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Y U V A K A T H A

Unforgettable
short fiction from some of
India's master story tellers

Edited by
Geeta Dharmarajan


KATHA

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M Mukundan

Unnikatha

Translated from Malayalam
by K M Sherrif and Neerada Suresh



nni," said Mutthashi,
"Tell me a story."

Mutthashi had chewed on her betel-and-nut to her satisfaction after her frugal meal of kanji. Now she waited for Unni. Only Unni's stories could put her to sleep. Peering through the open door she called out to her grandson. "Come, Unni."

U The writer and the translators of this story got the 1993 Katha Awards for Creative Fiction and for Translation, respectively.

She was impatient for his story.

"Unni is doing his homework," said his mother. Unni has much to study. He is in class two.

"Just a small one, Unni," Mutthashi pleaded. "An unnikatha."

His grandmother was sitting on the cot, leaning against the wall, her legs stretched out in front of her. The room was aglow with the faint light of an incandescent bulb.

"Amma, how can Unni tell you stories all the time? He has to study."

"Just this once, daughter."

"You said so yesterday too, Amma."

Mutthashi shifted her gaze guiltily. She was old, her body shrivelled and shrunk to the size of a child's. Unni's mother's heart went out to her.

"Unni, go tell Mutthashi a story. After you put her to sleep you can get back to your homework."

Unni prayed fervently that his grandmother would feel sleepy soon. It was already half-past nine.

Unni: Apart from being a common pet-name for boys in Kerala, unni also means small. Unni's story is unnikatha in more than one sense.

Mutthashi's face lit up when Unni came and sat by her. She couldn't sleep without a story. It had become a habit with her. A bad habit. But she could do nothing about it.)

"Which story, Mutthashi?"

"A nice one," Mutthashi said, "one that will send me to sleep."

Snuggling up to Mutthashi, Unni sat staring at the wall in front of him. It was a bare wall. No framed photographs. No showpieces.

The first picture that appeared on it was that of a short, stubby man with thick gold earrings. The many rings on his pudgy fingers were gold, too.

"Look!" said Unni, "that is Kuruman Panikkan, Mutthashi."

A palanquin moved across the bare wall. A fan in hand, Kuruman lay in it, surrounded by a retinue of attendants and a lamp bearer. The light of the pole-lamp fell in front of the palanquin like a smudge of pale gold.

"Unni, where is Panikkan going?"

Panikkan: An artisan; here, the artisan chief.

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"To pray. At the champaka-kaavu."

On the blankness of the white wall appeared a huge champaka tree, its lush foliage hiding the gnarled boughs. It was heavy with flowers that filled the air with a heady fragrance.

Kuruman's men placed the palanquin gently on the ground in front of the tree. Panikkan stepped down. An attendant took the fan from his hand and placed it back inside the palanquin. Kuruman always carried a fan with him, even when it rained.

The gentle breeze of dawn stirred the leaves as Panikkan stood with hands folded in prayer before the oily stone idols which sat at the base of the greying champaka tree. Light from an ancient oil lamp lay thick on its old, sinewy roots.

Mutthashi pointed to a new figure on the wall. "Unni, who is that?"

A well-dressed man had emerged

Champaka-kaavu: A kaavu is generally a small, rustic temple or shrine. Champaka-kaavilamma is the goddess who resides in the champaka temple.

on the whiteness of the wall. He wore a shirt. His cropped hair looked strange in a land where all men had long hair tied into knots.

"That is Melkkoran," Unni said. "He builds mosques and temples."

Melkkoran walked up to Panikkan. He bowed, his hands folded in respect.

The eastern sky was paling.

"Who are you?"

"I hail from the West. A mason. Melkkoran is my name."

"What do you want?"

"Work."

Panikkan glanced at his caretaker. In the light of the pole-lamp he could see the caretaker shake his head.

There was a rustle among the leaves of the champaka tree. The karadan chathans, those birds with wings of many colours, stirred in their sleep. In their nests of dried grass lay their eggs, whispering in the wind.

"Melkova, there is no work for you here." Panikkan said, "go ask in the neighbouring provinces."

"There is work right here," Melkkoran said. He bowed again, reverently.)

Puzzled, Panikkan looked once again at his caretaker.

"Look at this tree," Melkkoran continued, "old and worn-out. It can no longer shade Champaka-kaavilamma. Let us pull it down and build a new tree."

"Can that be done?"

"I can build a tree that never grows old, and that never sheds its leaves."

"Is there such a thing, Melkova?"

"Yes, in the West."

"Well, then," Kuruman Panikkan said, "we should have such a tree, too. Start your work at once!"

Melkkoran bowed so low that his head almost touched the ground. Then he retreated respectfully and vanished into the darkness.

Kuruman stepped into the palanquin. One of the attendants handed him the fan. Then, with the lamp bearer in front and attendants at the rear, Kuruman's palanquin was carried back to his mansion.

Dawn was breaking. The treetops gleamed white. The oil in the pole-lamp was running out.

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"Unni, will they cut down the champaka?" Mutthashi was worried.

They heard a tree crash.

After felling the champaka tree, which was as old as the earth, a tired Melkkoran put down the axe and rested on a rock.

The foraging birds came flying back, hearing their tree crash. Not finding their fledgelings and their eggs, they squawked and flew in helpless circles.

Melkkoran tried to shoo them away. He threw handfuls of gravel at them. But they hovered over the felled tree for quite a while.

"Sad, my Unni, very sad," murmured Mutthashi.

After a small silence, Unni continued with his story.

On the wall, Melkkoran's figure appeared again. He was now obsessed with building his new tree. Around him were empty coconut shells he had thrown away after drinking their sweet, cool water. Every once in a while Kuruman Panikkan came in his palanquin, to watch Melkkoran deftly chipping away at the logs of glass-wood as effortlessly as one would cut

tender fronds of the coconut palm. Panikkan was spellbound.

Shards of glass lay in heaps in front of Champaka-kaavu. Dark-skinned urchins picked up the glittering glass pieces to play with, and cut their fingers.

"Oh, Unni, they are bleeding!"

Heedless, Melkkoran sculpted the roots and the trunk of the tree. Then the branches. Only the leaves and the flowers remained. He needed green glass for the leaves, white for the flowers.

Mutthashi gazed at the naked tree.

"Unni, shouldn't you be finishing your homework?" Amma called out. "It's past ten o'clock."

"I've almost reached the end, Amma."

"Hurry up, son."

Mutthashi's face fell when she learned that the story was coming to an end. Sleep was still far away, the night young. "Unni," she whispered, "don't rush."

Unni slowed down. Melkkoran took a long time to shape each leaf and each soft-petalled flower with great care. Panikkan watched him at work,

fan in hand. The snout-nosed urchins hovered around, drawn irresistably to the slivers of glass that had cut their fingers once.

"Finally," Unni said, "after a year and a half, the work on the tree was done."

Kuruman Panikkan stood bewitched before the exquisite glass tree. Its transparency was drenched in the glow of dawn, the blush of the setting sun putting a sparkle on each green glass-leaf, each white glass-flower.

Visitors from far and near flocked to see the wondrous glass tree. Only Kuruman Panikkan could have owned such a tree! It was his pride and joy. And he showered Melkkoran with priceless gifts.

"The glass tree was unmatched in beauty, Mutthashi, yet its flowers had no fragrance. There were glittering nests on its branches, but no birds of many colours came to rest there ..."

Unni's story came to an end. He looked up. Mutthashi was slumped against the wall, sound asleep.

M MUKUNDAN says, While I was a young boy – and even now as I am about to enter the dusk of my life – the happiest moment for me is when I hear a story. As a little boy, sitting on the lap of my multhashi, I enjoyed her countless stories. When I grew up, in a reversal of roles, I started telling others the stories I dreamt up. I can't tell you exactly how "Unnikatha" originated. Maybe, like many of my other stories, it never originated – it was always there.

Mukundan is a pioneer of modern trends in Malayalam literature. He has also written scripts for two films. His stories have been translated into English and French. He lives in Delhi.

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—  —
Mrinal Pande

Girls

Translated from Hindi
by Rama Baru



The day we left with Ma for Nani's house, Babu broke a surahi. I didn't know whether my father did it on purpose or by accident, but anyway the floor was flooded with water.

Ma held up her saree and called Saru's mother, who was trying to eavesdrop from the adjacent room, to mop the water. If someone were to slip and break her bones it would be yet another problem.

To Ma, everything is a problem. As far

as she is concerned, whether we are at home or at school, ill or just playing around, *we* are problems.

While mopping the floor, Saru's mother looked up at Ma and asked, "This time you'll be away for at least three months, won't you?" Ma was trying to squat, her hands on her thighs as if she were assessing their weight. She said, "Yes, they won't want me to come back sooner." She turned, saw me, and ordered me to go out and play.

I always seemed to turn up at the wrong time and at the wrong place. As I was leaving the room I managed to pick up a piece of the broken surahi which I liked sucking, and I overheard Ma addressing either Saru's mother or the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. "I hope it's a boy this time. It will relieve me of the nuisance of going through another pregnancy." I could imagine Saru's mother, shaking her head as always and saying, "Why not? ... Why not?"

When we reached the station, I scrambled into the train, fought my way through people and luggage, and secured a place next to the window.

Triumphantly, I stuck my tongue out at everyone and went, "Eee ... Eee." I noticed Ma's gaze turn towards me and immediately started chanting the alphabet, "E for Eemli, E for Eekh." But Ma was not looking at me at all, because she was preoccupied with her problems – the luggage, the wobbling surahi, the three of us, and added to all that, the exhaustion of pregnancy.

At one of the stations we bought a lot of samosas filled with chillies. Just when we were buying them, a woman made her child pee through the next window. The sight made me feel quite sick and I couldn't eat my samosa, so I gave it to Ma. But I crushed a bit of the potato filling which had fallen on to the seat, into the shape of an insect to scare my younger sister. She screamed. Ma smacked me and I started to bawi too, and my elder sister muttered, "Oh what a nuisance you are!" Yet, I know that it is only she who really loves me. Everyone else is quite horrible!

Mama was waiting to receive us at the station. On the way to Nani's, I sat next to Mami and noticed the rubies on

her ear lobes bobbing up and down while she chewed paan. Every time the driver pressed the jeep's horn, my sisters and I would scream in unison, "Poo-poo!" The driver was amused, and when we reached the house, he lifted me and my younger sister out of the jeep. He had a huge moustache, smelt of tea and beedis, and wore a uniform made of coarse wool which tickled me and made me feel sleepy.

When the surahi was lifted out of the jeep it overturned and once again there was water everywhere. This reminded me so much of Babu that, absent-mindedly, I trod hard on my younger sister's sandal, nearly tripping her.

"You are the cause of all my problems!" Ma hissed through tightly clenched teeth so that no one else could hear her. She grabbed hold of my arm as if to prevent me from falling over, but actually pressed it so hard that my shoulder hurt.

I thought of Babu. He never came with us to Nani's house. And as for Ma, as soon as we got there, she would be lost in the company of my masis, mami, nani and the old maidservants. If we

went near her during the day, someone would say, "Let the poor thing have some rest at least while she's here." Ma too would put on a pathetic act as if we always harassed her.

I felt disgusted at the thought of entering Nani's house, so I loitered near the bushes. A mongrel dog came near and sniffed at me. Then I heard someone take my name inside the house and say, "Now where has she disappeared?"

I entered the house along with the dog and saw Nani sitting with Mama's son on her lap. As soon as she saw the dog, she shooed it away because to her all animals are untouchables. The dog, used to being reprimanded, tucked its tail between its legs and went out.

Someone from the family told me to bend down and touch Nani's feet. Someone else said, "Not like that ... bend properly. You are a girl and you will have to bend for the rest of your life, so you might as well learn now."

Nani blessed me by waving her hand over my bowed back and said, "This girl hasn't grown any taller. Who would

Masi: Mother's sister.

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— Girls —

believe she is eight years old?"

Mama's son was very fair, chubby and supposedly cute. Even though I pinched him, he followed me around like an idiot. He was also tall for his age. He was only five years old, but could easily pass for seven. "Will you tell me a story tonight?" he asked. I said, No, and pretended to read the newspaper.

"Oh, what a nuisance this is," Ma kept complaining. The old lady from the neighbourhood, who had come to see Ma, told Nani, "This time Lali will definitely have a boy. Just look at her complexion. When she was expecting the girls it was pink. Now it has a touch of yellow. I am sure it will be a boy."

"Perhaps even this time ..." moaned Ma, as she put on a pathetic expression and began to pare her nails.

"Is there anyone to cook for your husband?" asked the old lady. And I at once remembered Babu – how good he smelt, the softness of his lap, and how when we come here Ma does not allow us to lie in her lap for too long and complains, "Oh, my bones ache, my saree is all crushed. Get up! I have a lot of work to do and to top it all, there's

— Mrinal Pande —

this huge nuisance! Come on, get up."

Nani would fold her hands and pray. "Oh Devi, protect my honour. At least this time let her take a son back from her parents' home." At the end of the prayer she would dry her tears with her pallu.

From the corner of my eyes I could see that my sisters were fast asleep. We were in a big room divided into two by a wooden partition. Right above my bed hung a big wall clock. Just before it struck the hour it made a hissing noise which sounded like my sister drawing in her breath just before she starts howling.

All the lights had been switched off and the room was flooded with moonlight. Tulsa dai was applying oil to the soles of Ma's feet and saying, "If it's a boy this time, I will demand a saree with stainless steel zari."

Even in the bright moonlight I could not see Ma's face, but her saree had slipped slightly and I could see her huge stomach which looked like a drum. Then, Tulsa dai's hand must have brushed against a painful spot, for Ma

moaned, just like a cow does when returning home from the fields.

"If I have a boy this time, then I will be relieved of this burden for ever," she tells Tulsa dai, and then adds, "You can go home now, your children must be waiting for you. Be sure you put the oil vessel under the bed, otherwise one of these kids will kick it over in the morning and ..." Ah, a bad omen.

Whenever Ma leaves a sentence unfinished it seems to hang in the air, like the ticking of the clock. I wonder why grown-ups always complete their sentences when they are talking about pleasant things, but leave them unfinished if it's something unpleasant. Like, "Ah, a woman's fate ...," or "Oh, three girls ..." There's *always* a silence after these half-statements.

There's a bright star in the sky. Is that Dhruva tara? Babu used to say that if I worked hard I could become anything I wanted, just as Dhruva had become a star. "But I can't become a boy, can I?" I once asked him obstinately. I was surprised at Babu's reaction when he said sternly, "Don't argue with your elders."

I find it difficult to understand adults. My elder sister says one should never trust grown-ups because if they want to know something they will prise it out of you by hook or by crook, but *they* will never tell you a thing.

It's true, nobody ever tells us anything. In this house, it is when we go to sleep that the world of the elders opens, like a magic casket. I want to stay awake and listen; I don't know why I feel so sleepy half-way through. I wonder whose voice it is now. It sounds as if someone is crying in muffled tones. Is it Chhoti Masi? "I don't get even as much respect as a dog does in that house," she tells Ma. I wonder where she is treated worse than a dog. Then I hear Ma tell her, "All of us suffer like that, one just has to endure it." My eyes shut and I fall asleep.

The next morning, when everyone is having breakfast I ask my mother what "endure" means. I remind her by asking. What does Chhoti Masi have to endure? I get one tight slap, then another. Before Ma can strike me again Mami saves me. She says, "Let her be. She's only a child, after all."

"She's no child, she's a witch," says Ma as her stomach wobbles in anger. "She's always listening on the sly to elders talking. Heaven knows what will become of her."

When I go into the garden, my elder sister shakes at me the flowers she has gathered, "I have told you a hundred times not to question grown-ups. If you keep on like this, one day these people will beat you so hard you will die."

"I will ask questions. I will. I will," I answer crying.

"Then go and die," says my sister, and continues to thread a garland for Nani's Gopalji.

Seeing the garland, Nani says loudly, "You are my precious Lakshmi," with the intention that I should hear that.

In the afternoons I tell the younger children stories of ghosts and demons who live in the walnut tree here. I tell them that if they were to wake up at twelve o'clock on a full-moon night they would see children being bathed in blood. They would also hear ghosts speaking through their noses, which at first is difficult to follow. The children follow me all over the house like rats

following the Pied Piper.

Badi Mami and Ma give us money to buy sweet-sour golis just to get rid of us in the afternoon. Their room has been darkened by green paper stuck on the windows, and it is full of women — Ma, Mami, the Masis and Nani. They eat all the time and have cushiony arms, fat half-naked legs and wrinkled stomachs. Then why do they keep telling us not to sit with our legs spread out?

"You all look like cows," I tell them, but no one seems to have heard me.

Chhoti Masi, who is lying on the floor with a pillow under her head takes a sour goli from us, starts sucking it and says; "Jijaji is really the limit."

Suddenly laughter explodes in the room.

Who? Why? How? I look all around the room for an answer, but no one is bothered about us here, they are too lost in their own conversation. I leave the room and bang the door shut, wondering if Ma will call me a nuisance. No one comes to reprimand me, though.

Jijaji: Sister's husband.

“Move aside,” says Hari’s Ma who is carrying a tray laden with glasses of tea. “Move. This is not for you, it’s for the grown-ups. Move out of my way.” Her nose is like a frog’s and her eyebrows meet above her nose. Her cheeks hang loose like dead bats. “Do move aside,” she says to me again.

“I won’t,” I say, and try to block her way. “I’ll move only if you say girls are nice.”

“All right, all right, I have said it, so now move out of the way,” says Hari’s mother.

“No,” I persist, “say it properly.”

“Oh, Hari’s ma, what’s happening?” asks Chhoti Masi irritably, from the room. “Are you going to bring the tea next year, or what?”

Hari’s Ma knits her thick eyebrows together and says, “This Lali’s middle daughter won’t let me ...” She starts laughing, and as she does so her frog-like nose bobs up and down.

I hear Ma saying, “That girl was born only to plague my life.” Someone in the room says she should not get angry in her condition.

For a long time I sit outside the house

watching the birds fly and wishing that I had been born a bird. “Do mother birds too think their girl birds are inferior?” I wonder.

Then I hear a voice calling, “Where has she gone?” and I know someone is looking for me. I wish, I *wish* that somewhere, anywhere, I could find that magic betel-nut which would make me invisible as soon as I put it in my mouth. What fun that would be!

In the evening, when Nani finishes her story, she says, “Now off you go to sleep, all of you.”

I ask Nani if I could sleep next to her. Her body is soft and warm and her quilt smells of cardamom and cloves. Besides, Nani keeps a torch under the pillow. If you take it with you to the bathroom after the lights are off, you don’t stub your toes on anything. But Nani says, “As it is this boy doesn’t leave me. Where is the space on this bed for the two of you? Go and sleep next to your mother. I’ll tell you another story tomorrow. All right?” Nani’s voice becomes sugary in the way of most grown-ups when they want to coax you

into doing something. In the other room, my elder sister asks with her back turned to me, "She didn't let you sleep with her, did she?" Her voice seems to be trembling with anger. Ma is snoring away. The clock ticks on. How can you sleep? Tick. Tick. Khrr. Khrr.

50 (Where are you? Girls?" calls Nani with a plate of roli in her hands. A mat has been spread in front of her for us to sit on. "Come on girls, let me put tikkas on your foreheads." Before her is a dish of halwa and a plate filled with puris. She has prepared those as offerings to the Devi on Ashtami.

The room is filled with the smells of camphor, halwa, ghee and flowers. She lights the camphor for aarti. "Come now, let me do aarti to all of you."

My two sisters and Mama's beautiful daughters sit cross-legged in front of Nani. She puts a tikka on each forehead and then sounds a little bell. Exactly like the guard on the train. After the bell, she blows a conch. "Poo ... ooo." I am suddenly transformed into a railway engine and race around the ledge of the

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courtyard. I shout, "Come on, pay your fares to go to Calcutta. Poo-ooo."

In the background I hear Nani saying, "Come on dear, let me put a tikka on you. You are my kanya kumari, aren't you?"

"No," I retort, "I'm an engine."

Mama's son claps his hands excitedly and says, "Oh, an engine, an engine."

Suddenly I see Ma waddling towards me and my stomach grows tight with fear. Her face is filled with rage. "I'll make an engine out of you this very minute.")

The elderly neighbour intervenes, catches hold of Ma's hand and says, "Have you gone mad, Lali?" She signals to me to obey, and adds, "She is after all a child, a kanya kumari. Today is Ashtami, the Devi's day; you must not hit a young girl, it would be a sin."

I jump down from the ledge with a thud and see Nani serving the other girls halwa-puri, her lips pursed together.

"Go on. Take the prasad from Nani. Why do you make your mother cry when she is in this condition?" Chhoti Masi asks me, irritated.

"When you people don't love girls, why do you pretend to worship them?"

My voice breaks into a sob. I feel so furious with myself that I want to swallow the burning camphor to block my treacherous throat. I want to again ask, Why? – but don't, for I am afraid I will start crying. I don't want to cry in front of them.

Hari's mother puts her hand up to her cheek and says in wonder, "Ma-ri-ma just listen to her. What a temper for a girl!"

Nani is distributing a rupee and four annas to each girl, addressing the wall saying, "You can buy twenty golis with this money." She holds out to me a twenty-five paise coin wrapped in a rupee note. I notice the mark of the roll on the tip of her thumb, like a bloodstain.

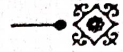
I start moving back towards the wall screaming, "I don't want all this halwa puri, tikka or money. I don't want to be a goddess." I scream so loudly that the pigeons pecking at the scattered grain in the courtyard take off in a flurry, as if a bullet had been fired somewhere.

MRINAL PANDE says, This is probably the closest I have come to writing an autobiographical story. Until I wrote this, I hadn't quite realized how clear a child's perception of justice is. Both my sisters said they really liked the story.

Mrinal has to her credit several collections of short stories as well as plays and novels. Editor of *Saptahik Hindustan*, she has had a distinguished career in journalism and the media. She lives in Delhi.

This story was originally published in *Dharmayug* in 1983, and this English translation by Rama Baru, in the same year in *Manushi*.

RAMA BARU is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Community Health and Social Medicine, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.



Sundara Ramaswamy

Reflowering

Translated from Tamil
by S Krishnan



Amma was lying on the cot and I was curled up on the floor right next to it. Amma and I were free to get up as late as we pleased. We had made it our habit over the years. We had to put up a battle of sorts for it.

Ours is a family that takes pride in safeguarding the dharma of the early riser. For generations now, we've all

dp The author and translator of this story received the 1991 Katha Awards for Creative Fiction and Translation, respectively.

3 (bathed before sunrise. But then, Amma and I were invalids. Amma had asthma and I suffered from joint pains. Both could create problems in the morning.

Outside, there were sounds of the horse shaking its mane, of its bells jangling. The horse buggy was ready. This meant that Appa had picked up the bunch of keys for his shop. It also meant that the clock was inching towards eight-thirty. He would now put on his slippers. Kweech. Then, once downstairs, the abrupt impatient sound of the umbrella opening and closing. The daily umbrella-health-test that.

The door opened slightly. A thin streak of sunlight pranced into the room, a shifting glass-pipe of light, dust swirling inside it. Appa! I see him in profile – one eye, spectacles, half a forehead streaked with vibhuti. A dot of golden-yellow chandanam, topped by a vivid spot of kumkumam.

"Boy! Ambi! Get up!" Appa said.

I closed my eyes. I did not move a limb, as if held captive by deep sleep.

"Ai! Get up. You good-for-nothing."

Amma said. "Appa's calling."

On the sly I looked at Appa. He appeared affectionate, even gentle. As if I were being roused from heavy slumber, I opened my eyes with pretended difficulty.

"Get ready, Ambi. Eat and then go to Aanaipaalam," said Appa. "Go and bring Rowther to the shop straightaway. I'll send the buggy for you."

I looked at Appa, then at Amma. I had told her about the squabble between Appa and Rowther in the shop the previous day. I knew exactly what she would say.

"Can you or can you not manage without him?" asked Amma. "This farce has gone on far too long. Making up one day, parting the next!"

Appa's face reddened. I thought that if it grew any redder, blood might start dripping from the tip of his nose.

"Onam is round the corner. You can come to shop and make the bills," he screamed. Anger twisted his lips, slurred and flattened out the words.

"Is Rowther the only person in this whole world who knows how to

make bills?" asked Amma.

"Shut up!" yelled Appa.

Abruptly he turned to me, "Get up, you!" he ordered. I sprang up from my bed and stood taut as a strung bow. "Go. Do what I told you," he growled.

As if some unseen hand had tugged at the wheels attached to my feet, I moved swiftly out of the room.

I heard Appa's horse buggy leave the house.

I got ready in double-quick time. What briskness! I wore—as I usually didn't—a dhoti over my half pants, and a full-sleeved shirt, all in the hope that it would make me speak up with some confidence. I didn't feel my usual anger with Appa. I didn't feel sad either. It seemed as if even a little fondness had seeped in. Poor thing! He had got himself into a fix. Without thinking, he'd spoken harshly to Rowther. He could have been calmer. But then, one can talk of calmness if a person is angry. What if he is *anger personified*?

Excited by this paradox, I went and stood before Amma. I looked her

straight in the face and I said, "Where is the question of calmness if he is anger personified?"

Amma laughed. Almost at once, she made her face stern and, "Smart, aren't you?" she asked. "Now, if you are a clever boy, you'll get Rowther to the shop." Placing her right hand over her heart she said, "Tell him, I apologize for whatever *he* may have said."

I too thought that we could not manage the Onam festival sales without Rowther.

Who could do sums like him? He was lightning quick in mental arithmetic. Five people sitting in a row, with paper and pencils, would not be equal to one Rowther and his brain. Remarkable. Even our regular customers, who flocked round him to have their bills tallied, were amazed.

"Is this a mere human brain?" many wondered aloud. "If the man can be this fast when he can only listen to the figures, what would he not do if he'd been granted sight?"

And to think that Rowther has only studied up to the third class. That's two grades less than Gomathi who works in the shop, fetching and cleaning.

The dispute between Rowther and Appa had started mildly enough the previous evening.

"Look here, Rowther, what are you going to do if you let your debts keep mounting like this?" Appa had asked. Rowther had chosen all the clothes he wanted, piled them up by his side, before thinking of asking Appa for credit. It was quite clear that Appa did not like this.

"What can I do, Ayyah? My house is full of women. My sons are useless. My sons-in-law too are useless. Four sons, four daughters-in-law, eight granddaughters, eight grandsons. How many is that? Just one piece of cloth each, and the cost adds up."

Appa was staring at Rowther, as if thinking, This man is getting out of hand. I must cut him to size.

"Kolappa, pack the clothes and give me the bill," said Rowther.

How dare he take the things before

permission had been granted? Appa's face reddened.

"It is not possible for me to give you credit this time," he said.

"So you're saying you don't want our relationship to continue, Ayyah? All right. Girl, take me home."

Rowther stood up. Gomathi took his right arm and placed it on her left shoulder. They went down the steps. When the shop closed in the evening, he would usually look in the direction of my father and take permission to leave. That particular evening he did not take permission. He had taken leave.

I thought I would first pick up Gomathi and take her with me to Rowther's house. That would perhaps lessen his hurt. But Gomathi was not at home. "Rowther had sent word that he was not coming. She's just left for the shop," her mother said.

I took a shortcut through the grove, and reached Rowther's house. A tiled house, the roof low. In the front yard there was a well on the right side, its parapet stark, unpainted, broken.

Velvet moss sprang around it in bright patches. Stone steps led to the house. A strip of a gunny sack hung at the main door.

"It's me, Ambi!" I announced my arrival loudly.

A little girl came out followed by another who was obviously her twin.

"Who is it, child?" came Rowther's voice from inside the house.

"It's me Ambi," I said again.

"Come! Come," said Rowther. His voice bubbled with happiness.

I pushed aside the sack curtain and went in. The floor had been swabbed smooth with cowdung. Rowther was sitting cross-legged, like a lord. His arms reached out for me. "Come, come," he kept saying.

I went and knelt in front of him. He put his arms around me. His eyes stared and stared, as if trying to recapture the vision they had lost long ago. He pressed me down by my shoulders, dragged me towards him and made me sit beside him. His emotions seemed to overwhelm him.

"Ah!" he said. "You are wearing a dhoti today!"

"Just felt like it."

"What's the border like?"

"Five striped."

"Just like Ayyah, uhn? The boys in the shop tell me that you look just like your father, too. It is my misfortune that I can't see you."

He ran his fingers over my face, my nose, my mouth, my neck, my eyes, my ears, my forehead. "Everything in place, thank the Lord," He laughed.

I thought that this was the right moment to tell him why I had come. But the words stuck in my throat, as if held there by an unseen hand.

"Amma ..." I started to say, making a tentative start.

Rowther interrupted me. "How is madam's health now?"

"As usual."

"I have Thuthuvalai Khandankattri leghiyam. No better medicine for asthma. Only, Ayyah likes to see English labels on his medicine bottles. I don't have English. Only medicines," he said, enjoying his own joke hugely.

This was the right moment to tackle him.

"Amma wants me to take you to the

shop. She wants me to tell you that she is very sorry if Appa has said anything to hurt you. You are not to misunderstand him. She says, please don't turn down her request."

Rowther's face visibly brightened. He raised his hands in salute. "Amma, you are a great woman," he called out. "Get up, let's go to the shop at once," he said.

That year the sales during Onam were very good. Rowther was in his element. With great elan he supervised the shop boys who constantly jostled around him. It was like Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata, single-handedly fighting a whole battalion.

He would state the price as soon as the cost and quantity of the material were mentioned to him. Only the good Lord knew what spark it was in his brain, what genius that did not need even a minute to calculate? A brain that could multiply and total up the cost of sixteen different items in a trice to announce, "Items: sixteen. Grand total - 1414 rupees, 25 paise," how could that be called an average

brain? Even if it was all written down on a blackboard, I would have easily taken half-an-hour to work it out. But for him, answers slipped out like lightning. He had till now never made a single mistake.

Amma has told me that in the early years of their association, Appa used to sit up half the night, checking Rowther's calculations. It seems he would say, "That man's getting beside himself. I must find at least an error or two." But he never could. He just lost a good night's sleep.

One day, a cart drawn by a single bullock, heavily curtained on both sides, stopped in front of the shop. From inside came the wailing of women and children.

"Sounds like the females of my household," Rowther said.

Rowther's house had come up for public auction! Apparently the amina was flinging all the household things on to the street.

Rowther started crying like a child and called on God to help him out. At just that moment, Kolappan came

100
came with a bill saying, "45 meters and 70 centimeters at 13 rupees and 45 paise."

(Rowther stopped his keening for a moment and said to him, "Write this down, 614 rupees and 66 paise." Then he turned to my father who was at the cash-counter and sobbed. "Ayyah. I had to pay the court the loan and the interest on it. It's more than five thousand rupees. Where will I go for the money?"

Appa took Rowther in the horse buggy to see a lawyer.

Rowther did not show up for work the next day. Kolappan said he had with his own eyes seen Rowther, reciting the bills in Chettiar's cloth shop.

"What injustice! I have just come back after paying the court the entire amount for his debts. He's let me down, the ungrateful wretch!" Appa shouted.

The shop assistant Kolappan also whipped himself into a fury. "He knows how to calculate, but he's a senseless idiot. Wait, I'll go this

minute and drag him here by his hair!" he said as he jumped onto his bicycle.

Appa sat down on the floor, devastated. He started to mumble. "This is a wicked world," he said. "These days you can't even trust your own mother."

In a little while, Kolappan returned. Rowther was sitting behind him, on the carrier. He marched a stone-like Rowther to the cash-counter.

"I lost my head, Ayyah," said Rowther as he stood before Appa, his hands folded in supplication.

"A time will come when you will be cut down to size," said Appa.

"Please don't say such things, Ayyah," pleaded Rowther. "Come work for me and I'll pay your debts, the Chettiar said. And I lost my head."

Appa only repeated, "The time will come when you will be cut down to size."

And, surprise of surprises, things soon happened that made it look as if Appa was going to be right after all.

When Appa returned from Bombay that year after seeing his wholesalers, he brought back a small machine and showed it to Amma.

"This can do calculations," he said. "A machine?"

"It can."

Amma made up a sum. Appa pressed a few keys. The machine gave the answer.

I quickly worked it out on a piece of paper. "The answer's correct, Amma!" I shouted.

"Have they transformed Rowther's brain into a machine?" asked my mother.

That whole day I kept trying out the calculator. That night, I kept it by my side when I slept. I gave it the most difficult sums I could think of. Its every answer was right.

I remembered something Gomathi had told me. Once she had asked Rowther, "Thatha! How can you do sums in a *nimit*?" mixing up as she always did, the Tamil and the common English word. It seems Rowther had said, "Child, I have three extra nerves in my brain." How did

those extra nerves get inside this machine?

I couldn't control my excitement. I showed the calculator to Gomathi. She also worked out many sums.

"Even I am getting it all right," she said, "this machine is more cunning than Thatha!"

One evening Rowther was totalling up for the day. Gomathi was sitting there, the calculator balanced on her lap, checking out his calculations. At one point, very impulsively she said, "You are correct, Thatha."

"Are you telling me I am right?" asked Rowther.

"I've worked it out," said Gomathi.

"Hmm," said Rowther. "I'll give you a sum. Answer."

Rowther gave her a sum. Gomathi gave the right answer. He tried sum after sum after sum. She had the correct answer each time. Rowther turned pale. "Dear God, I am so dumb, I cannot understand anything," he muttered.

"I'm not doing the sums, Thatha. It's the machine," said Gomathi.

pushing the calculator into his hands.

Rowther's hands shook as he took the calculator. His fingers trembled. He touched the whole front portion of the calculator, and the back.

"Is *this* doing the sums?" he asked again.

"Yes," said Gomathi.

"You keep it," he said as he thrust it back at her.

After this, Rowther was a very quiet man indeed. Words failed him. He remained in a state of stupor, leaning against the wall. That day, Gomathi and I took care of all the billing.

After a long time, Gomathi dug her finger into his thigh and asked, "Thatha, why don't you say something. Thatha?"

But he said nothing even to that.

He kept coming to the shop regularly but he looked and acted like a walking corpse. It seemed as if all the laughter, happiness, backchat, teasing, sarcasm, had disappeared. His voice was slow, hesitant. Even his body looked thinner.

One afternoon, it was a busy time in the shop. Murugan had a pile of cut-pieces with him. I was working out the cost. Suddenly, Rowther interrupted him, "What did you say was the price of poplin?"

Murugan stopped calling out and looked at Rowther. "5 rupees and 10 paise per metre."

"Wrong. Get the material out and look - it is 16 rupees and 10 paise per metre."

Appa got up. He came and stood next to Rowther.

Murugan's face fell as he checked the price.

"You are right," he mumbled.

"You have sold ten metres. You could have lost ten rupees. Are you here to give away Ayyah's money to everyone who comes in from the street?"

"So, you know the price?" Appa asked Rowther. 820

"Only from memory, Ayyaii."

"Do you remember all the prices?"

"It's God's will," said Rowther.

"What is the price of the smallest towel then?" asked Appa.

"4 rupees and 10 paise."

"And the biggest one?"

"36 rupees and 40 paise."

Appa kept on asking. The answers kept coming.

Appa looked amazed. He could not believe his ears. He took a deep breath.

"If that's so, you do one thing. When bills are being made, please check the prices."

"I will do my best, Ayyah," said Rowther. Then he looked up and said, "Oh, by the way, have you paid your electricity bill, Ayyah? Today is the last date for payment."

"Oh! no!" said Appa, calling out to Kollappan.

Rowther said, "He hasn't come today, Ayyah."

"How do you know?" asked Appa.

"Everybody has a voice, a smell. Today I missed Kolappan's voice, his smell," said Rowther, and then he called out to Murugan.

"Yesterday he told a customer that we have no double dhotis. Please reprimand him," Rowther said.

"I don't understand," said Appa.

"Ayyah. You put out ten double dhotis for sale. Weren't only seven sold? There should be three left, shouldn't there?"

Appa asked for the dhotis to be brought. Sure enough there were three unsold.

Rowther let a sardonic smile play on his face. He said to Murugan, "Oh Lord Muruga, you merrily send customers away by telling them we don't have what we do actually have. Are we here for business or for charity?"

That evening Rowther moved away from the bill-making section and went and sat closer to Appa.

"If I am by your side I will be more helpful, Ayyah," he said and without missing a beat, "and if you increase the speed of the fan a little, yours truly will also get some breeze."

Appa gave the appropriate order.

"It's time to pay your advance income tax, sir. Shouldn't you see your auditor?" asked Rowther.

"Yes, I must go see him," said Appa.

It was time to close the shop.
"Ayyah, you had wanted to get some medicine for madam."

"I'll buy it."

Appa was tugging at the locks to check if they were secure.

"Ayyah, you were saying that your mother's tithi was due soon. Why not ask Murugan to notify the priest on his way home?"

"Good idea," said Appa.

The employees left one by one.

Gomathi took Rowther's hand, placed it on her shoulder and started moving.


"Won't you be doing the bills any more, Thatha?"

"Ibrahim Hassan Rowther" Rowther replied, softly, "is no longer a mere adding machine. He is now the manager. It is God's will."

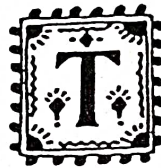
SUNDARA RAMASWAMY says, When I was eleven years old, an old man used to come to my father's cloth shop. He was blind, an eccentric, and no one knew why or how he did things, but he was a brilliant mathematician. He stayed in my mind, till he became Rowther in this story. This story also highlights the very friendly relationship between Hindus and Muslims – common in the border area between Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where I live.

Sundara Ramaswamy is a doyen among Tamil writers. A novelist, he has many short stories to his credit, and has received many literary awards. He also writes poetry. He is best known for his novel, *Oru Puliamaratthin Kathai*. An English translation of this novel has been recently published by Penguin India.

S KRISHNAN, translator and journalist, is a regular contributor to many Indian and foreign journals. A book-reviewer and poet, he is a senior editor of *Sruti*, a Madras-based music and dance magazine.

— 
A sinister symphony conducted by
Jug Suraiya

Clap Trap



he great golden cage of sound held him, racked his creaking spine in a concave curve following the ascending note, till now he was on tiptoe, head flung back and baton arm outstretched.

Through the quivering drop of sweat at the corner of his right eye, the scintillant nova of the light above dazzled him. Higher and faster the crest of volume thrust him, towards the galactic reef of lights till, in the final moment of precipitous suspense, it

seemed that his frail body must be wrecked against them ...

And then, with a flick of masterful suddenness, he stemmed the tide and cut it dead with a resounding clash of cymbals.

The applause poured over him like a monsoon squall – over his stooped shoulders, his streaming face and bedraggled wisps of hair.

Stan Fernandez, oboist and veteran leader of the West Coast Light Music Sestet (“Mozart with the Mantovani touch is our motto”), bowed again and again, and included his boys in the applause with a spontaneous wave of his hand.

What a reception! he thought. What a break! Just when we needed it. And to think we almost didn't come because of young Gomes and his silly objections!

He smiled and bowed to the clapping audience. Just went to show that the instinct born of years of experience still counted over flashy young talent and its sudden bouts of cold feet.

He nodded to the boys and they began to prepare for their next number.

Young Gomes seemed to be bearing up all right, thank god, but he still seemed a bit nervous. Must be dazed by the enthusiastic reception. Nothing like this could have happened to him before. Come to that, nothing like this had ever happened to the entire West Coast Light Music Sestet in all its 23 years of on and off, off and on itinerant playing.

What an audience! An audience of a lifetime, an audience you could play your heart out for. He turned to them again. He could feel them settling down, becoming still and expectant in the gloom beyond the glare of the lights.

This was the moment.

The audience waited like a well-trained domestic pet. Waited passively for him to magically infuse it with the dance and sway of conjured emotions, pastel moods and the primary surge of passion, enchanted landscapes, mysterious vistas, shafts of sun and dewfall moonlight, battle and love, and laughter and tears.

And all this done with a few bits of

wood and metal – and the skill of scuttling fingers. This was why when 45 years ago his father had jokingly asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd replied with instant candour, "A musician, like you, Daddy." His father had ruffled his hair and all the uncles had laughed.

The band waded into Strauss, their last number for the evening. The swelling legato of the theme, capped with its elegant little curlicues, carried him effortlessly down the flood of years.

Being a musician may have been a child's decision, but it certainly hadn't been child's play. He had worked hard under what tutelage he could get – his father, a cousin who taught music at the convent, a friend he had made in the local club band. He would practise long into the night, keeping tiredness at bay with a vision of himself in immaculate tails on a spotlight stage, holding a breathless concourse in thrall. A supreme, magnetic moment of destiny.

A moment like now.

True, the coattails could have been a little less tired and sagging. Some of the

shine on the elbows of the jacket would have served better on the somewhat limp facade of the shirt front. Times, especially of late, had been less than kind.

But what did that matter! he thought, with a swirl of jubilation, as he slid and rippled along the stately flow of the *Danube*. His dream – which he had so often thought lost forever in the rude awakening of adulthood – had been made vivid reality, living and breathing, in and through him. And to think they had almost turned down the offer because of Gomes and his doubts.

Business had been bad. It could never be "good" for a provincial musical group which, through musty pride, insisted on contesting the changed filmi tempo of the times with the genteel harmonics of Chopin and Strauss. Yet business had never been quite as bad as it was right then.

But Stan had been stubborn. "I refuse to compromise," he had said sitting in Louis's backroom with a glass of feni. "I will not have my band playing jazz, or cheap dance tunes, or," and he made

4 (a distasteful grimace, "that pop trash! We're musicians, not tamashawallahs."

All the other five, except Gomes (who had odd eyes), had heard this before and nodded as before.

"I feel bad for those of you boys who have families," Stan continued. Stan himself did not have a family. His engagement with music had always been too binding. "I know it's hard. But we will get a fixture. As always," he had assured them. Yes, as always - at schools or colleges, hostel functions or convention dinners.

But times were changing, had changed. Blaring loudspeakers and new money and plastic tabletops - where in all this did the West Coast Light Music Sestet fit in?

"Where?" asked Gomes, his eyes skittering around the room.

"Where what?" asked Stan.

The boys - all in their fifties except Gomes - looked at the floor.

"Where are we going to get our next fixture? And when?" asked Gomes, eyes darting about.

Stan studied him carefully. He didn't like Gomes. Never had. There was

something unsavoury about the young man. He had a hunted (or was it haunted?) look.

Stan had heard vague rumours. Of some sort of nervous breakdown in the City, where Gomes had been before. Some talk of drugs and other sordid things which Stan did not like to think about too much. He hadn't wanted to take Gomes on. But a good percussion man was hard to find, at least for the West Coast Light Music Sestet. So he had signed him on. But reluctantly, and, Stan admitted to himself, with a foreboding of fear.

Now he took his time answering, with the boys still staring down at the floor. Then with a long pull at his glass, he replied with magnificent finality, "Somewhere, sometime."

And what a place, what a time! The *Danube* rolled to its majestic close to meet the roaring, rising surf of applause which washed over them, pulling and sucking them forward, bowing and smiling, drawn in the mill race of heady, hypnotic success.

Stan straightened and tried to look out)

into the thunderous darkness beyond the too-bright lights.

Too bright? His eyes must be getting old. In all his 23 years of professional playing he had never found the lights too bright before. But he had never played in the City before either, and this was the way it was here, frenetic and brilliant. And Stan loved it with an aching, choking desire.

He strained his eyes against the hard barrier of the lights and could faintly make out the impressionistic patterns of the audience, the rainbow blurs of the women and the formal black and white geometry of the men.

The loud applause continued and fortissimo cries of "Encore!" descanted it. Stan mentally thanked the stars that, though abashed by their own daring, they had yet prepared a couple of extra numbers – in the unthinkable eventuality of an encore. And now the unthinkable had gloriously happened!

Stan signalled the boys into the *Vienna Woods*.

Secure in the lulling, familiar contours, his mind slipped into other

channels. He thought of the unforgettable morning when he had got the letter. The creamy richness of the envelope with his name in neat type had surprised him. He'd torn it open hurriedly and the contents had turned surprise to incredulous joy. He had rushed to break the news to the boys.

Their initial reaction had been disappointing; maybe they were too stunned to respond. But as he talked, in broken, excited phrases, the heat of his enthusiasm warmed them into animation.

"The City ... The National Hall ... 2,000 no, by god! 2,200 capacity ... first class expenses back and forth ... board and lodging ... *and* a fat fee. The City ... the lights ... the critics ... the people. Twenty-two hundred ... who would believe it?"

They'd got Louis to open a bottle of Scotch for them, on credit, after showing him the letter.

But sure enough, their cheery raucousness had been interrupted by Gomes. "I don't think we should go," he had burst out, and as they had turned towards him with slow disbelief,

he had cringed back in his chair, his body quivering and mouth twitching.

"My god, he's terrified," thought Stan in amazement.

Gomes jabbered, gulping out the quick half-sentences. "We shouldn't go. I tell you we should not. You don't know. You haven't been there, or stayed on. You haven't seen the National Hall crowd ... You don't know what can happen. I know. I'm telling you. I ..."

"Shut up!" said Stan loudly and Gomes stopped, mouth opening and shutting wordlessly. Then he slowly got up and walked out of the room.

Silence.

"Well," said Stan finally with a deep breath. "What do you make of that?"

A buzz of voices. "Don't know what got into him ... blue funk ... no moral fibre, these young fellows, no confidence." They had, naturally, decided ("What a decision!" said someone, and they all laughed) to go, and Gomes could go to hell. But surprisingly enough, Gomes came along. Still shaky and looking frightened, but he came.

"Good boy," said Stan and clapped him on his arm.

Gomes tried a smile, and didn't try it again.

Stan privately conceded to himself that the first impact of the City on him was staggering. Of course he had been to the City before, but not for anything more than a casual weekend visit. Now he – all of them – had come with a definite objective in view, something that had to be reached, seized.

They threaded their way through the giant bustle of the station out on to the streets snarling and hooting with traffic. The immense, urbane buildings looking down upon the teeming, elbow-sharp pavements, the bigness and swiftness of it all, made them catch their breath.

Stan said, "Well, boys. This is it."

The others nodded silently, like travellers who have journeyed for a long time without knowing it and who have finally reached a destination they had not even dreamt of.

They were out of the *Vienna Woods* now and the audience was roaring its ovation, a powerful, steady note of approbation that numbed the senses.

The West Coast Light Music Sestet bowed and bowed.

Over the boom of applause rose calls of "Encore!" And then another burst of applause! This really was the performance of a lifetime.

Stan tried to peer beyond the blinding lights, to see the people out there and convey to them his, the entire band's, sense of intense gratitude.

But the hermetic glaze of the lights seemed to have hardened. And, try as he would, his eyesight had turned watery and he could no longer look beyond the lights.

So he turned and signalled the boys into yet another number and noticed Gomes, immobilized in a taut half-crouch, his face tight with terror. Like a bird before a snake, thought Stan astonishedly, and impatiently waved again. Eventually Gomes unfroze and settled behind his instruments. Really, thought Stan. This wouldn't do at all. He must have a word with the young fellow once this was over.

But now, they were off again, this time on a free-swinging *Radetsky March*, and Stan's thoughts raced back to their first

view of the great National Hall, the venue of the concert.

As they had driven up to the mammoth, gleaming building in a ramshackle taxi, they had seen the posters and stiffened with pride.

AN EVENING TO REMEMBER!
The West Coast Light Music Sestet
Presents
A Special Concert of
Western Classical Themes

They met the Manager, a soft-voiced man with ceremonial manners. Almost like a priest conducting a rite, thought Stan. Then they went inside the main auditorium and the immense emptiness of the place made them shrink. It seemed impossible that six figures in thin, angular black could hope to fill, sustain and nourish that gigantic waiting cavity.

It's almost like a huge mouth, thought Stan, and unaccountably shivered.

They looked at each other uncertainly and spoke in whispers, for fear that the fissures of their voices might cause the vacuity to crack, burying them all in tumbling blocks of silent space.

drift across the perfect, enameled faces and said to himself, "My God, we'll never make a mark on them!"

But they had clapped for that one. And the next. And the one after that. And in the interval the Manager had come round to tell them how much everyone was enjoying their music.

They were still enjoying it. Every time a theme ended, the orchestra of applause took over, perfectly timed and controlled, relentlessly drawing them on from one number to the next, a leviathan Pied Piper in reverse.

Perreira, the violinist, was the first to go. He was the oldest and thinnest and he folded up quietly and neatly as though he were his own clothes being put away, and even managed not to damage his violin when he fell.

With a soundless cry Gomes tried to rush off the stage. But the black walls were solid and immovable on three sides and in front was the blazing barricade of light. So he went back to his instruments and there was only a slight jump in the music, the kind that an old record might make.

The West Coast Light Music Quintet played on. And the unseen audience waited and clapped, and waited and clapped.

The cellist and the other violinist, who incidentally were brothers, went together.

Stan didn't see them, he couldn't see anything now, nothing but the red flashes in his own skull. But he could tell from the altered sound.

He led the West Coast Light Music Trio on. And on.

Then there were only the two of them, Gomes and he, Gomes who had been so frightened but had stayed till the end.

And then Gomes too was gone and there was only he. Playing alone on the glowing, coruscating stage. Playing his heart out, for an audience of a lifetime. And on and on and encore on and the noises he was making were whimpers and then ...

He screamed a high pure note of horror and, with his flung-up arm in a final flourish, he cut himself dead.