could remember meeting you and all that chatting and boating. And I would like to be in contact with you and know about your life. It's a beautiful thing that you share every aspect of your life so sincerely. Don't bother too much about hiding the darker aspects of it. You can consider me your friend.

Though I must tell I can't be so elaborate in my replies. I am busy in so many activities all at once. And I would like this communication to be largely constructive. I want to help you, Srihari, because there is no one to guide you out. Your mother is depressed and your father hardly cares about you. He in fact is the root cause of all your suffering.

I want a promise that you will try to do exactly how I tell you. I want my advices to be appreciated in some manner. Further, if I can say it, I think I am more practical than you, even though I am fourteen like you are. Nothing to it, I have stronger foundations. I have two mature people as my parents.

I would tell you one thing straight away. Don't curse yourself for anything. Anything, whatsoever. You are already doing great by living bravely in such harsh conditions and trying to help your mother as best as you can. Don't feel ashamed that you couldn't save her from your father's beating. If a stranger had hit your mother you would have certainly tried to protect her. Isn't it? It's just that you have a complicated relationship with your father, and you are so very confused regarding him. Srihari, I would ask you only one thing. Just concentrate on your studies. A lot of drama happens in people's lives. Life goes on. You keep

sticking to your guns. Your best bet is study. You focus entirely on your studies. If you succeed in getting a good job, everything will be fine again. Your mother will be happy and proud.

Education. That's your only bet, baby. So, leave all that. Stop cursing yourself, be strong and study hard. Study your ass off, man. Be the topper again. You can do that! Things will change, surely.

I will wait for your reply.

Your friend,

Makena

\*\*\*

Dear Miss Makena,

It has been a while since I wrote to you last. It is because I wanted to have something positive to write about. Miss Makena I have started studying hard. I am doing well in the class again. I can breathe now. I don't let worry ride over my back. Amma is happy watching me study though Nanna discourages me. Nanna started living with us again. The woman with whom he had been living kicked him out. Now he is here and drinks from late afternoon till midnight. Amma, I don't know why she doesn't kick him out, despite the fact that he only drinks. He beats her too occasionally, but only when I am away. I am sure Amma has cut that deal from him. He beats Amma whenever she asks him to go and earn something. Earning is a far off thing. He steals and snatches whatever is left with Amma. He stole Amma's silver anklets last week, and when she confronted him he beat Amma. Again I was away from the house. He says he would sell her in the market. And despite all these things Amma doesn't kick him out. Rather she looks happier than she used to be. It doesn't make sense to me. Nanna, he discourages me when I study. "Aye, are you my son or someone else's?" "Aye you won't become a collector studying so hard." "Aye I will sell you too. You will die lifting load." Nanna, he is a devil in the skin of a human being. Miss Makena, you are very kind but I still won't like to trouble you with our sad affairs. I won't like to waste your precious time with the talks of a filthy rascal.

But I must tell you that Nanna wasn't such a bad man earlier. He was a little bitter and stern but not bad. He used to love and take care of Amma. He gifted her saris, took her to the market and the river where they boated together. But then it all changed one day. Six years



ago Nanna was driving and a school van came in front of the bus all of a sudden. The bus collided with the van. Three children died in the event and Nanna had to lose his job. His driving licence was taken away too. He had to sell everything, except the little house, to appease parents of the dead and injured children, and the police. Much of Amma's jewelry was sold, as well as his little land in his village.

He then started drinking, while Amma began working as a maid in some houses. In the first couple of years he didn't beat Amma. I think he was too ashamed to face her. He used to have such high airs before her and now he was nothing. Then one day when Amma started cursing him for doing nothing to support us and drinking every night, from whatever little was left with him, Nanna hit her severely. I was to the school then. It was about this time you visited our school with your friends, Miss Makena.

Nanna used to have faith in God. He worshipped Lord Aiyappa and went for a forty one day fasting every year, forty one continuous days of restraint in which he would wear only black clothes, remain barefoot, remain celibate, remain a vegetarian, and he would have to control his anger too, though Nanna usually failed on this count. He visited Pushkar *ghat* and took dips in the holy waters of Godavari, all through the year. He worshipped God at the small temple, closing his eyes respectfully and chanting mantras in His glory, considering Him his master, his saviour. And now for years he has no faith in God. He curses God for whatever happened to him, uses dirty words for Him. And Amma says his days are numbered because of his bad talks about God. Miss Makena, I don't want him to leave the world. I want him to live, but like he used to be earlier.

Miss Makena, I don't want to bore you with my sad matters. As I told I have started studying hard and teachers appreciate my turnaround. Amma feels happy though Nanna keeps discouraging me. I don't bother because education is the only way out for me. I have to study hard and I must thank God I have been able to do it.

Tell me about your life, Miss Makena. Tell a bit about your parents and big sister. How is life in Nairobi? Do you visit your tribe?

Yours sincerely,

P. Srihari Rao.

\*\*\*

Dear Srihari,

Thanks for your interest in our lives.

We are fine here, absolutely. We live a fairly simple life and there are no complications. We are not rich but we are happy with whatever falls on our way.

My father is presently fifty years old, a really decent man and a believer. He never fails to visit the church on Sundays. He runs a modest drugstore where he remains busy from early morning to late evening. He has a forever smiling face and his sight gives us strength. My mother is a tenacious woman. She garners immense satisfaction from the fact that she has been with her husband through all walks of life. She has been selling flowers and bouquets since last twenty years. She is a positive lady and takes pride in being elegant and kind-hearted.

My parents are not money-minded. They concentrated on raising us well so that we become independent in our thought process and live balanced, fulfilled lives. They want us to love nature as much as parties. Well, you must have heard we are quite rich in wildlife. Lions, elephants, zebras, giraffes, leopards, hyenas, you name it, and plenty of deer and antelopes, all around Kenya. We are quite rich in that wild stuff. Kenya has few cities but many wildlife sanctuaries. We are proud that we host and preserve hordes of species, both flora and fauna, in a world which has damaged environment too quickly and in so many ways. Sadly, urban growth has started interfering with wildlife in Kenya too, but hopefully with remedial measures it will remain in check.

Srihari, wildlife is a wonderful way to connect with the earth. It may also help to expand our vision when we feel too confined and suffocated in our lives. We often visit Amboseli and Maasai Mara national parks. We greatly enjoy the safaris, spotting lions and other wild cats, elephants, zebras, giraffes and many other animals.

We are Maasais, a major tribe of Africa, the herding people, but we lost connection when my great grandparents left our village seventy years ago, after their two year old son was stalked and taken away by a leopard in the darkness of the night. They came to Nairobi where my great grandfather started working as a porter. They never returned to their village and we lost connection. Yes, but we haven't entirely forgotten who we are. We are Maasais, and to feel like ones we have posters of our people all over our little house: men clad in gaudy clothes (*shukas*) herding cows, men chasing a pack of elephants away from their settlements (*kraals*), crude sabers raised in the air, men and women dancing in a group, women huddled together outside a hut (*boma*), carrying babies on their waists. We have a few sabers and *o-rinkas*,

which are clubs made of wood with a rounded top and with a long handle. We have our garish, colourful *shukas*, our attires we crudely wrap around our bodies. We also have some Maasai jewelry bought from the Maasai Market here in Nairobi. We dress like Maasais on some important occasions and get photographed together. We dance together in Maasai's funny ways, howling and jumping around.

Nairobi is a rapidly growing city. It attracts people from all over Kenya. It's crowded, and it's hot located just ninety miles from equator. It is called the most intelligent city of Africa. We have very good universities here. People are cool and nice though crime is on the rise, perhaps natural for any populous and growing city. We have a river here, River Nairobi on which the city is named, but it is not as big and clean as your river Godavari. It is quite thin, not wider than a small canal, and very, very dirty.

I love my city for the warmth and openness of people, a cool swagger and plain tenacity of tribal folk. Of course somewhere down deep we were all tribal.

That's all about us and our lives. We are quite happy here.

I feel sympathy for you, Srihari. But again, we have to live with what we have, and like your mother says, you will be able to 'change' your destiny if you keep faith and focus. Sometimes we are required to fight. Sometimes life becomes a battle. We should feel fortunate that these are not real wars with all that firing and blood spilling. These are just little battles of our lives. We'd generally have a few options if we don't lose faith and focus.

Keep me posting about yourself, Srihari.

Your friend,

Makena

\*\*\*

Dear Miss Makena,

Sorry I got delayed in replying. I was deeply distressed.

A horrible event has occurred, Miss Makena. Nanna has died, and not in the way everyone thinks, because I saw how it happened. Amma killed him. She took him to the middle of the bridge after making him drink for hours. She fooled him. She cheated him. Nanna was feeling a little love that day – he had drunk too much and Amma had a hand in it. She kept offering him drink after drink, went out of the house to fetch it whenever his bottle got empty. Nanna was talking big. He was telling he would quit drinking and put everything straight. He would

find some job, maybe start some little business. Amma didn't believe in it, which was fine. I didn't believe it myself. Nanna was a terrible alcoholic and a demon and I was sure he would beat Amma soon, maybe as early as the next day. But that was not to be. Amma took him to the bridge, leaving me behind and studying, and Nanna went with her feeling so full of love. I followed after some time. That was bad. I should not have followed them. From this end of the long bridge I saw them walking towards the middle, perhaps to enjoy carefree view of the giant river, that's what I thought. Nanna's legs were staggering, so much he had drunk. After reaching the center of the bridge, Nanna climbed the middle of the railing and spread his arms wide. I could make it from afar. And just then Amma pushed him over the railing and he fell and made a big splash down below. I ran towards the centre, where Amma was shouting for help and crying. By the time I reached her the water below had grown calm. Nanna had disappeared from our lives. I could not jump into the water. It is too much down below and water must be so deep. I was frightened, and Nanna had already died. Water was absolutely calm. A couple of boatmen came hearing Amma's shouting and crying. In a short while they brought Nanna out. They headed for the river's bank and we ran over the bridge following them. After reaching Nanna, Amma hugged his cold body tight and kissed his face wildly. She looked destroyed. But I knew everything.

I am not able to tell her that I had seen her pushing Nanna over the railing. And she keeps giving her pack of lies, to me and everyone. "Why did he leave me?," she says crying. "How could God be so cruel?" "Why didn't He call me too? I would have left with him."

Things have not remained the same between us, Miss Makena. Things have destroyed. And if you can believe it, Miss Makena, I am deeply scared of her. I am scared of my own mother. I can't live with her. I see demon in her. I see her in my dreams. She stands right in front of me, hair open and spread wild. She laughs madly for a while, then stops and watches me angrily. "I will kill you too, just like I killed your father." She says. I am scared. I can't live with her.

She senses strangeness in my behavior. It's because I try to avoid her all the time. I am so frightened. If she comes near me I walk outside the house on one pretext or the other. When she comes to my cot and starts running her fingers through my hair I sit up and rush to the toilet. She stares me as I get dressed for the school. She must be wondering why I have become so distant from her. She doesn't know I had seen her. But she doubts it, because I had been following them and rushed to her when she pushed Nanna over the railing.

"What's the matter, Hari?," she asked me four days ago. "Speak up."

“Nothing, Amma,” I answered. “I am just sad.”

I don’t know what to do. I want to run away from her. I am too scared of her, Miss Makena. I don’t want to study. I don’t want to do anything. After the school I go to the bridge and stand on its middle. For a long time I watch the water below, which sucked my father and turned him lifeless. I don’t like doing anything. I feel suffocated everywhere. I wish I didn’t have such mother and father. I just keep cursing my destiny. I don’t know what’s my fault in all this.

Amma is even happier these days. How can she be after murdering her own husband? I will go mad, Miss Makena. I think of going to the police station and tell them what I saw that afternoon. I don’t know what I will do.

Yours sincerely,

P. Srihari Rao.

\*\*\*

Dear Srihari,

I am shocked!! But listen to me. Do exactly what I say. Be tough! Don’t be too sensitive!

I don’t want to comment on your mother’s action.

But Srihari, from whatever you told me, absence of such a father should cause no sense of loss in your life. He was a senseless drunkard who kept no concern for you and your future. Instead he blemished your life and terrorized you. He beat your mother, destroyed her youth. He wasted years of your mother’s life and yours. He ‘jeopardized’ your future.

Srihari, if you can do it, speak openly to your mother. She loves you. She is not your enemy. There’s no reason to fear her. She lives for you. She won’t do any harm to you. Don’t be too scared. Take her to the river one day and tell her about the matter. Don’t ‘curse’ her. Don’t be angry at her. Just tell her that you had seen it. Just see what happens.

In the meantime, get a grip on your life. Concentrate on your studies! Remember it’s your only bet. Things will be fine again, surely.

Your friend,

Makena

\*\*\*

Dear Miss Makena,

Thanks for your advice. I still have to overcome it fully but things have moved a little. I have started studying again. I am doing well there. Hopefully, I would be able to do well in exams which are to start one and a half months from now.

I have talked to Amma. I told her that I know she killed my father. She told me that she is terribly shaken by the event. She told me that she repents her action. She said she did it in a moment of impulse. She won't have thrown him over the railing if he had not climbed the mid of it. She won't be able to do it. That's her point. The railing is one meter high. But she may be telling a lie, Miss Makena. Maybe she asked Nanna to climb the mid of the railing. How would I know? And Miss Makena, she has been quick to find another man. She is in terms with an auto driver, who comes to visit her every day. He is a decent man, so I don't complain much. He won't harass Amma. He in fact gives her a bit of money.

Miss Makena, I feel totally alone. I can't connect with Amma, even though she doesn't want to lose me. And Miss Makena, I have lost interest in life. Living a life for my own sake appears a bit hard to me. It's because Amma was always a part of my scheme. But now, it is as if she doesn't need me that much. She is happy with Mister Sivaram. He is kind and will take good care of her. No, she doesn't need me anymore.

As usual, she is weak and coughs. But she is very happy these days. She wants to live more. She is in love with Mister Sivaram, who loves her despite she is so weak and coughs a lot. He takes care of her. He took her to a good hospital but result was just the same. It is just cough, the doctor says. The cause of weakness is Amma's eating scantily. She skips meals on many occasions. And she eats poorly even now, even though she is in love and wants to live. Perhaps she indeed repents killing Nanna. Life is very complicated, Miss Makena, and I can never understand it completely. I feel myself incompetent. And I feel I have no say in the matters. I feel powerless. I feel like a toy in someone's hands. No I don't want to trouble you anymore with my sad talks, Miss Makena. You are a fine girl and so happy in your life with great and loving parents. And I feel too little when I share my dirty life with you. It's so shameful to talk like I am doing now. I feel so little talking to a fine girl like you. You have a great heart. That's why you read my sad talks. I will never forget the support provided by you this time around.

Yours sincerely,

P. Srihari Rao.

\*\*\*

Dear Srihari,

It's alright. There is absolutely no need to be grateful. World is still not such a terrible place. We all hear people out and try to provide whatever little support we can. It's not such a big deal. In some ways it's one giant family.

Srihari, I would say you think rather deeply. You over-analyse. And that's why you lose focus. The situation is quite simple. I will break it down for you.

- Your father was a 'demon' and a major hindrance in your life. In his absence, you have more time, more freedom, less disturbance.
- Your mother who has lived a hellish life with your father is now free. Still young, she has chosen to find love in her life, which is the greatest thing to do in her place.
- Your mother is genuinely happy after so many years. Feel joyful for her.
- Forgive her. What has happened has happened. Accept her. You will feel free. And she will be freer and happier.
- Now as you have become free, you can concentrate fully on your studies.

That's it, Srihari. Don't complicate a simple matter. Chill, have a breather. Think about it and tell me if I am wrong.

Your friend,

Makena

\*\*\*

Dear Miss Makena,

I have thought about it a great deal. You are of course right.

I talked to Amma again and said I have no grudges with her – nothing whatsoever. I told her that I feel happy for her.

I have started studying harder, and I am hopeful to do well in the exams, which start in a couple of weeks.

Miss Makena, I can't thank you enough for what you have done for me. You are a practical girl, perhaps too mature for a girl of your age. I feel fortunate that I met you four years ago. Almost five now. You will do exceedingly well in whatever you choose to do in your life. You are so wise and balanced. And you have a beautiful soul. God will always help you.

I will be concentrating on my studies now. I have taken so much of your time with all my sad talks. I will never forget your kindness.

Yours sincerely,

P. Srihari Rao.

\*\*\*

Dear Srihari,

It's okay! You think too deeply about simple matters, and that's what you have to avoid. It's not a big deal. I had just been talking to you. Really not a big deal!

I would wish you find a firm footing in your life. I wish you reach a position where you can help a few needy people. For that you must find a footing. And I see you are heading in the right direction.

It's been rather nice talking to you. Of course you are a most interesting individual.

Thanks for all the good comments about me. Though I am sure I don't deserve them. :)

Write to me whenever you feel like. Don't feel shy.

Your friend,

Makena

\*\*\*

They never wrote to one other, never again. Srihari's grip on his life tightened: just as resolved, he devoted himself entirely to the studies and started excelling there.

In the meantime his mother healed to a great extent. In two years her coughing disappeared and her gaunt body started gaining weight. She and Sivaram, a widower for seven years, married one extremely hot afternoon, in front of the small temple at Pushkar *ghat*, in midst of fervent chanting of mantras rendered by a couple of priests, mighty Godavari scampering by their side. As they circled around the sacred fire, Srihari believed, with certain cynicism, that life could even be perfect. It was not to be: the lovers were not destined to have a child from the wedlock, and Srihari wouldn't be welcoming a step-sibling to the world.

Often Hari would walk on the mile-long bridge and head to the centre of it, where he would behold for long the gently rippling water beneath, which had devoured his father and robbed his life. Hari did miss his father, felt a stark sense of loss sometimes, despite Makena's convincing voice which had urged him to forget the 'demon' completely. Hari was well loved



by his father until the accident on the highway pushed him to the abyss of misery and gloom. It was unfortunate that the love that blossomed and bloomed in the first eight years of his life could not be completely erased, despite subsequent years of neglect and mistreatment.

He grew into a devout like his father once was. He worshipped Lord Aiyappa every day, visiting Pushkar *ghat* where sometimes he also embarked on a lone journey over the river's gently rippling back. Just like his father, he remained barefoot for the designated forty one days, donned black clothes and ate simple, vegetarian food. In the middle of November, he would visit Sabrimala along with millions of other devotees to pay homage to Lord Aiyappa and mark the end of the month-long observances.

Eight years since the last word exchanged between him and Makena, he starts working as a software engineer. Now he's hundreds of miles away from home, in Bengaluru city, ever so raucous and bustling, ever so restless and hectic. Srihari misses Rajahmundry like he has left his soul behind.

He misses the giant and firm presence of Godavari's water, and the serene, carefree and religious air spread all around. He misses boating on the muddied-blue waters which stood starkly azure on some clear mornings. He misses musing walking on sundry *ghats*. He forever misses his mother, her tender voice, her strong presence near him, the *sambhar* and rice prepared by her, the magical fish-curry and chicken fry. He misses the auto driver, his stepfather with whom he has been on terms of friendship lately. He misses the rustic bazars, hawkers selling fruits and flowers on the bicycles, he misses coconut trees, he misses ambling on the long bridge which marks the last journey of his father. He misses gulping rose-milk at Main Road, he misses the sight of comely ladies wrapped in colorful saris, he misses the paddy farms skirting the little city, he misses the various religious processions, the frantic drum-beating and people dancing wild, he misses crowds thronging the sundry cinema halls, the land of movie-crazy folks, large movie posters stuck on giant hoardings. He misses the banana wholesale market half a mile from Godavari *ghat*, he misses the trains hurtling down the old railway bridge, the stacks of flowers sold outside the sundry temples. Well, he misses too many entities to be counted, simply. Though he has learnt all the tricks of survival, and he is aware that the happiness often lies in the word 'compromise'. Makena's words remain with him, too. He treats life more simply, a safe distance away from over-analysis, takes it just as it comes.

But inevitably, he has turned into a sombre soul, a fact often rued by his mother, presently hundreds of miles apart, choosing to stay on in Rajahmundry - the river's absence would be

too much to suffer for her, and besides she can't leave her husband who refuses to leave the rustic, religious town.

Two years later, in a gesture to appreciate the contribution made by fresh employees, Magnus Soft, the software firm where he works, decides to reward them with a five-day trip to any corner around the globe. In Srihari's case it has to be African wildlife, because he has been a bit obsessed with it since Makena introduced him to it ten years ago. He often watches wildlife on television, sometimes for hours. It's as if he is equally present in Serengeti and Maasai Mara as in India. He also watches videos on African tribes, and secretly wishes to live a fraction of his life like them, wrapping gaudy clothes around his body and painting his face with peculiar patterns, herding cattle and chasing wild animals with his crude sabre. He wishes to dance aboriginal dances, huddled with the tall, dark and tenacious tribesmen, howling strange sounding syllables loudly and with passion, circling around the fire quivering in the centre. Strangely unaware, through the love of wildlife and tribes, he feels close to Makena somewhere deep inside.

Sometime later, the craving to visit the wildlife morphs into a desire to meet Makena. He decides to shock her by a surprise visit, so unlikely she would perhaps swoon in disbelief. "Miss Makena! Miss Makena!" Srihari, for some careless moments wonders if it could be more than mere friendship, now, this time around, though he immediately smothers the demon before it can engulf his terribly lonely heart. Sanity is his most cherished treasure, and he can't afford to dent it in any manner. He is too sane, too wary of waywardness, and he won't have lingered about the idea of meeting a distant friend, living shores apart in Africa, had it not been feverishly supported by a few friends he has made at Magnus Soft.

But he can't restrain his imagination from painting how she would look today. She must be a beaming girl of twenty four. Dark like coffee beans, tall and slender, gorgeous, brimming with vivacity. He fancies her in a pink frock, smiling radiantly at him, spreading her delicate arms to hug him warmly. Hari finds such imaginings harmless. He even fancies her kissing his cheeks, joyous at his wellbeing, relieved, ecstatic. He fancies smelling the fragrance oozing from her neck, as she hugs him tenderly.

The plane flies over the great Sahara desert, hundreds of miles filled with golden sand-dunes, miles over miles of sandy, lifeless vista, eternally and endlessly spread. Though for Hari, flying high up in the sky, it's just dreary, dead calm hanging miles beneath. His heart pounds wildly in restlessness. Too close now, only three hours from Nairobi, and he chooses to ask the question more bluntly this time around, almost dangerously: could it be more than just

friendship? He can't answer frankly, he knows. Further he is no condition to judge impartially, which is because he feels too lonely all of a sudden, he almost *needs* her in his life.

"But why only her?," he questions again.

"But why even ask such stupid questions? It's not logical to think this way. She must have someone in her life, surely. She is so beautiful and intelligent. And maybe she is already married."

"But what if she is not! What if she doesn't have anyone in her life?"

"But it's not good to think that way. You are just going to meet a friend."

"But what's the harm in considering a possibility?"

"Are you a fool, Hari?"

"But what's so wrong in it? You are traveling so far across to meet her, letting go the opportunity to visit Europe. You could be in London, or Paris, but you chose to meet her instead, in Nairobi."

"Liar! You were coming here anyway. To visit the wildlife."

"Whatever. It's a big thing. I am traveling so far across, and I am going to meet her."

"But what about *her*! And you haven't even talked to her, not even informed her of your visit. What kind of a fool you are, Hari? She may be out of town. She may be somewhere else. Maybe they have changed their location. And again, what if she has married and gone away?"

"There's something called destiny", he argues. "If she is in my destiny, nothing can stop it. All these questions would stand baseless."

"Oh!"

"It's not a joke. I am damn serious."

"Oh! Srihari is serious. What gives him the right to be so serious about her?"

"I don't know. But I will stay positive. And you shut up! You are trying to discourage me!"

"Huh!"

Certainly, these have become the most torturous three hours of last many years of his life.

\*\*\*

The plane lands smoothly and Hari breathes a sigh of relief. But by the time he emerges out of the airport his heart is consumed by wild panic. The dreaded moment is coming soon, just half an hour apart. He is soon inside a yellow cab which crawls through the stifling streets bustling with cars and buses, the pavements filled with pedestrians. Transported to a different

world with black faces all around, and yet the spectacle feels familiar. People are dark in Rajahmundry too, though not ebony but caramel. Even it's more than just familiarity: he feels a sense of camaraderie, perhaps because he had nurtured a distant friendship with one of them years ago. Amicably he chatters with the cab-driver, tries to gather more about the place, avails from the mid-aged man a discourse on how times have changed in Nairobi, rendered in a highly discontented voice which almost carries a sense of doom.

"The diseases you talk about," Hari informs him in the end, "are global. Surely times have changed. I feel it more strongly because I am from a traditional place filled with simple, religious folks. There little things satisfy souls in big manner. In the rest of the world, nothing is enough, simply. It's just an endless race where present is never lived. And what's life apart from the present moment, this very moment?"

Soon the cab halts in front of a modest house crowned with a triangular, tiled, red roof. And a few moments later Hari stands before the door, his heart racing like a wild horse. Waiting futilely for the pounding beast to calm down, he raises his arm and pushes the bell-switch. Ting-tong, ting-tong.

It's an elderly lady who opens the door. She is about sixty, a little plump, watches the young man before her curiously, almost frowns.

"Does Miss Makena live here?"

The lady in the casual gown measures him severely for a moment.

"Who are you?" Her voice carries astonishment, and not modestly. Leslie is enthralled. The family has not left the house.

"You must be Miss Makena's mother," says Hari firmly. "I am P. Srihari Rao. I and Miss Makena had a bit of friendship many years ago. I hope she had told you something about me."

The old lady's mind appears to gather something. For a moment she scowls, judging Hari critically, pushing him a little towards discomfort. But then she smiles heartily, exhibiting the spotless perfection of her milky white teeth. She lurches forward and grabs his hands in hers. Hari is shy but enthralled. The lady's eyes look deeply through his, jubilant smile still lurking on her dark-brown lips. Hari is overwhelmed with strange forces. She appears powerful in a peculiar way. Eyes that lurk out of the ebony skin all around, they are sparkly white and intense. Her smile so generous and pure, sweeps him with feelings of such strength he has never experienced before.

She almost drags Hari inside the house, where she makes him sit on a cheap, beige couch. She herself sits on the accompanying couch opposite and beholds the guest's face with love and fondness, which he, now, considers a little overblown. The warmth exhibited by the old mother appears quite out of place: strictly and honestly speaking, he was just a distant pen-friend to her daughter, over a brief period of nine months, and almost an eternity ago.

Hari feels uneasy on other counts too. It's the solitude inside the house. He can sense from the scantiness lurking everywhere the lack of people which is so very disheartening. It's certainly not a family living here. Further he can spot a couple of doors closed, perhaps no one lives in those rooms now. The posters of Maasai life are absent. The walls are empty. There is a dull blankness to the air which signifies solitude and inaction. It's unmistakable. The daughters have perhaps married and gone away. The solitude is tormenting, and Hari is furious at himself for coming here, so wastefully, so blindly, like a dreamy fool who deserves a thousand lashings. The lady quickly discerns discomfiture and the sense of tragedy from his face. Though she says nothing in that line.

“You came all the way to meet Makena?”

“Not really,” replies Hari with forced sturdiness. “I was anyway coming to visit the wildlife over here. Then I decided I will just meet you people.”

“Or Makena?” The old, dignified lady smiles teasingly, a perky glimmer in her eyes. Hari senses hope.

“Where *is* she?,” he blurts out suddenly, as if the volcano inside him has erupted, as if the river has shattered the dam.

The old lady smiles for a moment, but too wryly to consider comforting.

“She was never there,” she lets out with a blend of sternness and glumness, her eyes unmoving. She clenches her fists and rests them on the couch, arms stiff like bamboo staffs. Then she hangs her head down gloomily. Her despair is infectious, Hari contracts a sense of trauma, but he is too agitated to feel it too deeply.

“What does that mean?”

The chubby, dark lady in a flowery gown lifts her head and looks towards the open window, sideways and away from the visitor.

“She died a couple of months after her return from India,” she informs in a jaded voice.

“They all died. In a road accident. A bus lost control and hit them when they were returning from the church.... I survived. Because I didn't go to the church that day. I was burning in fever, lying on my bed and shivering. I am the cause behind their death. They were not going

but I forced them to go. 'I am *fine*,' I said. 'You show yourself to God. You have to do it.' They went and never returned."

Hari understands everything in a flash.

"It was you?," he asks, customarily.

She nods her head, looking out of the window still, eyes frozen, watching miles ahead though the vision is blocked by the medley of houses across the street.

"Can I go to the toilet?," Hari asks in a heavy voice.

She watches him, and smiles, again, her teeth glittering white, perfect pearls arranged in two neat rows. Her eyes sparkly and spotless, yoke-white that almost glimmers. If Hari weren't too agitated he would have sensed years and years passed in solitude, living with the ghosts of the departed ones, at one corner a girl dancing, at another the other giggling, and in front of her a loving partner smiling assuredly. Years and years of absentia, conquered through the tenacity of iron, a pious kind of silence, a penance kind of suffering. Selling flowers and bouquets outside sundry malls and plazas, her only source of satisfaction and beauty. Perhaps Hari won't be able to realize what his visit means to her. She had started loving him as a mother, to somehow fill the gaps of motherhood in her life. She was always too cautious writing as Makena, because she didn't want his lonely and depressed soul to fall for her daughter, who was never really there. But it proves futile in the end, because love is a mysterious demon who skulks for years under your skin, and then one day it starts oozing out at the slightest pretext, to hound you forever with a sense of loss. Hari weeps inside the toilet, leaning over the basin, like an unrestrained river, not totally aware of the reason why he cries. He is confused. And he feels it's confusion that makes him cry, not love. Love could not be there, he believes now. It was just a distant pen-friendship. And he had done away with it years ago. No, it could not be love.

A hand falls on his back and starts moving there gently.

"She was never there," the old lady says tenderly. "I am sorry. I could never imagine it in my dreams. That you would one day make a visit. It is so far across. We live in different continents."

Hari grows calm. The lady fills him in her arm and drags him outside the toilet. They sit again facing one other. Now it's Hari's turn to look out of the window, while the lady beholds his face with a mixture of feelings: motherly love, sympathy, a vague fear and guilt.

"How is your mother?," she asks him tenderly.

"She is fine," he answers. "Better than she could ever be. Mister Sivaram is a very nice man."

“Mister Sivaram?”

“The auto driver Amma fell in love with.”

“Yes, I remember.” She watches Hari’s sombre face for a while, then asks, “are you sturdy now?”

“Yes,” says Hari pensively, still looking out of the window, a bit lost within himself. “I feel good that I came here... I am very thankful to you. It was you, not Miss Makena. I am sad to hear about her death... and the rest.” When he turns his head towards the elegant lady after some time, he looks in perfect control. “Can you show me around the place a little? And can I stay here for five days?”

The lady beams joyfully, displaying her white pearls with unabated candidness. Her flat nose puffs sideways in excitement.

“You can stay here for *eter.. nee.. tee!*,” she hollers jubilantly and darts up from the couch to get ready for the outing.

The lady’s enthusiasm proves to be infectious. Hari feels free and joyful, the confounding ghosts that were chewing his soul run away liberating him. Though he feels he still has to find a grip on the newly-discovered reality.

\*\*\*

Soon they are out, scampering together on the street outside, which is abutted by a medley of modest houses on either side. They chatter blithely, walk as if galloping. The lonely, old lady, presently dressed in a floral frock, appears a bit crazed, for she stops once in a while to inform her neighbours about the young man’s visit.

“India!,” she howls. “He has come from India! To meet *me!*”

Not for you, old lady. But anyway. It was you, after all.

They trot on, deciding to walk rather than hiring a cab, the first destination the graveyard where Makena, her big sister and her father have been buried. Then they would head for the church visited by the entire family years ago, and now frequented solely by the chubby lady. Afterwards the host would take him to the spots where she sells flowers. In the evening, maybe a gathering with a few of her neighbours, drinks and succulent delicacies, music and dancing. Hari feels a tad uneasy: the event promises to be a little louder than his taste. But he gives in, sets his internal stopwatch for it, and it goes tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. A few moments later he waits for the party feverishly.

The lady also offers to take him to Maasai Mara, and he agrees to the proposal with the enthusiasm of a toddler.

Hari thanks himself for visiting Nairobi. Completely triumphing over the loss of Makena, who now appears an imaginary wall between him and the real voice, he readies his mind for five days filled with events and discoveries, bolsters in his mind the resolve to visit his elegant friend once every couple of years.

It's an old friend, or a new one? He is still not able to decide.

\*\*\*\*\*