

Muse India

Lakshmi Kannan: 'Savvyasachi Square'



Lakshmi Kannan

"Do you have the key?"

"Hmm..."

"Take the umbrella too. Come on, hurry up! I've to leave at once. It's getting late."

"All right Vanaja. Bye."

"Amuda, come on. We'll have to take two tube trains and then there's that bit of walking from the tube station to school. It's getting awfully late", said Vanaja, pulling her daughter Amudavalli by the hand as she turned to go, handbag slung on her shoulder.

"The man forgets the key one day, his coat the next day... If this old man catches a cold, then it's me who has to look after him, attend on him... Hell, what a life, having to deal with an infirm old man," Vanaja cursed under her breath she climbed down

the stair. Velayudam could hear her clearly. He heard every word.

He closed the front door and went to the kitchen to make some coffee on the electric stove. O, I forgot again, he told himself. Forgot to put on my sandals after my morning prayers. How it gave me a shock the other day when I touched this electric stove on bare feet. Perhaps my feet were wet. My son Arumugam ganged up with my daughter-in-law

Vanaja and pounced on me...

"Can't you be a little careful" they shouted. "You should've some practical good sense," chided Arumugam.

Carefully, Velayudam wiped his feet dry with a towel, pulled the socks over them and wore his shoes before switching on the electric stove. He made a hot cup of coffee for himself. After coffee, he put on a large overcoat and remembered to take the house key and the umbrella before stepping out of the apartment. He pulled the front door behind him and heard it locking itself firmly with a metallic 'click'. O God save me, he muttered, taking a deep breath of relief. Every time Velayudam came out and heard the front door lock itself shut, he nearly lost his life for a moment and got it back all over again.

During the early days of his stay in London, there were many instances when he would get confused about locking the main door. He would get flustered and finally forget that he must take the house key every time before stepping out of the apartment. He would often lock himself out. Since he couldn't get into the flat, he would wander around the neighbourhood, and then get back to the apartments to wait outside for hours on end for Arumugam and Vanaja to return from work. Predictably, they would be furious. 'How very silly of you to have forgotten the house key. Just look at the way you're standing, right in the middle of the road. It's so embarrassing. Everyone will laugh at us.'

Humph! Some big shame. Old hypocrites, the husband and wife. They put on a big Front

for the world and talk so euphemistically. On the rare occasions when they happened to talk to any of the white Britons in the neighbourhood, how the two of them bragged about their so-called 'cultural values.'

'In our country, we always take care of our elderly parents. Because that's the way we're conditioned. It's our culture, our duty too. In the West, elderly

people are dumped in Old Age Homes so mercilessly. What a callous thing to do! We can't even imagine a situation like that,' they would go on, very pleased with themselves. And the white Britons would make some polite noises of appreciation, just to keep up appearances.

Valliamma, my wife. She's gone now, peacefully. Only I'm left behind to suffer like this. I should've had the good sense to stay back in my own village in India. There's Kuttan in the village, Valliamma's brother. And then there's my uncle, my mother's brother, who is of course years older than I. I've so many relatives in the village. Whether we had internal family feuds raging within a household or not, there was always the comfort of being in one's own place. The comfort of belonging. How can you hope to find the coziness of your own place in a foreign land? But Arumugam had nagged me continuously, without any respite:

'Appa, come and stay with us in London,' he had pleaded. 'We'll show you around the places. What does this Tamil Nadu have to offer? It's so dry, dirty and dusty. Come and see what living in Britain is like. It's a land of plenty, it really is. All items from milk, fruits, vegetables and meat, down to housing are excellent,' he said.

Arumugam lured me with these words and here I am a mere convenience. I look after their two small children, my grand daughter Amudavalli and my grandson Shanmugam until Vanaja, my daughter-in-law returns from the school where she teaches. I heat milk for the children, coax them to drink it up, I warm their food and serve them, tell them stories as I tuck them up in bed. Vanaja works as a teacher in a small, primary level school. What other job can she get with her indifferent academic background? A few Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis of modest means got together and started a small nursery school in a house. And for that, Vanaja struts around and always talks about her 'career'! And that spineless Arumugam just hangs on her words, wagging his tail. How we wrapped him up with love and care when he was small, Valiamma and I.

Velayudam avoided the elevator and climbed down the stair. A bright sunlight greeted him outside. He did not open the umbrella. He walked across to the West Hampstead tube station and bought a ticket for himself. He followed the direction of the route in the deep Pink Line, the Metropolitan Line, and boarded his usual train. In front of him was the usual morning scene of passengers in the train, deeply buried in the day's newspaper spread out in front of them. Only a few faces were visible in between the papers. Men and women with glassy

eyes stared ahead without any expression on their faces, their bodies swaying to the rhythm of the train's movement. How do they live like this, without exchanging even a word with each other, wondered Velayudam? Travelling the whole day beneath the surface of the earth in this underground tube has perhaps robbed their faces of blood. They look so pale...

Velayudam noted the names of the stations flitting through the windows. He got down at Baker Street and scanned the railway lines again, drawn in different colours on the wall for the different routes. He followed the Brown Line, the Bakerloo Line, and slowly walked towards the platform. The train puled up at the station. Velayudam boarded it and shortly afterwards got down at Embankment.

It was somewhat chilly. He bought a coffee in a small kiosk. Yuck! It tastes like bitter medicine. They just kill the taste of coffee because they keep on boiling the coffee extract endlessly. Ah! The coffee Valliamma made. It was truly fit for the gods. And she would serve it along with *idlis*¹ soft and white as the flowers of *thumbai* ². She would tear off a piece of white cloth from an old, well-washed *dhotie* ³ and steam *idlis* in them expertly. Then she would percolate coffee and with the first extract, make coffee with freshly heated milk. As you sip that coffee, the aroma will pierce your nostrils and a soothing warmth will wash over your whole body pervasively. It was a coffee that tapped alive the life force within you.

He looked at the remaining coffee in his paper cup, crushed it before throwing it away in the waste bin. Climbing up the stair of the tube station, he came out and strolled towards St. James's Park at a leisurely pace. Being a working day of the week, the streets were not too crowded although some people could be found walking briskly up and down the street. Nobody seems to notice me, thought Velayudam. I walk like a corpse, a living corpse. Even if people happen to see me, they dismiss me with just one sweep of a glance as if to say, oh, there goes yet another black man.

Black or not, I'm real to myself. This colour which unsettles them, the colour of my dark skin, it's a truth. This skin feels the heat of the sun just as it feels the cold of the snow. It's a skin that smarts painfully from the stinging words of Vanaja, it's a skin that winces under the harsh words of Arumugam who always gangs up with his wife. But the skin is real. Real.

Velayudam's legs ached. The road to St. James's Park seems to be unusually long today. Or have I grown tired this early in the morning? I did a

mistake in choosing to walk. After getting down at the Embankment, I should've caught a train on the Green Line. That would've brought me straight on to St. James's Park. It was foolhardy of me to opt for walking.

It was quiet in St. James's Park. There were only a few people around. Velayudam sat on a bench under a tree. In front of him was a small pond with ducks swimming to and fro. They dipped their bills in the water and quivered as they shook themselves free of the droplets of water, much to the delight of the small children who played around the pond, watching the scene. Their mothers had spread a cloth over the grass and taken things out of the picnic baskets. Sandwich, rolls, apples, cartons of milk, chocolates and fruit juices were laid out on a cloth. Velayudam was surprised to see some of them throw crumpled paper on the grass. O dear, thought Velayudam, I've seen only Indians do that.

A few tourists strolled along the narrow pathway, camera slung over their shoulders. On the bench, next to Velayudam sat a Briton munching something, but deeply engrossed in

reading his paper. The sunlight was pleasantly warm. Ah, what bliss! It is so peaceful to get out of the house to the great outdoors. But to reach this place every day one has to get into the tube train.

"It costs 2.50/- pounds for every return trip by the tube. Sheer waste of money. Why don't you sound him about it?" Vanaja had asked Arumugam.

"What? What're you saying? Who spends 2.50/- pounds every day?" he asked. "Your father, that's who!" – Vanaja.

"Oh, father just goes out to get some fresh air. What'll he do here, cooped up at home all day, with me returning home from office so late?" – Arumugam.

"Now look here. We simply can't afford all this expense, let me make that very clear to you. Just think of the cost of living in London. Our house rent alone seems to swallow us up, whole. Then there's your father, occupying the living room the whole day. When my friends visit me, I can't find any place for them." – Vanaja.

"But it was you who were obstinate about our moving into a two-bedroom apartment. You're the one who planned that the children must've one bedroom for themselves, that we should have the other. That leaves only the living room for my father. Now you turn around and...O.K. then. Shall

we look for a three-bedroom flat?" – Arumugam.

"What! Have you gone mad? Here I'm telling you that we can't even afford our present lifestyle...Now listen to me. Are you going to talk to your father about the daily wasteful expenditure of 2.50/- pounds or shall I?" – Vanaja.

"O no. I'll talk to him, I'll tell him Vanaja, leave it to me. I'll try to persuade him that it's enough if he goes out twice or three times in a week. All right?" – Arumugam.

"Humph!" – Vanaja made a face and left the room in a huff.

Arumugam kept his promise to Vanaja. Gingerly, he broached the subject with his father. Velayudam could not absorb the words that dropped out of Arumugam's lips. He stood there as if he was struck deaf for a moment. Only his eyes noted how Arumugam gulped his words midway, how he repeatedly blinked his eyes.

"Appa...Appa..."

The small boy, Arumugam, tugged at the edge of his father's shirt.

"Yes my child?"

"Appa...I...I..."

"Come on, tell me. What do you want, my child? Why do you hesitate so much?"

The small boy lowered his head and remained silent. Velayudam kneeled on the floor to bring himself on a level with the boy. He looked at him straight in the eyes and asked:

"Arumugam, what is it?"

Shyly, little Arumugam pointed at the ice-cream vendor.

"Is that all?" said Velayudam. He bought him an ice cream. Arumugam wolfed it down eagerly.

"Want to have another?" asked Velayudam. Arumugam remained silent. Velayudam bought him one more ice cream. Arumugam was delighted. Suddenly emboldened by the

mood, he asked his father: *"Appa, there's something called cake in that shop, in light green, pink and white colours. What'll it be like?"*

Instantly, Velayudam bought him the pastry. It cost him Rs.3/-. He realized then that he did not have

enough money left for the bus that would take them both home to Tambaram. Father and son walked their way back home that evening.

"Are you tired of walking, my child?"

The little boy just lowered his head and said nothing.

Velayudam kneeled and looked at his son. *"Arumugam, are you tired in the legs?"*

The boy shook his head. Velayudam pulled him close, gathered him up in his arms and hugged him. He lifted up the boy and made him sit on his shoulder. The boy's slender legs dangled on both sides of his father's strong, muscular shoulders. Making sure that the boy was secure on his perch, Velayudam walked, carrying Arumugam all the way home as if the child was light as a basket of flowers. On reaching home, he lifted Arumugam's head by his chin and said: *"Dear child, don't hesitate so much to tell me whenever you want to say something. I'm your father after all, am I not?"* he said, patting him lightly. Arumugam flung his arms around his father's neck and buried his face on the strong shoulder.

Now the adult Arumugam stuttered hesitantly in front of his father. He avoided meeting his eyes. But the same Arumugam could easily snap and bark like a dog, hiding behind Vanaja whenever she cared to shout at Velayudam.

"Excuse me, what did you say?" asked the Briton who sat on the bench next to his, reading a paper.

"What? But Sir, I never said anything!" replied Velayudam in English, beside himself with surprise.

"Sir? Why do you call me Sir? Anyway, I've been looking at you for sometime now. I noticed that you were saying something. I also thought that maybe you spoke like that, without even looking at me because you've a problem with your vision. Do you?" said the man, rolling the paper in his hand.

Velayudam felt the blood rushing to his face. His body shrank back in embarrassment.

"No, no, there's nothing wrong with my vision. I can see properly," he said. "And I don't think I said anything, I mean, I didn't speak at all."

"Very well, then. I just enquired to find out if you needed any help, that's all. Take care. Good day!" smiled the man and walked away from the place.

Velayudam looked at his retreating figure for a moment, and then he shook himself. How very disgraceful. I've been sitting in this park, a public place, and talking aloud to myself. What utter idiocy! It's mainly the consequence of sitting in one place for a long time, with nothing to do. Let me walk around a bit, he thought and got up from the bench.

Velayudam walked a bit and felt a dryness in his throat. He bought himself a tea from a small kiosk and slowly strolled along the Birdcage Walk. Traffic flowed on the Horses Guard Road to his left. Velayudam walked towards the direction of the Spurt Road although his aching feet bothered him. In the park there were a few benches that lay unoccupied. He sat on one of them facing the Spurt Road, which was full of tourists walking towards Buckingham Palace, the palace of Queen Elizabeth. He glanced at his wristwatch. There are still ten minutes to go for eleven o'clock. The 'Changing of the guard' ceremony at the Buckingham Palace, complete with a music, band, drums and what not will start in another ten minutes. That was one reason why the people on the road were hurrying towards the palace. When I was new to London, Arumugam brought me over to this palace to see the 'Changing of the Guard'. What a grand spectacle it was.

Velayudam sat on a bench and closed his eyes. He could hear the music now. No, not the pomp and richness of the music from the 'Changing of the Guard' ceremony, for there were still five minutes to go. He heard a different kind of music, very quiet and soft as it swirled and echoed within his ears. He heard the sounds of a large cello. It wafted from a corner of Trafalgar Square where the roads met. A man stood, playing on the cello. He sang beautifully. People flung their change on the cloth spread in front of him and soon there was a big pile of money over the floor. The music spread a sweet delirium, reverberating around the whole corner. Velayudam was amazed. What a gifted man. He sings so very well. He looked at him intently. Why, the man is old, he noted, quite old in fact. As Velayudam dragged himself away from the place and walked on, the music of the cello man followed him and wrapped around him with a soft, resonant presence.

Even now, sitting here in St. James's Park, it resounded in his ears so clearly. Has that old man splintered into many different men and have each of them occupied the different

Squares in different parts of London, all those Squares where the roads meet, with a man playing music for every weary passerby? Has the man

really split up into different men with different looks, playing different notes on different musical instruments in the various corners of London? Has he? If not, how then did I see another old man, different yet somewhat similar to this one, near St. Westminster Bridge? On Sundays, occasionally even on Saturdays, if you walk past the Westminster Abbey and get into one of the smaller streets, then you can see for yourself. You'll find the man sitting in a large square, singing to the notes of his instrument, a triangular stringed musical instrument on which he played with a bow. It was something like the Russian balalaika except that it had a strange looking handle on the right. The man kept on turning the handle with one hand, while holding the bow with the other and sang in a way that softly caressed your heart. He rained music on anyone who came close enough. Who could say he was old at all? All the tired people, tired of walking endlessly, tired of stepping in and out of shops, felt greatly refreshed by his music that rose and spread out, floating above and settling down on everyone like soft woolly clouds of melody.

Velayudam opened his eyes and cleared his throat. Carefully, he looked around in all directions. I mustn't talk aloud to myself again, oh no, I mustn't, he warned himself, closing his lips firmly. He closed his eyes again. I have half an hour for myself, after which I should leave for home. Come what may, I must go to the temple of Murugan 4 in Eastham at least once a week. It has been such a long time since I went there. And yet, whenever I go to Eastham I return with an incomplete feeling, as if something is missing.

Is it enough to have a *darshan* of Murugan by seeing him? Shouldn't I complete my pledge to the god by walking barefoot on a hot, steaming asphalt road for miles on end with a *kaavadi* 5 on my shoulders, walk till my feet get blistered? How we walked in our village in India, carrying the *kaavadi* on our shoulders. First we stand in a row as milk is poured into a small container attached to our *kaavadi*. Once it is perched on our shoulders, we sing in chorus, 'Victory to god Murugan, victory to the valiant one who wields a spear!' And then we set off on our long walk briskly, the milk in the small containers spilling over at times with the jerkiness of our movements. We walked for miles on end, rows and rows of us, but actually we were really alone. Each man walked alone, the *kaavadi* on his shoulders bearing his own private, secret wishes and goals. It was man alone with his individual pledge to god, even as he walked along with the rest.

The music resonated hauntingly. Velayudam could

hear all kinds of sounds now. It was a blend of melodies from a harmonica, a synthesizer, the beat of drums. And that was not all. The melting sweetness of notes from a flute reached him. Knifing through the sound waves in between was the strong drone of Scottish bagpipes. They rang in his ears and inside his closed eyes a scene unfolded like a vivid picture. Has one man splintered into several different men who play on the instruments and sing in the squares of London where the roads meet? Or is it more accurate to think that all those different men have actually fused and welded into that one man who has magically gathered up their collective skills for his own incredible versatility? Have all the different skills of the men amalgamated into that one abundantly gifted man, a veritable conglomerate who handles a variety of musical instruments simultaneously and with such astonishing ease?

That man. He is unique. He always occupies a place on the square near Piccadilly where the four streets meet, the one beside the Green Park towards the direction of Piccadilly. It is a square which invariably vibrates with the notes of excellent music, thanks to him. It's not just the good music alone. It's also a splendid spectacle that fills your eyes as a visual delight. One day I edged closer and took a look. What a stunning display it was.

An enormous crowd milled around. A surging crowd in which the children outnumbered the adults. And there stood a tall frame on which were fixed small colourful birds, ducks and many other things. The birds fluttered and flapped their tiny wings in answer to the sounds of harmonica coming from behind the wooden framework. Small ducks opened and closed their bills to the notes of the synthesizer. Birds and ducks, all of them quivered to the music, their body tingling to the notes. Then there were enchanting fairies too, along with elves, gnomes and dwarves who tuned into the music and danced together with admirable rhythm. There were also little pups, kittens, a baby bear, Mickey Mouse and so on. They moved to the beat of the drums and the soft, fluid notes of the flute, to every little movement of music from the various instruments, all of them – the birds, the ducks, the fairies, elves, gnomes, dwarves, pups, kittens, Mickey and the bear – swayed, played, gamboled about, frolicked, clapped their hands and danced. What a splendid scene. An unforgettable experience.

It drew everyone, children, their young mothers, fathers and all others who happened to walk that way. Attracted by the sheer force of the music and the spectacular display on the large wooden

framework that dominated the whole square, they thronged, filling up the entire place. The man who conjured up this magical show was always concealed behind the wooden frame, working nimbly behind the scene, single-handed. Velayudam's eyes searched for him eagerly. There he was. The man who played on the harmonica, the synthesizer, the man who deftly turned to a side to do the drum beats, who again pulled out liquid melodies from the flute, or kept a sustained note of bagpipes threading through it all – the various 'hands' belonged to one man. It was one man after all who accomplished the feat of taking turns to handle all those instruments. And that one man functioned from behind the screen, the veins on his arms thick, and the veins on his neck swollen as if they may burst any moment, his face red and puffy. If he played on the harmonica and the synthesizer, the ducks in front of the wooden frame opened and closed their bills, scampered about playfully, the little birds flapped their tiny wings friskily. When he played on the flute and the bagpipes while simultaneously beating on the drums below, tapping his feet to the beat, the rope that was fastened to his ankles set in motion the dance of the colourful fairies, elves, dwarves and gnomes who swayed rhythmically to the music. One could watch the show for hours.

After the musical show gave over, Velayudam swallowed his initial hesitation and approached the man.

"It's excellent, the way you play on so many instruments and also sing!" he remarked in English.

"Thanks. Thanks very much," the man smiled and nodded.

"I just ...I wondered...if..." said Velayudam hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"I mean..."

The man waited, wiping his instruments with a soft linen. "Tell me," he said.

"I mean...I just wondered if it wouldn't be enough for you to play on one, or at the most two musical instruments, since you sing so well?" asked Velayudam.

"If I restrict myself like that, I could never hope to draw such a big crowd. Therefore, I wouldn't be able to earn this much money, you see?" he replied. He looked utterly exhausted by the

exertion of the whole show.

"But...but...if you don't mind," began Velayudam and stopped midway.

"Go ahead, tell me..." the man smiled at Velayudam genially.

"You're wearing yourself out, aren't you, by handling so many instruments at the same time, not forgetting the drums as well. Must you work so very hard for money? Do you need this much money?" asked Velayudam.

"I've no choice really. This is London, a city of prohibitive prices. And I live alone, and have no one who'd care to spend even a penny on me. My children have distanced themselves from me. They don't even visit me any more, nor do they bother to find out how I'm getting on. That's why I've to work hard to make a living," he explained, as he wiped and cleaned the toys, the dolls and the instruments one by one. He stacked them up neatly in a box. The harmonica, the flute, the synthesizer, the drums along with the birds and the fairies were tucked into the box where they settled, still and quiescent, after that vibrant action just a while ago, drawing everyone magnetically as they stood in awe and wonder.

The fatigue on his face made him look even older from close. And yet, what an amazing person you are, thought Velayudam. You're highly skilled in doing so many different things. You are...you are...Savvyasachi. That's right! Savvyasachi, the ambidextrous. Savvyasachi, one of the many other illustrious names attributed to Arjun 6, might well be yours. Like Arjun who was adept in handling a variety of weapons with exceptional skill and nimbleness in the battlefield, handling them all as if he had twelve hands that sliced their way through a thick, pitched battle. That's how Arjun earned his name as Savvyasachi, the brave, indomitable warrior, incredibly adept at battle craft. You too, old man, who handle so any instruments and sing for your birds and fairies with such

nonchalant ease, are a Savvyasachi. Indeed, you are.

Battle-weary, utterly exhausted and embittered by the ravages of war, a much-saddened Arjun asked Lord Krishna: To what purpose is all this? Must I go on killing my own relations so mercilessly?"

Looking at the peerless warrior, Krishna replied: "Who or what do you think you're killing anyway? You don't wish to kill your relations, but don't you realize that you yourself are going to die

eventually? In the final analysis, what can you hope to annihilate? You can only destroy this thing you recognize as a 'body', that's about all. And the body is just a garment O Savvyasachi. You are a glorious soldier who can use two hands like twelve with incredible skill. Even so fine body such as yours in only a garment, an old garment. Very soon you're going to throw it away as something too old for you. You'll shed your body like an old dress. In that case Savvyasachi, why do you lament for others?"

Under the darkening sky of Kurukshetra 7, Krishna's words from Bhagavad Gita pierced through the sombre overcast like a flash of brilliant lightning. The light bathed Savvyasachi in the battlefield. The light also bathed this nice old Briton, the musical wizard in the Piccadilly squares of London.

Velayudam raised his eyes and looked at the man, at the fine wrinkles on his face. How valiantly he struggled against the loneliness and infirmity of old age in the cold squares of London. Come my man, let's discard this old garment we still wear, he murmured. Come my Savvyasachi, let's both cast it off, then let's mingle with the air. Come.

***Received the Best Short Story award by *Ilakkiya Chintanai*, Chennai.**

(Courtesy: *Nandanvan and Other Stories* by Lakshmi Kannan, Orient BlackSwan, 2011)

1 *Idlis*: A breakfast dish made by steaming ground rice and black gram.

2 *Thumbai*: Soft white flowers of the white nettle

3 *Dhotie*: A loose piece of cloth worn as a lower garment by men.

4 Murugan: Kartik, the young son of Shiva and Parvati, brother of Ganesh. He is a god of valour and strength.

5 Kaavadi: A cylindrical wooden rod joined by a wooden strip on top, decorated with the feathers of peacock, the mascot of Murugan. The same is also used in folk dances that invoke Murugan. Devotees of Murugan carry a *kaavadi* on their shoulders and walk on roads as a pledge or vow taken for their devotion to Murugan.

6 Arjun: One of the Pandava brothers in the epic *Mahabharatha*.

7 Kurukshetra: The place where the big battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas took place.