

The Agony of Valliamma

The Agony of Valliamma
AZIZ HASSIM

ISBN NO. etc.
Indosafrikan Publishers

Dedicated to

Foreword

My curiosity about the life of Valliamma, the child martyr who was murdered by the colonial regime when she was barely sixteen, was first piqued by my dear and now departed mentor, Soobry Pillay.

It brewed within me for years, occasionally tempting me to write her story. Sadly, other more pressing priorities intruded.

I was continuously amazed, though, that throughout that period no one whom I spoke to had heard of this remarkable girl. Nor, to my knowledge, had anything of substance been written about her. This disturbed me.

The Universe, however, has its own agenda.

When Soobry Pillay passed away, a little over a month ago, I began to feel guilty; he had repeatedly exhorted me to record her story and I had not responded to his request. It was then that I mentioned my procrastination to Yana, Soobry's son. I also commented that I could not find much information about Valliamma.

That casual conversation, over a cup of coffee, suddenly opened up a new world to me.

Yana, in his usual manner, came over the next day and dumped a load of historical documents onto my dining room table, much of it rare and not easily obtainable elsewhere.

To say a simple 'Thank you' to Yana is not enough. My appreciation is unbounded.

However, the environment that Valliamma lived in, more than a hundred years ago, is the product of my own research, as is my style and the narrative, including the imagined dialogues between the protagonists.

Any errors, omissions, and flaws are mine, and I accept full responsibility for them.

May all readers of this slim novel forgive those

The Agony of Valliamma

shortcomings.

Aziz Hassim
Durban. September 2011.

Prologue

Doornfontein. 1898.

Midwinter. Icy cold. Bitterly gusty. The freezing wind whipped through the shack-like houses of Indian labourers scattered around the Mooi Street ghetto in Johannesburg, home to some of the forgotten and neglected scraps of society.

Munuswami, chilled to the bone by the biting frost, shivered violently as he stepped through the flimsy and rickety door and looked earnestly at the midwife, the concern on his face reflected in his eyes.

“Mangalam is fine. So is the child. It’s a girl. Mother and daughter are resting.”

Munuswami sighed with relief, placed his basket on the ground and headed for the bleak and dreary corner where his wife and child lay huddled on the floor, wrapped in a sheer and insubstantial sackcloth and a threadbare military style overcoat.

“Yerru, thumby,” the midwife exclaimed in Tamil – “Wait! There is something I must tell you.”

Munuswami hesitated, not pleased by the distraction. But there was a look in the ancient woman’s eyes, some urgent message, which made him obey her request.

“I am old now. I have been doing this work for over seventy years. I have seen much and there are those who will tell you that I am very spiritual and have psychic powers...”

“I know that, amma. I haven’t forgotten that you attended to my mother when I was born. She often told me that I was stillborn and you breathed life into me.”

“Only God can do that! You listen to me now. Carefully. My time is up. I have looked into your child’s eyes. She has seen God. She will do His work. She is also deeply

intelligent. But she is not of this world. She will leave at an early age, long before she gives you any grandchildren. But she will do much greater things. Like you, she will fight the enemies of our people.

“You need to remember that as she grows up. And you must support her in her struggle for justice. You are her father and that is also your dharma. I must go now. Attending to her confinement was what I was born to do. My job is done. May the Lord Krishna watch over you and your family.”

Before the words had fully registered and while he still waited for her to reveal some greater secret, the midwife picked up her haversack and disappeared.

Munuswami stood, transfixed, his mind in turmoil: Had he been dreaming? Was his imagination playing tricks with him? Had she really been here? And then he recalled something else his mother had told him, that the ancient lady was not given to speaking loosely. And that her predictions were legendary and always accurate – often only manifesting themselves many years after she had first mentioned them. And what did she mean, what was the message she had conveyed? He was confused, rooted to the spot and unmoving.

And then he heard the baby cry, the sound cutting through his thoughts. He shrugged his shoulders, sighed, and then swiftly moved to his wife’s side.

“Mangalam...?”

“Come, my husband. Take your child in your arms and warm her frozen body. And whisper her name in her ear.”

“Her name...?”

“Yes. Yes. It’s what we agreed on.”

“What? In my excitement I have forgotten...”

“Valliamma.”

Chapter One

West End Hotel. Durban 1970

Soobry Pillay was angry, his eyes blazing with fury. “Those names that you boys just mentioned,” he said, somewhat irascibly, the irritation in his voice obvious, “I have no problem with them. They all fought for our freedom. Goonum! The Meers, Monty Naicker, Yusuf Dadoo...I knew them all. Personally. And they were great leaders of the Resistance. Everyone knows that. Their names are etched in our memory. But all of you, how much do you really know, about the unsung heroes, about the early fighters who gave their lives so that we can be free?”

“I know, Tata,” a youngster muttered, “There were many others...”

“You know nothing! Many others? Tchah! Finish your drink and I’ll give you the next one on the house. But you listen nicely now. I don’t like repeating myself.”

“Okay, boss,” Thumba smiled. “Go ahead, educate us.”

“And that is something else I don’t like. I’m no man’s boss! We are all equal here – isn’t that what you were taking about?”

“Sorry, boss...I mean Tata. I take that back.”

“You learn fast. That’s a good quality.” As he spoke, Soobry bent over and reached under the counter, extracting a writing pad and a pencil. “Write this name down,” he instructed, “Do it carefully and correctly. I’ll spell it out for you: Valliamma Munuswami Mudliar.”

“Hey, Uncle Soobry,” Abbas shouted from a nearby table, “I’ve heard of her. My old man once told me she gave her life for the people. He said she was a great lady.”

“She was a child,” Soobry retorted, almost rever-

ently.

“Ya? A child?” a third patron standing at the far end of the bar counter smiled. “How old?”

“How old?” Soobry smiled back, his voice low. “When they murdered her or when she first took on the Nazis?”

“Nazis?” Thumba asked, his face a mask of confusion. “She was in the war...?”

“I told you boys, you know nothing. Yes, it was a war, but not the one you’re thinking of. In the early days we referred to the apartheid government as ‘Nazis.’ But I’m talking of a time before then, around 1906, when Valliamma was only about eight years old. She told those racist bastards their fortune.”

Abbas gave a low whistle, then asked in a voice that was half-disbelieving, half-admiring, “Only eight years old? You have to be kidding! And how old was she when they killed her?”

“Not yet sixteen.”

“And they actually killed her?”

“You could say that.”

“Tata,” Thumba asked quietly, his eyes suddenly soft, “Tell us more. I’m intrigued.”

“Intrigued? Nice word that. But I donno what it means. But look, my relief barman will report for duty early today. You boys come here, at about seven, and bring your friends. We’ll go into the backroom and I’ll tell you a story that will warm your hearts faster than that drink in your hands.”

There were five of them, huddled around an old wooden table. Thumba Pillay, Abbas Jinna and Sonny Murugen had been in the bar earlier. Now they were accompanied by Mohan Govender and Sam Naidoo.

“Okay,” Soobry Pillay said, his voice barely audible, “I’m going to give you lighties a history lesson that your schools were not allowed to teach you. And it’s as true as the day you were born.

“In those early years, around about 1890, a fruit and vegetable hawker by the name of Munuswami Mudliar daily lugged a heavy basket that was attached to a wooden pole that he balanced over his shoulders, just behind his neck. Earning a living was not easy, and he was up early every morning to buy his wares from the market. In winter his wife, Mangalam, would light a fire in the center of their shack to keep her family warm. She collected coal from around the railway lines. Munuswami barely earned enough to put food on the table - and they had no table so they sat on the floor - and pay rent to the slumlords.

“I sell food so that we can eat,” he often cried bitterly when his customers haggled over the price of his goods.

“In 1898 they had their first child, Valliamma. When Munuswami, a few years later, complained to his wife that the child played in the yard as if the cold didn’t affect her, his wife replied with a smile, “The fire is in her heart. This little one is a fighter.”

Listening to Soobry narrating Valliamma’s story, the boys felt as if they had been transported back in time. They were paying rapt attention.

“You must remember,” Soobry continued, “that the girl was born in a family of Passive Resisters. Both her parents were in and out of jail regularly. For what? Fighting for justice! It didn’t stop them from opposing the unjust laws, and Valliamma, the oldest of their four children, refused to stay at home and take care of her siblings. She went to every political rally and listened to every word that the leaders of the time, great men like Gandhi and Thambi Naidoo, told their audience. Wasn’t long before the little girl often jumped onto the stage and, with her dynamic

personality, raised the ire of the people. And she was only eight years old at the time!

“You find that hard to believe? Go check the facts. They’re all there, somewhere in the records of the Transvaal Tamil Society. What was it that motivated the child to become a freedom fighter? Was it a commitment to justice? Anger at the way people of colour were being treated? The pain that her parents and other Passive Resisters suffered in jail? The brutality of the unjust laws? Maybe it was all of those things...”

The boys were entranced. The old barman had fired their imagination. His physical presence had faded, all they heard was the voice and were suddenly caught in a time warp – living in an environment and back to a time when a girl far younger than them was the heroine of their lives...

Chapter Two

Johannesburg. 1906.

Valliamma was tired. Her bare feet were swollen and a cut under her big toe made walking painful. She kept to the edge of the pavement, trying to keep the ball of her wounded foot off the paving. It helped a little. Not much, but enough to continue on her journey. I must get to that rally, she kept repeating to herself. I must not be late.

When she entered the schoolyard, to her dismay the protest meeting had just ended and a priest was leading the congregation into prayer. Valliamma forced her way to the front and, as soon as the prayer was over, she impulsively jumped onto the makeshift stage and, to her own amazement, began to dance, performing the Bharata Natyam with an impromptu display of childish grace. It was a totally involuntary portrayal, and when the audience began clapping in appreciation she looked confused and a little shy, surprised by her audacity.

She painfully lowered herself off the stage and then, holding onto an upright post and slightly off-balance, she raised her foot and examined the toe, wincing as it started to bleed again.

“Come here, child,” a middle aged, distinguished-looking man took her by the arm and then carried her to a chair, signaling with his eyes to one of the officials, who hastily vacated his seat.

“What is your name, little one?”

“Valliamma.”

“Are your parents here?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

“You danced very well, in spite of the cut on your foot.”

“It’s nothing. The people are suffering more.”

“Excellent! But now we must ask one of the first-aid ladies to bandage your foot.” He signaled a stout lady in a nurse’s uniform and when she came over, he simply said, “Bandage this poor child’s toe and see that she gets home safely.”

Before the nurse could react, Valliamma retorted, “Naanpaavamum ille, kazhanthayum ille” – I am neither poor nor a child.

Her benefactor chuckled delightfully at her audacity, waved affectionately, and walked away.

“Who was that?” Valliamma asked the nurse.

“Thambi Naidoo,” the woman replied, “one of our greatest freedom fighters. A man who is in jail more often than he is at his house.”

“Somebody should teach him some manners. He talked to me like I was a little girl.”

“But you are –”

“Give me the bandage,” Valliamma retorted bluntly. “I’ll tie it myself when I get home.”

“But...” the nurse started to object, when Valliamma simply walked away.

“Amma, at the rally in the schoolyard they said something about a law that would make Hindu marriages illegal.”

“Yes. It’s a new law that the government is trying to introduce. It could take years and may never even happen.”

“So? Does that mean I will be illegitimate?”

“Where do you learn such fancy words? And in the eyes of God you are perfectly legitimate, and that is all that matters.”

“But who gives them the right to go against God’s laws? Why don’t we just tell them to go to hell?”

“Hush, child! If your father hears you talking like that – “

“But appa says it all the time. He says those racist dogs need to be sorted out.”

“And they throw him in jail.”

“And you, amma? You do exactly what appa does and you also end up in jail. They can’t keep doing this. I’m going to fight them!”

“You are too young to...”

“Gandhi doesn’t think so. Just last week I heard him say we must all make a stand – man, woman, and child.”

“What will you do?”

“I will go to every rally. I will listen to Gandhi and Thambi Naidoo, and I will join them in the fight against this evil. God says that you must fight evil, and then it doesn’t last.”

“Who told you that?”

“I just know it. It’s God’s law.”

“They will throw you in prison –“

“I am already in prison. All of us are. These unjust laws, they lock up our minds and turn us into criminals.”

“Your appa and me have been to prison many times, for simply going to protest meetings. It is horrible in there-“

“The horror is out here, amma. And we are the only ones that can put an end to it. We can’t protest when we are in prison.”

“Your father and I are fighting that battle.”

“Look at him...he leaves home before daylight and returns when it is dark. He works all day like an animal and that is how the police treat him. They take his basket of food that he sells from door to door, and say they are confiscating it because he is trading without a license.

And what do they do with it? They take it to their homes and enjoy themselves. This must stop. Now!”

“They are too powerful, child. They-“

“Are they more powerful than God? He is on our side, leading us. We are His army. How can we lose?”

“We will go with you to every rally and-“

“No, amma. I will go alone. All our people are too soft. They make speeches and wait for something to happen. It is time to confront the enemy, to tell them that their evil stops now. It is up to us to change the world. It’s the job I was born to do. And that work starts today!”

Chapter Three

Johannesburg. 1908.

When Valliamma walked up to the stage, many of the protesters in the crowd snickered at the child's audacity. When she started speaking, the snickering stopped, to be replaced with awe and respect.

"Those of you who came here today for entertainment, the fun is over. You can go home now and continue to be the government's slaves. The rest of you, who value your freedom and justice, stay and listen."

Valliamma's voice was clear as a bell. A stout lady in the audience turned to her friend and whispered, "Who is this girl? She talks like a veteran..."

"Hush!" her companion replied softly. "It's obvious that she is gifted. I want to hear what she has to say."

"We were born free," Valliamma continued passionately. "We need no one's permission to demand our rights. Evil must be destroyed, before it destroys you. And talking, as we are doing today and you have been doing for a long time, will change nothing. We must confront this enemy, in his own castle, and tell him that his time is up! He must now step aside, before the anger of the people removes him."

The audience was hypnotized. They couldn't believe that a mere girl was addressing them, and with such forceful conviction. And Valliamma's unusual height, her tall body, held them spellbound. Few would have guessed that she was just a little over ten years of age.

"What can they do to you, those animals that take all your possessions and give it to their own people who have more than enough anyway? Throw you in jail? Feed you rubbish with weevils in it? Beat you up and abuse you? But they are doing that even now, even as we talk.

You have nothing left, nothing to lose. When you are on the ground you can only go up. It is time for you to rise and let the enemy know that you have called on God to come to your rescue. Let them try and fight Him! But God will only be at your side if you go into battle. Talking is not fighting.

“Just the other day Gandhiji said, ‘You must be afraid neither of imprisonment nor of deportation. You must not mind being reduced to poverty, nor must you be frightened of being mashed into pulp with a mortar and pestle.’ Listen to him. Learn from him.

“Don’t demonstrate only in our areas, where the oppressors don’t see us. Go into their own districts, where they live like kings with money from your hard work. There are good people among them too. Let them see what we have been reduced to. That is a lot better than coming to these rallies and talking among ourselves. We must instruct our leaders that the time for talking is over.”

“Yes!” several voices called out. “We are with you. It is time. Lead us.”

“We have very good leaders. Follow them. They have the experience to lead all of us.”

A babble of voices rose all around the gathering. The crowd was fired up and ready to march to the white areas. Someone shouted something unintelligible, appealing to Valliamma to continue talking. She had already leapt off the stage and was walking away.

“Who is that girl? Where does she live?”

The slim, distinguished looking man, in his late thirties, was looking earnestly at his companion, demanding an answer.

“I don’t know, Mohanbhai. I’ve heard that her parents are very active in the struggle. But look, here comes

our friend Ally. He knows the child's family well."

H.O. Ally - Ally as he was simply known to everyone - smiled as he approached Gandhi and his friend, and then bowed slightly, simultaneously raising his hands and joining them together in greeting. "Mohanbhai, its good to see you looking well. I heard you were released only yesterday."

"Thambi and I reached home this morning. His wife, Veeramal, is still in prison."

"Those filthy dogs!" Ally swore under his breath, his face flushed with anger, "they respect nobody and nothing. They use their military strength with disregard for human life – black lives. Our only weapon is our unity, and in the end it will triumph."

"Well said, good friend! Tell me, did you hear that little girl a few minutes ago, telling the people to make a determined stand against the government?"

Ally smiled widely, the delight reflected in his eyes. "That child...the gods smile down on her. She has been touched by an angel! I've heard her, often. Give us two more like her, put them in the front line, and the war will be over in a day!"

"So you agree with her," Gandhi chuckled, "we are at war?"

"You heard the people applauding her, they certainly think so."

"Do you know her family and where she lives?"

"Yes indeed! Both her parents are satyagrahis, in and out of jail regularly. When he is not in prison he earns a living as a hawker. And when her mother and father are both locked up it's the little girl who feeds her younger siblings, from money she earns by hawking, just like her father."

"I would like to meet her family. Can you take me to them?"

“I’ll be honoured. But don’t expect the girl, Valliamma, to bow to you. She is a warrior. And a proud one too.”

“Our children grow up fast here,” Gandhi said sadly. “Patience is not a part of their culture. But that is as it should be. And you say she is proud? It’s what I like about our people. Pride is a revolutionary emotion.”

“We can go there now, if you like.”

“Come then. Lead the way.”

“You are our leader, Mohanbhai. But for now, it will be my great honour to be in front of you.” Ally was still chuckling when Gandhi hugged him affectionately.

“Thank you for welcoming us so warmly into your home,” Gandhi said to the Mudliars. “Your courtesy will always be remembered.”

“Thank you, Mohanbhai. I’m afraid that tea is all we can offer you.”

“It is all we need. I came to meet your daughter. She is a firebrand. We are proud of her.”

“Valliamma? Her mother here says the girl was born with a flame in her heart. We worry about her.”

“We are immensely pleased with her and her fighting spirit.”

“She lives for the people. All she talks about is freedom and justice.”

“That is all we are asking for. This government, it is stupid. It believes a gun can destroy our determination. It is their own people who will pay the price for their folly.”

“When she was born I was told that she is not for this world, that she will leave us early in her life.”

“God’s will,” Ally said, with conviction. “What is written is written.”

Valliamma had just walked through the door, and

Munuswami said, "This is Gandhiji. That is uncle Ally with him."

"I know them. I have heard them speak. They are of the people."

"We have come to see you, my child," Gandhi said warmly. "We heard you speak today. You shamed us with your words, your passion."

"All I was saying is 'Shatham Prati Satyam' – truth against a rogue.

"Beautiful!" Ally exclaimed softly. "Absolutely marvelous! It must become our rallying cry, at all our protest meetings."

Gandhi's eyes were sparkling, his face reflecting his delight. "I am amazed by your choice of words. May I ask you, in all respect, where you first heard them?"

"In my heart. Everything I say is from my heart," she replied bluntly.

The men were suddenly speechless and unsure of how to respond. In the silence that followed, Mangalam, mildly embarrassed by Valliamma's quick words, diplomatically stepped into the breach and smoothly took control of the discussion. "She is always like that. She says what's in her mind..."

"I like it!" Gandhi said approvingly. "It is an admirable quality. The next time there is a rally, she must be on the stage with us."

"I don't require a stage to talk to our people," Valliamma cut in. "They know what we are going through. We should be dealing with our oppressor."

"Quite right," Gandhi responded. "Tomorrow Thambi Naidoo is expected to be released from jail. Although he has insisted that he does not wish to be met when he walks out of prison gates, Ahmed Cachalia and imam Bawazeer, together with Mister Sorabjee and I, are determined to be there. It is a show of strength, to demon-

strate to the authorities that we stand united. And we are very angry because they have also locked up Cupusamy, Thambi's 16 year old son, and have no intention of letting him out."

"I want to be there too," Valliamma snapped. "I've met him. He is a good man and the people love him!"

"That wouldn't be wise. Those brutes outside of the police station are not nice people. In all likelihood we will be attacked even when we stand there peacefully. They respect nobody. You could be badly hurt."

"You're not scared of the beating?"

"No! They can hurt my body but my dignity will be intact."

"Then why do you think I will feel any differently?"

Gandhi was stumped. He was astounded by the girl's courage and determination. The look in her eyes, the resolution and fortitude reflected in them, filled him with pride and, simultaneously, provided him with the mettle to pursue his mission with greater determination. It was a quality he had come across occasionally in the past few years, but never in a child of such tender years. And very rarely even among the adults.

"Yes...okay. But you must promise to stay behind us, out of the line of attack."

"I make no promises. What happens will happen."

Chapter Four

West End Hotel. Durban. 1970.

“No Tata...no! no! no! You can't just stop there and leave us hanging,” Abbas Jinna said, appealingly.

“We need to know what happened next,” Sam Naidoo cut in.

“We are not moving from here, Tata. We're going to sit right here until you finish the story,” Mohan Govender insisted. “You don't really think we can walk home without hearing the rest of this great girl's life.”

“You boys can sit here all night, for all I care,” Soobry Pillay shot back. “I have a family to get back to.”

“But Tata!!!” they all chorused in unison. And then they saw him smile, saw the mischief in his eyes, and knew that he was teasing them.

“You boys come here tomorrow. And I'll educate you tunsels – you rascals. But remember now, tomorrow is Sunday, so you can only come at 'session' time, twelve noon.”

“And you'll close at two, and in that time you will be busy with your customers. How much can we learn in that short while?” Abbas asked disconsolately.

“That's the law, my boy, as it applies to us Indians and Coloureds. Don't let it bother you. We will end up right here, in this room, and I'll make sure there's enough food for you to stay awake.”

“Nothing will keep us away, Tata. And you can be sure we will be wide awake,” Mohan said firmly. “This kid, Valliamma, she's one bristen bok. I want to know all about her.”

By two in the afternoon the boys had all settled

comfortably in the backroom, and were chatting amongst themselves whilst they waited for uncle Soobry to lock up.

“This ‘session’ business is a lot of crap!” Mohan said. “We can drink only if we buy a meal, whether or not we are hungry. We can’t enter a pub before twelve and have to be out by two. And it applies only to us darkies. The witous can booze all day, in luxury lounges, and don’t have to order chow either. It’s just a racket to fleece us!”

“What are you complaining about?” Abbas smiled. “Uncle Soobry is the head honcho here, he’s in charge of the Indian section and he settled us charous in the back here, and damned comfortably too.”

“Listen, both you guys,” Sam said to Mohan and Abbas, “Uncle Soobry doesn’t like slang – like ‘bok’ and ‘bristen.’ You okes know that, so watch out or you’ll get the rough end of his tongue.”

“Nothing bad about those words, but point taken, boet,” Abbas responded amicably. “And here he comes. Let’s hope he continues with the Valliamma story and doesn’t tell us to buzz off.”

Soobry Pillay headed directly for the kettle and switched it on. As he prepared to make himself a cup of tea, he called over his shoulder, “Any of you like some tea? Come and make it yourself.”

“Tata...” Thumba cried appealingly, “All we want is to hear about Valliamma – “

“Patience, my boy. That girl was a saint. She turned her world on its side, like no one had done before. And I have to be sure that when I talk I don’t insult her memory.

“In every generation there comes a leader, a savior, who leads the people to glory. Valliamma was the trail-blazer in her time. She mobilized society – especially the women - to stand tall and proud of their lineage. Where such a young girl received her inspiration is a mystery.

There are those who say she was saint-like, blessed by a higher power. Some say the midwife, herself a saintly lady, saw the greatness in her at birth. Who really knows? What we do know is she had guts, the courage to face up to tyrants and not back down.”

Soobry had poured the tea into his cup and now sat back into his favourite chair, his face reflective. “That was a time ... a period in our lives, when taking on the brutal laws and standing up for human rights, black rights, could cost you your life, and it often did.

“I want you boys to remember something, for as long as you live. Evil, by its very nature, cannot last. But you have to make an effort to destroy it. Don’t fall into the trap of believing that somehow, not of your own doing, everything will come right. That would be stupid, like building a boat where there is no water. Valliamma knew this, she didn’t have to be told.”

Soobry paused to gather his thoughts, then took a long sip from his cup before continuing. The young men around him were spellbound, hardly daring to breathe. “It was a time when evil ruled this land, when the gods were sleeping, as if, having given us Valliamma they had no need to do anything more...”

Chapter Five

Johannesburg. 1908.

A **small group** of people had gathered at the entrance to the prison, waiting for Thambi Naidoo to emerge. Several armed policemen, bristling with revolvers and rifles, faced the tiny crowd. Valliamma was right at the front, shouting at the top of her voice: “SHATHAM PRATI SATYAM” – truth against a rogue.

The assemblage took its cue from her, chorusing in unison, “SHATHAM PRATI SATYAM! A few added, “God’s name is truth!”

“And truth will triumph,” Ally roared.

“You, Gandhi,” a senior police official screamed, “Take your rabble and get the hell out of here. We have instructions to shoot you if you pursue this unlawful protest. Go! NOW!”

“This is a peaceful demonstration,” Gandhi answered, softly and reasonably. “We are passive citizens and we are not breaking the law and have no intention of attacking anybody. This is a public place and we have every right to be here. I assure you we will leave quietly as soon as our comrade walks out of that gate.”

“You have instructions to shoot us?” Valliamma demanded, “even though we are causing no disturbance? Who gave you the instructions? And are you saying you need our permission to murder us? You do what you have to do. And we will do what we have to do. ‘Shatham Prati Satyam.’ That is the law we live by. Yours is a sick law. We do not obey evil laws!”

The leader of the police force was stumped. If he took violent action, with Gandhi at the receiving end, there would be an international outcry. And experience had taught him that he would be blamed by his own sen-

iors, as they scuttled to save their necks. If he did nothing he would be seen, by the same bosses, as a weak leader.

Whilst he wavered uncertainly he was rescued by Thambi Naidoo, walking boldly out of the prison gates. The protesters were cheering loudly. For the moment the pressure was off him. In that moment, he watched Valliamma closely, taking careful note of her appearance. His time will come, he swore to himself, and he'll break the little bitch and obtain revenge for his humiliation.

"Even as I step out of prison," Thambi Naidoo smiled warmly, "the first face I see is this little girl, leading the way." He hugged Valliamma effusively, then turned towards Gandhi and Ally, "Well, dear friends, can we go somewhere and get a hot cup of tea and something to eat. I'm famished."

As soon as Thambi had showered and borrowed fresh clothes from Ally, they settled around Ally's table. Valliamma asked Thambi Naidoo, "Tell me what it's like in there. Do they feed you?"

"That, my dear, is the least of our problems when in jail. But why do you ask?"

"I need to know what to expect, when they take me in."

"When they take you in? You're convinced that will happen?"

"Yes. I saw the way that policeman looked at me."

"Valliamma, you don't want to end up there. It is beyond terrible. When people talk about hell on earth, that place is it.

"It's vermin infested, cockroaches crawl all over you and often you have to fight off rats that are as big as cats. Its bitterly cold in winter and the only covering you have are the fleas that crawl over your body. Your body itches constantly, and you only sleep in snatches. And there is

no one you can complain to. The moment you open your mouth they shove the barrels of their guns down your throat.

“And as much as that may shock you, there are worse things that happen in there. You are continuously walking in your own faeces and...look, let’s not talk about it now. I wanted to look presentable when I go home. I didn’t want to shock my family. I have to go to them...”

“Yes,” Gandhi added. “Nothing is more important than family. Go and reassure them.”

“Before I do that...Valliamma, you have your entire life before you. Pursue your studies. The Resistance will take care of itself.”

“What do you know of how long I have to live! I may be young but I see our people’s pain. And some of our leaders...they keep saying they have a vision for our future. I’m not sure what they are seeing, but I hear them laughing. It angers me. I’m not sure whether they love power or the people, especially when they find the battle for liberty amusing!”

“You had better go now, Thambi, while you still can,” Gandhi cut in with a smile. “This girl, she’ll end up becoming your siren song and, as the Greeks say, lure you onto the rocks. I can only pray for more like her.”

“Like I once told you, Mohanbhai,” Ally smiled back, “You only need two more like her and the war will be over.”

Thambi chuckled loudly, “You two say she is my siren song. But you are both like the Ancient Mariner, and if I don’t get out of your clutches now I’ll be hooked for life.”

“Go with God, good friend,” Ally said warmly. “We meet tomorrow, to plan the way forward.”

“And make sure I’m there,” Valliamma butted in. “This is not your battle only.”

“That child...” Gandhi said to Ally as soon as they were alone, “She makes me feel sorry for our enemies. I would hate to suffer her enmity.”

“If we ever win this contest, it will be the likes of Valliamma that will make it happen.”

“It’s strange that you say that. I feel this child is not interested in winning or losing – as long as justice triumphs eventually. I don’t understand, though, how someone so young can be so wise.”

“It is a benefaction from God. There is no other explanation. With wisdom comes courage and she has a lot of that.”

“She certainly does! And she doesn’t know the meaning of fear.”

“Look, Mohanbhai, I am convinced that she is not of this world. And she dotes on Thambi – our ‘old offender’ as he is affectionately called. And he takes the government on at every turn, which gives her even greater encouragement.”

“Thambi is the greatest of our satyagrahis. The greatest liberation fighter this country, or any other, ever produced. I’m convinced that without his presence the Passive Resistance movement would have crumbled. It’s good that he mentors the child. I fear for her. She has a huge following, perhaps even greater than my own. We have to find a way to protect her from the government’s lackeys.”

“She will never agree to any form of protection. She is hell-bent on provoking the authorities, is actually daring them to lock her up. I think it is her way of exposing our rulers to the world.”

“I agree with that summation, my friend. There is some divine power that guides her. Of that I am certain.”

And when she tells the crowds that our leaders seem to preach rather than practise I can't help but agree with her. I'm not sure that even I am not guilty of that failing. What concerns me intensely, though, is that our people must not be incited to the point where they resort to violence. I acknowledge that an unjust law is itself a species of violence. Arrest for its breach is more so. Violence should be resisted not by counter-violence but by non-violence. This I do peacefully by submitting myself to arrest and imprisonment."

"No one can accuse you of lacking morality, my brother. You are the originator of satyagraha, you taught us to mobilize and stand firm. Without the likes of you and Thambi, the Resistance would fade away. And now, I am convinced that Valliamma will inject a new impetus to the movement. It worries me, though, when she says that she is not of this world for long!"

Without looking up from the ground, which he seemed to be contemplating, Gandhi commented, "What will be, will be. I'm intrigued by what she will do next. Don't be surprised if she turns our world upside down. She is way ahead of all of us when it comes to forward planning. Mark my words, this country will never be the same when she finishes her mission."

"I don't doubt that. And she can make that happen anytime now."

"We cannot lose control," Valliamma was saying to her companion as they crossed over the street on their way to school. "Our people are dying in jail. Their children are dying in their decaying houses because there is no one to care for them. It has to stop. I will stop them. Later today we must go to the Tamil Benefit Society and arrange to feed the hungry and the starving. Over the next few days, if our schooling has to suffer, so be it!"

“Valliamma...” her friend, Nagappen, said softly, “What’s going on there, across the road? Some old man is being beaten up by the police and...”

Valliamma was already sprinting across the road, her face furious. “Hey, you,” she called out long before she reached the scene, “leave him alone, he is old and weak. Stop! NOW! You big bully!”

“Shut your face, coolie!” the tall and burly constable shouted back, “or you will get a bit of the same. You bloody Indians, you think you own this land!”

“We do own this country, you filthy tyrant. And your time will soon come! I warn you, stop beating this poor man.”

“You warn me? You cheeky bitch! I’ll throw all of you in jail till you rot like rats.”

Valliamma had stepped in between the policeman and the bleeding old man, protecting him with her body. And then a miraculous change seemed to overcome her, she appeared to grow taller, menacing, projecting an authority that transformed her into a fearsome adversary.

“Shatham prati satyam,” she pronounced, so softly that the officer had to lean forward to hear her. The first two fingers of each hand were extended and pointing at the man’s face, her upper body leaning forward. “The truth shall set us free.”

It was at that moment, when he leaned forward to hear what she was saying, that the thug looked into the girl’s eyes for the first time. And he froze. An unknown fear coursed through him, immobilizing him. Something, some searing power emanating from her, chilled him to his core and he involuntarily shivered. What he saw in the girl’s eyes was his own death.

“Go! Back to your hole and leave decent people alone,” Valliamma repeated, in the same soft and unthreatening voice. “Move!”

The browbeaten ruffian shuddered, then started to tremble. He took a backward step, then another, began to retreat, and then turned around and fled across the road.

Valliamma bent down and helped the old man to his feet. As he slowly rose, she asked, “can I help you? Maybe get some water?”

“No, beti, I’m fine,” he replied, breathing heavily. “This has happened to me before, often. I’m used to it. But what did you say to that man to make him flee...”

“Why was he beating you?” Valliamma asked, not unkindly, ignoring the question.

“He asked me for money. I laughed, because I don’t have a penny. That made him angry.”

“What is your name, Tata?”

“Amod. Just Amod.”

“Can I take you home?”

“Home? The gutters are my home, child. They took my house away from me a year ago. It was a nice house. My father had built it with his bare hands. Then the whites came and threw our furniture and all of us onto the street. Now they live in my house,” he added bitterly.

“And your family?”

“They are at my brother’s house, in Claremont – Pretoria. The place is a ghetto and my brother is not rich. So I stay here, looking for some work. But who will give an old man like me a job.”

“You come with us, father. The Tamil Benefit Society will feed you and give you a bed to sleep in.”

“You are kind, beti. God will bless you.”

“All I want is the strength to break them! When that is done, God can do what he likes with me.”

Thambi Naidoo looked angrily at his close friend, P.K. Naidoo, and exhorted him to move swiftly to rein Valliamma in. “They will eliminate her, P.K. She doesn’t

know the meaning of fear. We have to get her to slow down. She is our trump card when we lead the march to Parliament. The people will follow her to hell.”

“Nobody can stop her, Thambi. And you should watch your own back. Their hit squad will soon come for you.”

“I have to do what I have to do. And to hell with the hit squad! Our people are in pain, constantly. That old man that Valliamma brought here yesterday, it broke my heart to hear his story. His is not an isolated case. The horror is a daily occurrence, repeated a dozen times. I have to take on their grief. Watching my back is not my priority.”

“And when they kill you?”

“There are others who will take over: You, H.O. Ally, Cachalia, Gandhi, Sorabjee, Rungasamy...the list is endless. How can I live if I desert the cause?”

“I’m not asking you to do that. We have both been in jail. I’ve lost track of the number of times. And you know that they are coming for you again, possibly today.”

“I have been in jail for longer than I have been out of it. What will change?”

“What will change? You are our greatest leader, the people’s hero. We need you.”

“And I say we need Valliamma. Our people love her. I may win a battle but she will win the war.”

“Thambi, my good friend, we can’t change the flow of history. Events will take their own course...”

P. K. was still talking when Nagappen barged in on them and said, breathlessly, “That policeman, the one Valliamma faced up to, came to her house an hour ago. He was screaming for her, and he had a large number of his friends with him...”

“What? What did you say?” P.K. cut in furiously. “They beat her up?”

“No. She was not at home. They took her mother

and father away.”

“We have to get to Valliamma,” Thambi said urgently. “There’s no telling what she will do now. We must find her and get Gandhi to go with us to the police station. We must move fast, before Valliamma takes matters into her own hands!”

Chapter Six

West End Hotel. Durban. 1970.

“**Uncle Soobry,**” Mohan said slowly, his eyes half-shut and his jaw clenched tightly, “We know nothing about all this. You are right! We are ignorant of our early heroes, men like Thambi Naidoo, H. O. Ally, P.K. Naidoo and the others. And we had never heard of Valliamma. Why? Why were we not told about those things? We knew about Gandhi and I always thought it was him alone who...”

“Cut the cackle, Mo,” Abbas said. “I want to hear about what Valliamma did when they picked up her parents.”

“We all do,” Sam added. “Don’t stop now, Uncle Soobry.”

“I like that you should know your history,” Soobry said, unhurriedly. “But I hope you don’t think this is a fairytale, something to keep you occupied and amused when you have nothing to do.”

“You know, Uncle Soobs,” Abbas replied solemnly, “We, all of us here, feel that nothing has changed. We are still treated by the cops like dirt. So we stay close to the casbah, where we call the shots and we can disappear into the alleys when they raid our areas. We hate their guts. They’re scum! But they have the guns and that gives them the muscle to push us around and harass us. But we have never taken this government on. We have never confronted their sick laws. So when we hear about Valliamma we feel courage and a kind of pride in her spunky confrontation of our common enemy.”

“Abbas is right!” Sam interjected firmly. “We made the mistake of treating the government’s muscle men with a contemptuous respect. We have never defied them, let

alone challenged them. That girl, Valliamma, makes us ashamed of our weakness and lack of commitment.”

“She makes me feel like a coward,” Mohan said softly, “like I’m a little skaapie that anyone can push around.”

“But...Uncle Soobry...” Thumba asked, “How do you know so much about the politics of that time, especially in Johannesburg? We know you never lived there and from what you told us, it was all before your time...”

“You boys are educated,” Soobry said. “But your education was controlled by orders from the government departments and politics was expressly forbidden in your schools. I didn’t have much education, but I knew right from wrong. And I read a lot, all the books I could get hold of. But they were mainly novels and nothing was written about Valliamma in any of them. And then, when I was forced to leave school and work here, my formal education ended.

“But I read all the papers that the customers left behind. And my mother, she was not only my tutor but also one of our greatest historians. She used to work here, in the kitchen. We had very little money, so she got me a job here as a scullery boy. I was fourteen at the time.

“It was the best thing that could have happened to me. There are those who will say my mother was not educated. Well...she couldn’t read or write English but she was a Tamil scholar and historian. And because we were together for most of the day, she gave me a running commentary on the developments in our country and told me about Valliamma, not just once but over and over. She gave me every detail of that child’s life and made certain I stored it in my mind. I appreciated that only much later, after she was gone.

“You must not forget that she lived in that time, when Valliamma was active. But this is not about my life. Let me tell you more about that remarkable child...”

Chapter Seven

Doornfontein. 1908.

When Valliamma walked through the door the first thing that struck her was the silence. The usual clutter of pots and pans as her mother worked was totally absent. And the flimsy door had been wide open. Although nobody ever locked their doors in the township, often leaving them open for the neighbours to walk in at their pleasure, it was not normal for the houses to be left unattended and unoccupied. Instinctively, she knew that something was amiss.

She was still gathering her thoughts when Minachee, who lived a few doors away, walked in. “The police were here earlier. I’m not even sure that they were the police. They were a rough bunch and behaved in a violent way. They were looking for you.”

Valliamma inclined her head, listening attentively. “They were screaming like wild animals and they messed up your house. When they realized that you were not here they took your mother and father away.”

“Did they hurt them?”

“No. But they behaved very rudely...”

Before Minachee could finish Thambi Naidoo, Gandhi and H.O. Ally came over and Thambi said, consolingly, “You mustn’t worry. Nagappen was here when the dogs came. He told us what happened. We are on our way to the police station. P.K. is already there.”

“I’m not worried. Appa and amma have been in and out of jail very often. But those men were looking for me. I must come with you. I’m concerned that they will torture my parents if I’m not there.”

They will do that anyway, Ally thought to himself, but only replied, “You can come along if you insist.”

“I deal with these people daily,” Gandhi added, “they know me and I’ll obtain access to them. Let us handle this.”

“We’re wasting time,” Thambi cut in. “Let’s go!”

“We are not interfering with your work, gentlemen,” Gandhi said reasonably. “That couple is innocent. We want to avoid trouble. If our people out there hear about this you will have a riot on your hands. I’m meeting with General Smuts tomorrow. I would like to put this behind me before then.”

The motley bunch of uniformed officials, bristling with anger, suddenly went quiet. They were aware of Gandhi’s influence with Smuts. None of them wanted to be accused of underhanded tactics. And they knew that they had no case against the Mudliars. Their pride, however, didn’t allow them to capitulate easily.

“This girl,” one of them, a burly individual, pointed towards Valliamma and bellowed, with false bravado, “is a trouble maker. She can’t be allowed to continue stirring your people to rebel. And you, Thambi, you are a rabble-rouser too! You can all go to Smuts and say what you like. He will listen to us and accept what we tell him.”

“My friend,” Gandhi replied dispassionately, “We have no intention of saying anything about today to him. Nor will we mention your names or anything about this incident. We are being reasonable. We’re asking you to help us to avoid wasting the General’s time on such petty matters. If you wish to charge this couple for any reason, that is your prerogative and you are not answerable to us. For now, let us all go in peace. It is not much to ask for.”

Gandhi was allowing them to save face and extricate themselves from a predicament that was entirely of their own doing.

Valliamma was on the verge of saying something,

of objecting to Gandhi's pacifist stance, when Thambi quietly took her aside and whispered, "Let Gandhiji handle this. Our concern now is for your parents. When they're out of here, you can decide what you wish to do. And I'll back you up. But for now, please..."

Valliamma nodded, and whispered back, "that man that Gandhiji is treating with so much respect, he is the one who beat up the old man, uncle Amod. I know that policeman. He hates me! But he fears me too..."

"And that makes him dangerous," Thambi Naidoo said softly, ensuring that only Valliamma could hear him. "Leave it for now. When we are away from here we will talk about it."

"All we do is talk, and then talk some more," Valliamma complained to the men around her. "We must take some firm steps..."

"Listen, my girl," Gandhi said, "I acknowledge and respect the fact that you are only ten years old. I am also fully aware that you have the brain of someone twice your age. But you haven't yet experienced the brutality that this government is capable of unleashing. I have been subjected to its barbaric savagery. And Thambi here has been to jail more than a dozen times, for simply standing up and peacefully denouncing it. You don't need that at this stage in your life."

"Are you telling me that fighting for the truth is only for a grown up?"

"I'm saying that you are too valuable to the people out there. Ending up in jail will only harm the cause, slow it down. We can't risk that."

"You are revered by those same people, for your brave stand. I see it as a noble fight. Why should my life be more valuable than yours?"

Gandhi was stumped. Dear God, he said to him-

self, how do I reason with this child. And yet, everything she says is perfectly sensible. How can one so young be capable of such profound wisdom. It can only be a gift from You.

“You have not answered me, uncle,” Valliamma said, cutting into Gandhi’s thoughts. Tell me where I’m wrong and I’ll do the right thing.”

“It isn’t about you being right or wrong,” Gandhi replied, then turned towards Thambi Naidoo and Ally, spreading his hands helplessly and seeking their participation. “Perhaps I am missing a point here...”

“If I may...” Ally said, choosing his words carefully, “I think I know where your anger comes from, Valliamma. Your parents have been very active in the Resistance, from long before you were born. They have been subjected to the regime’s brutality perpetually and incessantly.

“As a result, after you were born there must have been many times when you were cared for by neighbours and friends. You sensed, in those early days of your life, that your mother and father were continually being thrown in jail and forced into hard labour and that it was not because they had committed any crimes, but simply that they had the courage of their convictions.

“You must have witnessed the pain in their faces each time they returned from prison, their bruised and broken bodies hanging limply in their torn clothes. You may even have ministered to their ailments. And you surely shared in their agony.

“It was a devastating period in your life. You are not wealthy people. Your father toils as a hawker, earning barely enough to keep the home fires burning. And yet, the two of them have been in the forefront of the battle for liberation, crusading for our people’s freedom and holding high the banner for justice.

“How, whenever they were in prison - and they

were locked up for six months at least on each occasion, and that was very often - you managed to protect and feed your younger sisters is a miracle in itself. But it hardened you. It is the source...the origin, of your convictions.

“So, from the very first breath you took, those early experiences were the fountain that created what you are today. They fortified you. And that, my dear, is what makes you into the person you now are - your lineage... you have been programmed to fight injustice wherever you see it.

“It is an admirable quality but it could also be what destroys you in the end.”

“That is a very accurate assessment,” Thambi Naidoo confirmed, addressing Valliamma, “and it also explains why you chose the route of peaceful resistance rather than violent protest. It was ingrained into you by your parents and you learned that responding to savagery with barbaric and inhuman behavior was not the civilized way. You automatically chose the non-violent way of opposing the tyrant.

“All of us support that route. Indeed, Gandhiji has been promoting it almost since he first arrived in our country. What we are now saying is that such methods require a certain sophistication, the ability to fight back peacefully without a display of hatred or inculcating hatred in the oppressor. You, my girl, need to refine that avenue and learn from that philosophy.”

Valliamma, her neck inclined slightly to the side, was listening carefully to the opinions enunciated by both Ally and Thambi Naidoo. And the more she heard, the more the crease in her forehead lessened. Towards the end of Thambi’s statement she had begun to nod her head, implying acceptance of their estimation of the influence that her parents’ principled stance had had on her own development.

“If I may intrude,” Gandhi stepped in with his usual courteous manner, “I am not privy to your early life. But I do know your mother and father well. They’re always in the frontline of the Resistance. They are diehard and resolute in their opposition and unwaveringly dedicated to the cause. They have no money but are rich in integrity and morals.

“It is patriots like them that motivate my own commitment to the struggle. They affirm my belief that whilst our country is colonized, as long as our minds are free we will eventually obtain our freedom. What we have to guard against is the danger of allowing them to colonise our minds!

Valliamma, paying careful attention, even at that age was aware and appreciated that she was being tutored by three of the greatest men of her time.

“My own country, India,” Gandhi continued, “is subject to a regime not unlike what your country is experiencing. And the people there are resisting the invasion too.”

Gandhi then turned towards his companions and added, “The tiny island that has usurped our wealth and now rules our land, together with the majority of little countries in Europe, have colonized the rest of the world and abrogated to themselves the wealth and production of those colonies.

“Their people enjoy the highest living standard anywhere on earth. Their luxurious lifestyle is the result of those ill-gotten gains, looted from the more civilized nations of the world. They can bask in it for a long time but it is the product of demonic and immoral actions, evil in the extreme.

“The citizens of those villainous lands can remain in denial for a long time, feigning ignorance of the source of their prosperity and opulence. But someday they, or

their descendants, will be held to account. Evil, by its very nature, cannot last forever.

“Sadly, some of the people in those countries may not have contributed to the vice, but they can’t deny that they enjoyed the gains derived from such depraved proceeds. Their karma,” Gandhi concluded, “will certainly manifest itself in the years to come, on that you can depend.”

“I’m not prepared to suffer until someday their karma catches up with them,” Valliamma said quietly, holding back the anger. “The time is now, today. I am their karma, and I’m knocking on their door!”

Chapter Eight

West End Hotel. Durban. 1970.

“**That girl, Tata,**” Mohan Govender said admiringly, “was one vilt chick.”

“Vilt chick?” Soobry snorted. “Why don’t you boys speak English? A chick is a bird. You eat the pieces I fry and place on the counter. And some of you are studying to become doctors! What are you going to do? Eat your patients?”

“Well, Tata,” Mohan chuckled, “the world has moved on...language changes...all I was saying is that she was a tough cookie...”

“Not here! Not in my bar! And what is this about cookies? You mind your language or go elsewhere.”

“Okay, Uncle Soobs...uh Soobry... but tell us the rest of Valliamma’s story. Did she really go and neuk the government?”

Soobry Pillay threw his hands up in the air. “neuk? What is neuk? Maybe it was a good thing I didn’t go to school...”

“It was the best thing that happened,” Abbas said, with conviction. “We wouldn’t have known about Valliamma and her gutsy stand if you hadn’t spent time here with amma.”

“Yes... But it’s funny how, whenever I talked about that girl, nobody wanted to know. Now it’s Valliamma, Valliamma, Valliamma! You boys, what you will do with it? With her brave story? You now tell me that the world has moved on, but how can you move on if you don’t know who you are, who were your heroes? How can a country become great if it moves on but forgets its past?”

“Hey, Tata,” Sam Naidoo grinned, “You’re a philosopher too.”

“And our historian,” Thumba added. “Educate us, time we learned about our yesterdays.”

“Your yesterdays are your tomorrows, son.” Soobry said solemnly. “But only if you know where you come from.”

“Our problem, Tata, is that today the government’s spies are everywhere, listening and reporting everything we say. Some of them are our own people.”

“You won’t find them here, kanna, not in my place. One look and I know them. A second hard glance and they run fast and shaking like they saw their own ghost. I have been here all my life, I know everyone, I recognize sellouts before they even open their mouths.”

“How come you’re not scared of them, Uncle Soobry?” Abbas asked.

“Because I fear ignorance more than prison. And I don’t talk a lot. I listen and I learn.”

“Well...you’re certainly talking today, and we’re listening.”

“But are you learning? Any fool can listen, that’s why you have two ears. But you have to stand up for your rights, and for that you must use your third ear – your mind. That is how you really learn. Are you able to do that?”

“We’re getting there,” Sonny Murugen laughed, “Like they say in the bios, Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“And this is Soobry’s bar, not Rome or the bioscope. Here you learn fast, or you’re out.”

“Oh, we’ll learn, for sure. But will we follow in Valliamma’s footsteps? Learn by her example?”

“You want to get somewhere, you have to move. Just listening is not moving. How different is our world from the time when Valliamma was fighting for us? We are still tenth class citizens. We still jump when they shout. Valliamma shouted and they jumped!

“Gandhi did that, Mandela did that, Kathrada, Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo did that. Even our women, like Fatima Meer and Goonum did that. And they shouted loud and clear, boy. They didn’t jump for nobody. How about you? You waiting for someone to teach you? Maybe you think jumping is good for your legs!”

“We’re putting food on the table, Uncle Soobry,” Sonny started to say when Soobry cut in, “Look who walked in. Hello Billy. How you doing?”

“Vannakam, Soobry.” Billy Nair smiled. “I’m still ducking the damned Security Branch. But what’s with these lighties? They look like they saw a ghost.”

“They did,” Soobry laughed. “Their own.”

“Ya? How come?”

I’ve been telling them about Valliamma. They want to know all about her.”

“Only now? What were they doing all this time?”

“Hustling, Billy,” Sonny replied. “But you should know that, ya?”

“Sure, my boy, sure. If you guys had the same opportunities in the marketplace as the Whites, you wouldn’t have to do that.”

“We make our own markets...”

“Ya...the blackmarket racket,” Soobry teased.

“Why not? We don’t force anybody to deal with us. They don’t like what we sell, they’re free to chuck. And it’s a business, like any other. Those cinema tickets that we offer on premier nights...we outlay a stack of marcher for them. Sometimes we end up with a whole bunch that nobody wants, because the cinema doesn’t have a ‘House Full’ sign. And then we carry the loss, sometimes a huge one. Why they refer to it as ‘black market’ tickets is unfair and makes me furious.

“And, as any business, we create employment. Our runners, the guys who see to the customers’ needs in the

gambling schools, the hustlers, they're all earning an honest living. They don't go around mugging people and hijacking them."

"If you don't already know it, Billy," Abbas added, "our guys live a lot better and earn more than those miserable guys that graft in those shops in Grey Street. Don't talk to me about rackets until you know who the real racketeers are –"

"Easy, boet," Billy cut in pleasantly, "I know how you guys operate. Even the Fah-Fee racket, the Bank – as it is famously referred to – is nothing more than the identical numbers game that is now a legal enterprise controlled by organisations connected to the government. They call it the Natal Lotto and the law doesn't hassle them. So cool it, boys. Nobody is accusing you..."

"Let's talk about Valliamma," Sam urged. "We are hooked on that girl and her courage."

"That's your field, Soobry," Billy Nair said encouragingly. "Continue from where you stopped when I walked in."

"Yes... well... It was two years later, around 1910, when Valliamma really got into her stride..."

Chapter Nine

Johannesburg. 1910.

Valliamma knew instinctively that she was being followed. The hair on the back of her neck was bristling. And, at a point between her shoulder blades, she felt a sensation similar to the feeling induced when a finger is pointed close to the spot between the eyes.

Don't allow them to scare you, she told herself. Their only strength is your fear. Conquer that and they're helpless. And don't turn around. Continue to pretend that you are unaware of their presence. Let them make the first move.

She was still debating her next response and urging herself to remain calm when someone grabbed her by the shoulder and roughly turned her around.

"Remember me, bitch! I've waited a long time to get you alone in a quiet place. It's time to break your bloody pride!"

Valliamma immediately recognized him. It was the man who had assaulted Amod because the elderly and feeble gentleman didn't have any money to give him.

"My pride is what I am. Aren't you proud of yourself? Do you hate yourself or the work you do?"

The hard slap twisted Valliamma's neck, almost forcing her to her knees. A drop of blood, from her upper lip, trickled down her chin. Her attacker was grinning delightfully, his fingers bunching as he readied himself for the next blow. "I'm your Moses, you little cow!" he screamed, when a tall Zulu, burly and brawny, suddenly stepped between them and demanded, "Hau! She's a little girl. Why you hit her?"

Valliamma's tormenter rose to his full height, trying to intimidate her savior. "Fok off, kaffir! I'm a police-

man. I'll lock up your black arse if you don't start running."

"Lock me up? For telling you not to hit a child? Big man like you? Try hitting me!"

Valliamma's assailant went red in the face, his eyes blazing, "You talk to me like that? To a white man? You cheeky piece of shit! You'll pay for this!"

While the two men were locked in hostility, Valliamma quietly intervened, resorting to the gesture that had, on their previous encounter, reduced the ruffian to a quivering coward. She raised her hands in front of her, the index fingers pointed directly at the tyrant's eyes, immobilizing him in his tracks. The pupils in her eyes narrowed to pinpoints, her upper body leaning forward, her shoulders hunched. Throughout the motion, she had remained silent.

The effect was instantaneous. The thug took a backward step, then another, before strutting away, his body stooped and no longer intimidating.

"Hawubo, ntombi! What you do? Why he suddenly ran away?"

"Nothing, baba. I just looked at him. But thank you for protecting me. You're an angel."

"No, little girl. I'm just a man. And we have to stand together, keep an eye on each other. When they come with their army we can't fight them, but when they alone, like all cowards they run away."

"You must come to my house, baba. And meet everyone. I live in Doornfontein. And tomorrow there will be a protest rally, to shake our rulers up. Can you come? And bring your family and friends?"

"For sure. I know Doornfontein and some people there."

"Okay, just ask for Valliamma. Everybody there knows me."

“Where do you meet so many people?” Thambi Naidoo asked. “That man you just introduced me to...do you know who he is? That’s Big Boy Tshabalala, the underworld don. In this town you don’t sneeze without his permission. Even the police keep away from him.”

“He is the man I told you about earlier. He saved me from that bully yesterday.”

“You are lucky that he happened to be on the scene. That policeman, he’s just a rookie cop. Tshabalala has got that man’s bosses in his back pocket. You’ll be surprised to know that your savior is also a political activist. The only chaps that can touch him are the government’s special team of enforcers. They can’t be bought. And they’re ruthless. Once they begin to hunt you down you can be sure your time is up.”

“My time was up on the day I was born. If I have to run each time those thugs come looking for me I may as well stop living.”

“But there is no need for you to confront them. Do what you have to do, just keep your distance and stay away from them. There is a time to face up to these animals and a time to draw back. Knowing the difference is the way to engage with your opponents.”

“Such a battle could go on forever.”

“That’s where you are mistaken. Minor victories weaken the enemy and undermine his resolve. He becomes vulnerable. And that is the time to strike him, once and for all.”

Even as she listened to Thambi Naidoo advising her on tactics, Valliamma’s eyes were everywhere and now she was frowning, staring at a spot directly across from her and a short distance away. Something didn’t look right. “Uncle Thambi, what is going on there? That group of protesters...they seem to be scattering...”

“The government’s dogs are here!” Thambi spat, “they’re out in full force and harassing those poor people protesting peacefully. Come, they need our support.”

They were about a hundred yards away when they noticed that the women were beginning to disperse and a ring of policemen, armed with rifles and revolvers, had surrounded the remaining contingent of supporters and were barking instructions to them to disband and move on.

Ignoring Thambi’s cautionary cry, Valliamma sprinted across the square and began to exhort the women to go back and not allow themselves to be intimidated. Thambi came striding through the crowd of demonstrators and confronted the arrogant official perched atop his prancing horse, his sharp features and smiling face at odds with his contemptuous expression. “I know you, you little skelm! I’m going to lock you up for inciting the people.”

“You are the one causing this disturbance. These people are not threatening anybody. Leave them in peace.”

The imperious official, looking self-important and haughty, flushed with anger and signaled to a few of his troopers to come over. “Take this bloody coolie and lock him up. I’ll break his black backside later.”

There was a sudden lull in the crowd, the noisy objections stilled by the threat to imprison Thambi. A few of the protestors were murmuring angrily, refusing to be intimidated by the high-handed policeman’s threats.

“Damned ruffians!” H.O. Ally shouted, grabbing the reins and attempting to dislodge the rider. “You think you can terrorize us with impunity. You only increase our determination – “

The frightened horse, unused to rough handling, neighed loudly and reared on its forelegs. Somehow, not without great effort, the official maintained his seat and

summoned his men to come to his assistance. “Break the bastard! Tie him to your horse and pull him all the way to the station.”

And then, before the lackeys could respond to their orders, the heavens suddenly growled, the clouds became dark, the sky roared with thunder and rain threatened to pour down in buckets. The horses began to snort in fear. In the confusion, Valliamma grabbed Ally’s hand, pulled Thambi away from the furious guards, dashed towards the milling crowd, and merged with the swarming throng of disarray.

“You tell me to be careful,” she hissed, “and to keep my distance from these ruffians. And then you walk right into them. And you’re supposed to be veterans! On the one hand you advise me to bide my time, to wait for the right moment, and then do exactly the opposite.”

“Circumstances dictate our actions,” Thambi said breathlessly. “Let’s get out of here. The recriminations can come later.”

“If the seven gods of luck spare us till then,” Valliamma panted.

Valliamma, her chest heaving with exertion, lowered herself on the worn sofa and addressed the two men, surprised at the anger in her own voice. “Never again! I will not run from them even if they fire their guns at me,” she gasped. And then, for the first time since she had been a baby, she wept. “This has to stop,” she started to say, but her voice broke as she began to sob.

“You were brave, my girl,” Ally said softly, “You saved us from certain disaster. You displayed great courage in the face of grave danger. Thambi and I are indebted to you”

Even to Valliamma, her voice sounded unfamiliar when she replied, “You owe me nothing. I need no reas-

urance of my courage. I will follow Lord Krishna's example when he led his people into battle. He was only courteous in victory. And until we are victorious, I will engage the enemy with vengeance. If that means dying for what I believe in, so be it."

Thambi sighed. "It is not a simple matter of life and death, my dear. This is about politics. We have to master the game, the way it is played. Victory comes with planning, not sacrificing our lives."

While the men debated the rules governing protest, Valliamma stood up and, in a voice as soft as melted butter, said, "You do it your way. I will follow my own conscience. We all want our people to be free. For that I will do all I can. That will be a greater victory than sacrificing my life."

On a steamy Saturday afternoon, in the middle of November, four men sat around Thambi Naidoo's dining-room table: Gandhi, Thambi Naidoo, H.O. Ally and P. K. Naidoo were planning the way forward when Ahmed Cachalia and Parsi Rustomjee walked in.

"That child," Cachalia said to no one in particular as he lowered himself into a chair, "makes me feel ashamed of my moderate responses. I now hear that she is mobilizing the women to prepare to march from Tolstoy Farm to the Natal border. It's a certainty that they will end up in jail, not only for the illegal march but also for not having a permit to leave the Transvaal."

"She has to be restrained," Thambi insisted. "This is not the time for that. It will happen, certainly, but we must advise her to hold back, until the movement is stronger. At this point in time, it will be a waste of energy and achieve little."

"Another year, perhaps a little longer, would be perfect," P.K. Naidoo added. "But will she listen to us? She

has always been headstrong. And the people out there adore her.”

“We all do,” Ally interjected. “However, I agree that she is her own person, motivated by her own beliefs. Swaying her resolve is like trying to stop the sun from shining. Impossible task!”

“I will speak to her,” Gandhi softly suggested. “She has to be approached with reason and a good case for her to delay her decision. I have found her very amenable to a logical proposition. She may be headstrong, but she is not foolish.

That is what makes her into our greatest asset, a natural born leader.”

When Gandhi walked into the Mudliar’s humble home, Mangalam smiled warmly and invited him to sit in one of the only two chairs in the house. He sat across from her as she draped the top of her sari decorously over her hair.

“I have come to see Valliamma,” he said respectfully. “I must speak to her about this mission that she wants to engage in, her march to Natal. It will be most dangerous.”

“She will be here in a minute. But don’t hope for much. That child, she has a mind of her own. Nothing and nobody can influence her.”

“I understand. And I am proud of her. Both you and your husband have been active satyagrahis for a long time. And you paid the price. Indeed, you spend more time in prison than you do here, in your home. I can see where she gets her courage and her motivation.”

“Thank you. We see it as our duty, our birthright.”

“It is a noble mission and it is what makes the Indian in this country so outstanding and heroic.”

Gandhi had stopped to catch his breath, when Val-

liamma stepped through the door and raised her hands to her face. "Namaskarum, father. It's nice to see you."

"The pleasure is all mine," Gandhi smiled. "Now grant me one more, a simple request."

"If I can...I will be honoured."

"Can we talk about your planned march to the Natal border?"

"You don't want me to proceed?"

"I'm going to try and dissuade you. At this stage it won't be wise –"

"You can relax, then. I have already deferred it to a later date. Would you like to know why I did that?"

"Yes, please. I'm delighted by your decision."

"I must warn you though, that I have only postponed it, for a much greater march."

"Hai Ram!" Gandhi exclaimed. "I should have known better. For a moment it sounded too good to be true."

"What I can't believe is this new bill that Smuts is busy putting together. In December he passed the ACT OF UNION and in a few weeks, on the 31st May, he will declare the Union of South Africa. It is totally racist, excludes all people of colour from calling themselves citizens of this country and –"

"Valliamma, my girl... I know the details and I have objected strongly to the way the new Constitution is structured. I'm due to see Smuts next week..."

"Smuts does not interest me. The man is a racist and arrogant. And the British parliament will back him all the way. It's up to us to resist this evil. It is not an Indian thing, all of us that they call non-whites must stand together."

"How do you know what the British parliament will do?"

"I listen, and I remember."

“And you plan to do what? March on Pretoria?”

“Yes. My supporters are ready. Our walk starts tomorrow.”

“It’s a long way...”

“A long way to where? Pretoria or freedom?”

“I believe freedom is a gift from God. Pretoria is just a place, the center of government.”

“If Smuts succeeds in passing this despicable law, I intend writing to the Queen of England.”

“Saying what?”

“That Smuts’ Constitution is an act against humanity. I will write that I object to people of colour being excluded from being citizens in the country of their birth.”

“I should have thought of that. I feel I learned something today, by just talking to you. You go ahead, with your protest rally and the letter. Be sure, though, that they will throw you in jail – “

“You’ve been in jail so very often. I can only emulate you, with pride.”

“I am proud – of you! God bless you. You are the true face of my satyagraha movement.”

They had gathered once again at Ally’s house. Gandhi had just returned from the visit to Valliamma.

“That child,” Gandhi said to Ally, “is immortal. The word ‘fear’ is not a part of her vocabulary.”

“She fears God,” Cachalia interjected. “Not many people can honestly say that these days.”

“Well...” Thambi commented, “I know she believes that doing God’s work is why she was born.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Cachalia said with conviction.

“So, Gandhiji, are you saying you failed to dissuade her?” Rustomjee asked.

“It was the most satisfying failure of my life. And did I tell you that she is even targeting the queen of Eng-

land? Valliamma plans - I suspect she thinks the queen is accountable for Smuts' actions - to write a letter of protest to her."

"The queen had better watch out, then," Rustomjee chuckled.

"This March that she is planning," Ally mused, "She has Smuts in her sights. Your friend, Mohanbhai, is the one who should watch out."

"There is much about Smuts that is admirable. He is fighting for his people, who were brutally victimized by the British. His is also a noble cause and we must respect that. His error is that, in the process, he ignores the rest of humanity. But he is a reasonable man, always courteous and understanding. We must not judge him harshly or unfairly. The only difference between the two of us is that he is concentrating on the liberation of his people - the Afrikaner. I am concerned with all of humanity.

"That may be so," Thambi Naidoo added softly, "but Smuts is the author of that disgraceful Constitution, degrading all people of colour and reducing them to a disgusting and shameful level. I cannot, will not, treat him with respect. I intend fighting him to the end, even if that be my end."

"I understand and sympathise with you, my good friend. But anger and hatred is not the way to approach him. And the word 'fight' must be removed from our vocabulary. Negotiating, in good faith and love, is the only road to success."

"Valliamma has never shown any tendency to violence," Ally said, "both her parents, and she herself, have always behaved with strict adherence to your teachings of Satyagraha. She will fight the good fight - peacefully."

"That child..." Thambi muttered, "...is too tall for her age. People often mistake her height and assume she is an adult, and treat her accordingly, and perhaps un-

fairly.”

“It pains me when our children are brutalized,” Gandhi brooded. “They are imprisoned, tortured, and emerge from jail with broken bones and scarred bodies. Recently I attended the funeral of a young satyagrahi, Nagappen. His body was bruised and covered in welts. He had died of pneumonia and heart failure, barely six days after his discharge from prison.

“And if that shakes you, can you imagine Valliamma’s reaction? She was present at his funeral, she saw his broken body. They were childhood friends, he was at her side during every rally and protest march. What went through her mind when she looked at what had been done to him?”

“And yet, Gandhiji,” Thambi complained, “You advocate a conciliatory stance against the very animals that indulge in such fiendish and savage acts...”

“Yes! Indubitably. Violent responses only beget greater violence, and everybody gets hurt. There is no alternative to reasoned remonstrations and rational behavior. Debate is preferable to destruction. It is the only way, the civilized way, to deal with outrage and humiliation.”

“And if logic and reason fail to correct the problem?” Ally asked. “And, as in our case, only encourages the oppressor to commit greater atrocities, how are we to respond to that?”

“Walk away. You can be sure it will get him thinking and reconsidering his actions. And even if it doesn’t correct his behavior, the guilt is his, not yours. All I am advocating is that you do not reduce yourself to the level of your opponent.”

“Do you think Valliamma is operating by those principles?”

“Undoubtedly. And she didn’t need me to tell her all this. It wells from deep inside her, some inborn impulse

that will not allow her to obey unjust laws. The key here is her methods – she responds by demonstrating peacefully. A quality I have immense admiration for.”

“I must consider joining her on her march to Pretoria,” Ally said.

“And I,” Thambi added.

“We will all join her,” Gandhi proclaimed. “It is the least we can do. It is our contest too and, of course, the core of satyagraha to which all of us are committed.”

“We are being led by a child,” Ally quietly observed, the awe in his voice unmistakable. “Where did we go wrong? Why did we fail so miserably?”

“You do yourself an injustice, good friend. The contribution all of you here have made to the cause is legendary. It makes me proud to say I am an Indian.”

“I’m afraid Valliamma will disagree,” Ally laughed pleasantly, “she sees herself as a South African.”

“I must warn you, though,” Gandhi added, very softly, to allow his message to sink in. “Three of you here are extremely wealthy men. They’ll break you, reduce you to penury...”

“Gandhiji,” Thambi Naidoo replied, equally courteously, “That has already commenced. Both Ally and Parsi Rustomjee here will tell you that our businesses are suffering. And Ahmed Cachalia here is paying a bitter price for his defiance of the authorities; they have closed down many of his most lucrative ventures. We’ve reconciled ourselves to that.”

“Poverty doesn’t seem to have reduced Valliamma’s convictions. We can do no less,” Cachalia added, somewhat flippantly. “Compared to the price she is paying, our troubles are insignificant.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Gandhi said, “but a word of caution. This State can be very vicious. It will tear you apart, and vilify your wives and children too. It will lay

into all of you, brutally.”

“Nothing of true value can be obtained cheaply,” Cachalia scoffed. “There is a price to be paid for everything. And, without freedom, what good is wealth? What can it buy that has greater significance? And Thambi is already paying the price. Even as we speak, 17 members of his family are in jail – simply because they spoke up for their rights.”

“I bow before you,” Gandhi humbly acknowledged. “Your descendants will celebrate your sacrifices. And so will future generations in this country. What each of you and Valliamma are doing will never be forgotten.”

“We are mature adults. Valliamma is a child,” Cachalia said diffidently, “but she displays a greater courage than all of us put together.”

“She operates on a higher moral plane,” Thambi Naidoo added impassionately, “all things considered.”

Gandhi was about to say something when there was a tap on the front door, followed by several loud knocks. Ally excused himself, opened the door, and looked at the visitor enquiringly.

“My name is Vusi Tshabalala,” the strapping man announced. “May I speak with you?”

Ally had not seen the man before and hesitated for a moment. There was something impressive and confident about the visitor’s manner, without a hint of aggressiveness.

“I am a friend of Valliamma,” the caller announced. “I have some bad news.”

“Please come in,” Ally said welcomingly. “I hope she is okay.”

“She’s fine, depending on your viewpoint.”

Ally led the way to his sitting-room, saying, “I thought you said you had bad news?”

Before Tshabalala could answer, Thambi Naidoo

stepped up and smiled, “Well, the big boss himself! We’ve met at a few rallies.”

“You’re Thambi Naidoo.”

“I’m honoured that you remember me. But meet the others.”

Thambi introduced each of the men, starting with Gandhi. As soon as everybody had shaken hands, Ally asked, “You said you have bad news?”

“Yes,” Tshabalala answered, then seemed to hesitate, before bluntly announcing, “They’ve arrested Valliamma.”

The men were stunned. Gandhi was the first to recover. “Where is she being held?”

“My boys are trying to find out. But I saw them as they rushed off with her. They were brutal.

“Did they say anything? Did you hear them say what they were charging her for?”

Before Tshabalala could reply, P.K. Naidoo burst out, furious, “Can they arrest a child of that age? Are they gone completely crazy? Would they have done that to a white kid?”

“That ‘child,’” Tshabalala said with a chuckle, “makes my toughest fighters look like cowards.. Do you want to hear what she was saying as they led her away? ‘What took you so long...’ And then she held out her hands to be cuffed. That little one has more courage than anyone I know. And that is saying something!”

Chapter Ten

West End Hotel Durban. 1970.

“The lousy sonsabitches!” Abbas was outraged. “That kid makes many of our so-called toughies look like 99 pound weaklings. These okes run when they see the cops!”

“Tata,” Mohan added, softly and with a hint of admiration, “that was one gutsy broad. Where did she get her courage from?”

“You boys haven’t been listening!” Soobry protested, looking frustrated. “What have I been saying all day?”

“We’ve been following you, dad,” Sam said, placatingly. “Everything you’ve been saying, we will never forget it. It’s just that...this girl, a twelve year old, was something else. We have never heard about her. Her life, her sacrifices, her opposition to unjust laws, leave us in awe of her. And it makes us feel guilty too! Like...you know...we’ve failed her memory. She was a freedom fighter who – “

Soobry, his face expressionless, cut in decisively, “Okay. Alright. But you boys miss the point. Valliamma was not, far as I’m concerned, a ‘Freedom Fighter.’”

“But Tata...” Abbas complained, “You have been saying that she fought – “

“You boys have missed the point entirely,” Soobry snorted. “Valliamma was a true follower of Gandhi. A confirmed satyagrahi. She was no ‘freedom fighter’; She was a peace activist. Are you mukus capable of telling the difference.

“Go easy on them, uncle Soobry,” Billy Nair suggested respectfully. “These boys are trying to get to grips with a world that is alien to them. But the fact that they’re outraged by what you told them, that alone is to their credit.”

“Any fool can be outraged,” Soobry snorted. “But actually standing up for his rights and suffering without complaining, that is true courage. These lighties, they strut around the streets like they own them and don’t realize that they are no more than slaves, even today, to the system.”

“Okay, lekker, uncle Soobs,” Abbas said, raising his hands in surrender. “But we can learn from you. And today we all admit we are receiving a great historical lesson. We can appreciate that. And that is something our schools never taught us. None of our teachers even mentioned her name.”

“You forget, my boy,” Billy Nair said, “The teachers then, and even now, are completely intimidated by the Education Department, the holy cows who make the rules. If you deviate, even mildly, from the set syllabus, you’re out on the street and will never be able to teach again. Our teachers are strictly monitored by government-appointed inspectors, and those guys are The Law. Our guys don’t dare step out of line – they too have to put food on the table.”

“Ya, well, we graduated from the University of Hard Knocks,” Sonny grinned. “Politics was not a subject taught to us.”

“You think that was tough? Do you know what our teachers were truly subjected to by the government? The torture that some of them were threatened with if they didn’t obey official policy?”

“Torture, Billy?” Sam asked, outraged.

“Yes! And I’m referring to the physical stuff, pain like you lighties never experienced. And probably never will.”

“How do you mean physical?” Sonny asked. “You telling us they were neuked by the inspectors?”

“No. The Inspectors were okay – mostly. They only

had the power to make - or break - a teacher's career, to recommend promotion to a higher level, or to demote them. The real grief was when the political cops got on to them and hauled them off to their detention centers."

"You're joking, ya?" Mohan asked, disbelievably. "I've never heard of a teacher that was hucked to some place and snayed by the kerels."

"That's because you left school early and took no interest in your teachers' life after that."

"Billy..." Sam mumbled, his voice almost inaudible, "I get the feeling that we're missing something here... something we know nothing about..."

"You got that right, son. But that is not exactly your fault. The really appalling and outrageous omission was...is...the Press. The newspapers help the government to cover up the monstrous cruelty that is still being perpetrated on our people. Some of them do it out of fear - the government could close them down within hours. But others...well, let's just say they like what their government is doing. Prejudice has no conscience!"

"Tell us about what happens to teachers when they don't play by the rules. What is the Department's response," Mohan asked, his curiosity aroused.

And then, even as Mohan had barely completed his question, Billy's face underwent a remarkable change. His eyes narrowed, his jaw tightened, his fingers curled into fists with the knuckles shining white and the skin stretched taut and hardened. His face reflected a mixture of emotions - pain mixed with grief, eyes blazing with anger, his lips stretched tightly over his mouth.

The bar had suddenly gone very quiet, even Soobry had stopped polishing the glasses and was looking intently at Billy. It was clear that what Billy would say next would be devastating and change their lives forever.

"You want to know what happens? When you don't

toe the line? You cease to be human! They reduce you to the level of a helpless and blithering idiot! You become an object of their fury and suffer their wrath. They destroy you, boys, like you squash a roach in the gutter. But first they break you, body and soul. And then they throw you out the window.”

“They actually do that, all those things? For simply refusing to play ball with them?” Abbas asked, looking horrified.

“You find that hard to believe?” Billy demanded. “Where have you boys been living? In some cloistered environment where you are protected by your own kind and hear only what you want to hear?”

“Ouch, Billy,” Mohan started to say when Abbas gently nudged him in the ribs and silenced him, then said quietly, his voice sounding shocked, “Billy, we know nothing about that world. But we’re not stupid. We hear things – “

“You hear things? What sort of things? Okay, perhaps I’m being unfair. But tell me, have you lighties heard of Ahmed Timol? No? Let me tell you something, about what goes on in the real world...”

“Ahmed Timol was a teacher. A few years ago – I can give you the exact date, it was in October 1971, when he was about thirty years old – he refused to keep to the apartheid - based curriculum that the government imposed on the teachers. He denounced the regime, showed the world the horrors committed in its name, and became a political activist.

“What did the government do? They murdered him! But now hear this, you think that was barbaric? They did worse things to him before that – if anything can be worse than murder. They took him to John Vorster Square – that’s the Johannesburg Police Station – and they worked him over. They tormented him, abused him and

subjected him to excruciating pain!

“And when that failed to break him, they pulled out his fingernails, one agonizing finger at a time. His right eye was gouged out and his balls were crushed. That was when he contemptuously spat on their faces and they lost whatever sense of humanity still existed – they threw him out of the window of the high-rise building. And you can be sure they did all that without batting an eyelid.”

“They did that?” Sam asked, outraged. “This same government that still treats us like rubbish in a toilet and helps itself to our hard-earned wealth?”

“Not a government, Sambhai!” Abbas protested vehemently. “They’re a bunch of thugs, brutal scoundrels who persecute every darkie and line the pockets of their own people.”

“You want to see how our people, the Africans, are forced to live in their shacklands.” Billy added. “But you want to be fair, Abbas. Don’t taint every White man with the apartheid brush. I already told you, about guys like Robin Cranko, Rowley Arenstein...hell, there were hundreds of others...”

“Listen, you lot,” Soobry said bluntly, entering the debate for the first time. “Don’t ever think that all our own people were fighting the system and denouncing the government.”

“My son, Rajan, used to manage the Mermaid restaurant in Teacher’s Centre, in Albert Street. On the floor above him were the A.N.C. offices. The chaps from there used to visit the restaurant daily and discuss their political strategy. So those people – the ‘thugs’ as Abbas correctly described them – they pressurized my boy to bar them from his place. Rajan bluntly refused, in effect told them to shove off.

“It was a mistake, a terrible one. Within weeks they destroyed a highly profitable business and reduced it to a

dump! His crime? He didn't play ball either. And it was our own sellouts that did the dirty work!"

"Our own okes?" Abbas asked, in a shocked voice. "You mean charous?"

"We know who they are, Abbas" Billy said angrily. "There will come a day when they will be called to account! They won't talk their way out of it. Their betrayal will be exposed to the world."

"And in the meantime nothing has changed," Sam said derisively. "After over seventy years since Valliamma took the bastards on we are no better off!"

"But the struggle goes on!" Billy exclaimed. "And of this I am certain, victory will be ours! It will take time, but it's assured."

"I would like to ask Valliamma what she has to say about that," Thumba Pillay said questioningly. "Wherever she is, I bet she's pretty disappointed with us."

"We do our bit," Billy said, somewhat diffidently. "And we are aware that we're in it for the long haul. I repeat, we will overcome.!"

"Well..." Abbas said, "While you okes are doing that I want to know more about Valliamma. What did the cops do to her when they hucked her off to jail?"

"She must have given those dogs hell," Mohan chuckled, though he didn't look amused.

"She did that, for sure," Soobry answered confidently. "They couldn't hold her for more than a few days..."

Chapter Eleven

Johannesburg. 1910.

“You can’t do this, General!” Gandhi said scathingly, looking at Smuts directly in the eye. “Throwing a twelve year old child in jail, for protesting peacefully? Can you imagine the reaction of the international community? Your country will be seen as the pariah of the world.”

“I assure you, my good friend, I know nothing about this. I’ll immediately instruct whomever is responsible to release her unconditionally.”

“Thank you. There must be no delay. Even as we talk I fear she will be brutalized, mercilessly.”

“Look, Mr. Gandhi, we are not all animals. The actions of a few must not be held against the government – “

“So you do acknowledge that you have a bunch of vicious and inhuman hounds out there and that they have to be reined in.”

“What do you want me to say? Every country in the world has its black sheep. I’m not saying that we should treat them with a velvet glove. When it comes to my attention, like now, I act swiftly. Can any man do more?”

“General, your people, the Afrikaners, have suffered cruelly at the hand of the British. Your women endured a bitter persecution barely ten years ago. You personally led the revolt against that treacherous country. And that was noble of you. Why is such savagery now manifesting itself in your race? The Afrikaner, the honest man of the land, is not by nature barbarous or heartless. I urge you to employ the same tactics when you deal with my people. They are, after all, citizens of this country and, by extension, your responsibility.”

“I am not unaware of that. Nor do I condone this barbarous behavior – “

“General, with the utmost respect, the constitution of this country, that you are solely responsible for drawing up, does not support your sentiments.”

“This is a debate for another time. My priority now is to ensure the release of that girl. I will attend to that now.”

“Thank you for hearing me out,” Gandhi replied, agreeably. “I’ll seek an appointment with you in a few days. For now, God is the best judge.”

This is not the life I dreamed about, Valliamma said to herself. All I ever wanted was to be happy and live with my family, not sit in this filthy place and eat the dirt they give me. Even the rats here must eat good food, they’re so huge and fat! Unlike them I don’t go around biting people. If asking to be treated decently, the way we treat others, is a crime for which I must be punished like this, then this world is not a good place.

And do they think that, if they do this to me, then I will keep my mouth shut in future and not tell the people to stand up to them. Who are the real criminals? Me? Our people? Or this government that treats us like we are animals?

Appa and amma always told me never to stay silent when someone is abused, that if I don’t speak up for other people then who will speak up for me? And they too were thrown in jail, very often. They must have also suffered in this place and been kicked around like dogs. It didn’t stop them from fighting back.

She sighed, stretched her legs on the hard cement floor, and stood up. I wish I could be different, she thought, looking at the floor, and not like a few of my friends who say nothing and play in the sunshine, eating vadeh and drinking tea. No! I can never be like that! I’d rather be dead... like Nagappen, my good friend who

was murdered for saying that the police are killers and act like wild animals. Then she shook her head, from side to side...no, not even wild animals kill for fun and torment those that do not torment them...

When Valliamma heard the sound of keys rattling in the lock on the cell gate, she looked up and almost smiled. It was the elderly warder, who sometimes brought her food and water. And placed it gently on the ground instead of throwing it into the cell, like most of the others did.

The kindly old man opened the gate and said, "You are going home, meisie. Kom, follow me."

When Valliamma stepped through the prison gates, Thambi Naidoo and H.O. Ally, together with Gandhi, who had patiently waited all morning for her release, smiled widely, the delight reflected in their eyes.

They hugged her, and then Thambi asked, "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

"They can't hurt me," Valliamma said warmly and with certainty. "I don't submit to savagery. Now, I need to prepare for the next rally urgently. I've lost much time!"

"There is no containing this revolutionary," Thambi laughed. "She spends three days in prison and all she has on her mind is the next convention, to re-group her followers."

"If fighting for my people means I must go back in there, I'll do it again and without regret. If Sita could stand up so heroically to Ravan and not allow him to abuse her, can I do less? How different is this government in the way it treats our people?"

"You subscribe to the highest principles of Ahimsa and I can only admire that in you," Gandhi said. "It is a quality that is integral to my Satyagraha beliefs. How can I now attempt to dissuade you from your course of ac-

tion... How can I even contemplate such a thought?"

"Do not even reflect on it, Mohanbhai," Ally advised. "She will do exactly what her mind dictates, and so far she has behaved admirably."

"Valliamma," Thambi Naidoo said somewhat persuasively, "Will you at least promise to consult with us before embarking on your next protest venture or proceeding with your plans—"

"I'll do what I believe is the correct thing," Valliamma replied decisively. "And talking is not one of them. The day you prove me wrong I will bow to your will."

"But you talk to the people," Ally smiled to take the sting out of his words. "Are we not the people too?"

"You are more than that, uncle. Each of you is a leader and you have been in jail very often. Why did that happen? Because you stood up for justice! I cannot now remain silent out of fear of imprisonment. Doing that will be the end of me! Today I learnt, from the way they treated me in jail, that they are intent on breaking us and burying our bones. Let us see who wins this contest."

"That child is a visionary," Thambi Naidoo said with conviction. "This government is going to bite off more than it can chew when they make a move on her."

"I don't think she knows much about Passive Resistance and legal issues," P.K. Naidoo said slowly. "She has this conviction that truth is something that must not be abused and in pursuit of justice she will sacrifice her life. For her, fighting that cause is her life mission. It has nothing to do with her own future or, for that matter, her death."

"But can this government be so stupid, to actually believe that its policies can be rammed down the throats of an entire community and not meet opposition?"

"Stupidity has no limits," P. K. Naidoo said scath-

ingly. “We have to oppose it and tell this brutal regime that their time is up.”

“And before their time expires they’ll make sure you and I are in some unmarked grave. It can’t be avoided.”

“Thambi, this is not about life or death, it’s about breaking the spine of a community. They pass laws restricting us to certain areas only, allowing us to deal only in goods approved by them and at a price determined by them. It is no more than a sophistication of the Indenture rules that were first put in place when our people were enticed to come here.”

“So, after fifty years of oppression, nothing much has changed.”

“Oh, a lot has changed, my brother. They are still trying to reduce us to the level of slaves. What they fail to see is that we are not some illiterate community lacking in knowledge of the democratic system or that we are simply here for the plucking. They didn’t believe that we had the capacity to take their evil system to the international courts and to bring it to the attention of the rest of the world. We proved them wrong, repeatedly and decisively.”

“And they didn’t bank on a Valliamma,” Thumbi chuckled, but there was little humour in it.

“It’s an Indian thing. We set great store on justice and the rights of man. Why do you think such a large majority of our people is fighting back against this system? They may be doing it peacefully, but there is no doubting their determination. Both Gandhi and, if I may add, Valliamma, are on fertile soil. Defying unjust laws comes naturally to us.”

“P.K., do you think logic will ever prevail and rational thinking take over?”

“On the part of this government? I suspect they don’t give a damned about treating us with respect or de-

cency. I believe that they actually hate us. They are convinced, in their mad chase for power and greed, that we will eventually capitulate.”

“Or they’ll destroy us! Is there no hope then? For our salvation?”

“There is more than hope. So long as we have the likes of Valliamma and Gandhi.”

“That girl haunts me. There is no escaping her. While most of our people complain about our rulers’ inhumanity, Valliamma responds with spontaneous defiance. There is something about her - a lot more than her youth and level of education - that motivates her. It’s as if some inborn conviction spurs her on and feeds her energy to fight back.”

“Whatever. You can be sure of one thing, though, she will not back down. And that, my friend, is the point the government is missing. Valliamma knows no fear. They haven’t experienced her determination to rebel against them. That is their greatest error and our greatest asset.”

“Shatam Prati Satyam – truth against a rogue. I can still hear her call!”

“Appa was looking very handsome today, in a suit and tie and a flower in his lapel,” Valliamma said, her face glowing with happiness.

“Our men,” Mangalam said with pride, “take good care of their appearance, when they can afford it.”

“Appa is doing well, then, in his business?”

“Well enough. If you paid more attention to your responsibilities here instead of leading rallies all day – “

“Amma! I don’t believe you said that! For someone who spent half your life in jail and refused to give in to evil, how can you even question my commitment...”

“I don’t. You are doing exactly what we taught you,

by example and by words. But you have to spend more time here, with your Appa and me.”

Valliamma hugged her mother, her eyes moist. “I love you both. You are my reason for fighting this evil – “
“What’s this then?” Munuswami beamed as he walked in, “Love and hugs? And what about me?” he asked teasingly.

“You, my dear father, are my hero. And you’re looking very dapper these days. I love everything about you.”

They were conversing entirely in Tamil, their ancestral language. Munuswami had made it a rule that in his house and with his family, it would be the only form of communication. English was expressly forbidden.

“I love you too, little one. But you must slow down. Don’t lose sight of our objective. I hear you talking to the people, telling them to fight back, and my heart expands with pride and I am consumed with emotion. But it also worries me. Some of the things you say, like defying the White man... that is wrong. This is not an Indian against the White thing – you confuse the government with the entire White population and that is not only wrong but against our culture.”

“But, appa, it is the Whites who vote for their government. Are they not responsible for its reprehensible behavior?”

“Yes, but by default, not intention. Many of them are decent people and they recoil from the way the law is applied. They too despise their rulers.”

“Then why don’t they just throw them out? We can’t do it, we don’t have the vote.”

“But it would be a huge mistake to reflect our anger and shine it on them. What I am simply saying is that we must educate them, show them the error of their ways. When you succeed in doing that, you not only free our oppressed but you also free the oppressor and everybody

benefits.”

“They don’t listen to us, appa! To them we are ignorant savages. We are good only if we obey them.”

“Nothing you say can be disputed, and the people adore you for it. They will follow you to the end. But be very careful, my sweet child, that you don’t set the scene for a civil war. That will hurt everybody, the good and the bad.”

“I have never called on our people to declare a war, or even to resort to violence. That I have learned from you and have always been guided by you.”

“Then listen to me now, when the populace hang onto your every word and are prepared to emulate you and support you, it places a great responsibility in your hands. You have to ensure that your words don’t lead to a bloodbath.”

“I am aware of the dangers, appa. I am always careful when urging them to protest that they always emulate Gandhiji’s teachings. But it happens, sometimes, when the police attack old people, that the young ones, angered, wage a running battle with them. How can I stop them? Deep inside me I admire them.”

“Your mother and I are guilty of the same sentiments. When will this stupid government ever learn!”

“When we topple them! And then it won’t matter whether they learn anything or not. That is when my mission will end.”

Chapter Twelve

West End Hotel. Durban. 1970.

“Soobry,” Billy Nair said admiringly, “what are you doing here, working as a barman! We need you out there, at our side. The battle is still being waged and I am not sure we are winning.”

“This is not about me. I’m simply telling these boys what it was like, in Valliamma’s time, and the brave stand our people were taking even then.”

“And little has changed! Or perhaps we now have a large group of sellouts...our own guys who play ball with the Nats. They are motivated by money, and this government has plenty of that, more than enough to buy off those that claim to be our supporters.”

“I’ve heard some of those scavengers say that they are fighting from the inside to get us a better deal,” Abbas muttered, scathingly. “They go along with those okes, lining their pockets like bumboys!”

“I’ve been inside, son,” Billy chuckled. “And, even in this day, prison is still a hellhole.”

“It didn’t frighten Valliamma,” Sam Naidoo shrugged. “And I bet it doesn’t scare you either.”

“Oh! It scares me, alright! But I’m damned if it will stop me.”

“From what I know, the latest technique the government employs is to ban okes like you from appearing in public –“ Mohan started to say when Billy cut him off in mid-sentence.

“Damn the ban!” Billy exploded. “That’s what Ismail Meer always says. They ban him and he defies them by telling the public that the government is a bunch of twits. And he walks around town boldly, daring them to lock him up.”

“You know what I’m hearing?” Sonny Murugan said ironically, “Nothing has changed. In over a hundred years guys like you have been fighting for the vote. What has been achieved?”

“You will be surprised, son,” Billy protested. “This government is now the pariah of the world. How did that happen? By chance?”

“Hey, Billy,” Sonny laughed, “No offense meant, bro.”

“And none taken. I’m quite impressed with you lighties, you ask the right questions and demand answers. I salute that.”

“We also do our bit,” Sonny added, “When you guys ask us to go to the wit areas and break a few windows to distract the cops from your meetings, we’re not slow to act. We may not be political animals, but we know right from wrong.”

“And I’m the first to acknowledge it!” Billy asserted. “Perhaps you could do a bit more, but I accept that you have to make a living too. In any event, everything helps.”

“We never did care much for the witous,” Mohan stated, somewhat disdainfully, “They climb onto the bandwagon...”

“Whoa, my boy. Go easy on that. Guys like Rowley Arenstein, Robin Cranko, Ronnie Kastrils and a helluva lot of others put their careers – and their lives – on the line for the battle against apartheid. We owe them, big-time.”

“Okay, lekker,” Mohan conceded. “We know some of them, and met a few. But that cherry, Valliamma, she was something else. Uncle Soobry, how about telling us more about her?”

“Cherry?” Soobry snorted. “What cherry? Are all the girls you know nothing more than ‘chicks’ and ‘cherries’? Are they some kind of food? Okay. Alright. Don’t

The Agony of Valliamma

answer that. You'll only mess up my mind some more.
But now, Valliamma..."

Chapter Thirteen

Johannesburg. 1913.

Thambi Naidoo appeared to be defeated and determined, simultaneously. He had just received news that Valliamma was in jail, again. He had lost count of the number of times she had been incarcerated and was beginning to lose hope that their rulers would ever change for the better. If anything, they were becoming more brutal and vicious. In despair, he had just lowered his head on his desk when he heard a knock and then the sound of someone opening the door.

“You can relax,” P.K. Naidoo smiled as he walked in. “Valliamma is back at home. She’s hurt, in physical pain, but still bouncing.”

“It will take more than imprisonment to break her back,” Thambi sighed with relief and immediately perked up. “Those vermin infested dungeons can’t alter her resolve. The problem is this girl can’t be contained. She is steadfast in her belief that this government is evil and must be toppled. I fear she will be taken apart by our rulers – she is constantly exposing them, daring them to lock her up. She has become a great threat to them.”

“Do you remember, Thambi, about two years ago, when we were on Tolstoy Farm?”

“Can I ever forget? Veeramal reminds me daily about that rustic place. We learned to be independent, self-sufficient, on that dusty farm. We spent many happy days there, with our children and the others.”

“My wife talks about that place too. She is convinced that Valliamma refined her stance when she flitted in and out of there. How she got there is a mystery. She must have walked through the day and the night to visit us and all she was interested in was the way forward. I

can't recall ever seeing her curled up somewhere to rest from her arduous journey and restoring her energy.”

“And I can picture her, haranguing Parsi Rustomjee and Ahmed Cachalia, demanding that they take the lead once more and nagging Gandhi to get out of there and be more active.”

“How about Imam Bawazeer? His wife and daughter Fatima gave the poor man no rest. The good Imam didn't have peace even when he was on his mat, crying to God for justice.”

“I still laugh when I think of that. But we received an excellent grounding there too. Gandhi took the brute out of us and instilled his philosophy that he loves and honours any man who treats both friend and foe with respect.”

“And while he was doing that, and the women were in the farmhouse kitchen, Valliamma was hauling huge drums of water from the wells and carrying them, painfully and one at a time, to the homestead. That girl, she was a tough little one...”

“And dedicated to bringing our rulers down, at whatever cost to her own health.”

“I loved the way that she, before setting out once more, early in the morning, after a simple meal of beans and roti, waved gaily to whoever was awake at that time. It was like...having done her job she would come back again...”

“That, my dear Thambi, was then. She is now quite the veteran – in and out of jail, at the head of every protest march, encouraging those that can hear her to strike...”

“That word ‘strike’ resonates deep within me. It fermented in my mind for a long time but I never got around to propagating it. Now I've just heard that Valliamma is planning a defiance campaign to encourage all workers to go on a ‘one day strike’ and not turn up for work.”

“You can be sure that she won’t stop there. The ‘one day strike’ will lead to a ‘one week’ strike. She is hellbent on bringing our rulers to their knees, totally disregarding her own health and life.”

“What has been worrying the life out of me is that Valliamma has a huge following. Our own wives and children are right behind her, and they will follow her to the ends of the earth. My own Veeramal and my entire family swear by her.”

“As do mine! Can we even think of slowing them down?”

“No! Never. You and I have paid the price for our principled stance. We know the horror of imprisonment. Our wives and children emulate us. How can we now object.”

“Indeed! And why should we? We no longer fear death. If we slow down now our descendants will spit on our graves!”

“And why should it bother us? Whatever the outcome, we will leave a legacy of free speech for future generations. That in itself is a great achievement.”

“Well, dear friend, at least in death there is finality. I can’t contemplate living for ever, especially not when I see our suffering.”

“Yes... and Valliamma has elevated free speech to the level of a religion. That girl will be our savior.”

“When a man doesn’t listen to reason, appa, then you have to resort to harsher measures. However much we try to reason with this government, its only response is jail and torture.”

“And you must always respond calmly and rationally. Abandoning it will be abandoning civilized behavior.”

“I think that they are convinced we will eventually lie down and submit to them. I intend to send a message to them, to shake them out of their stupidity.”

“And you’ll do that, how?”

“A national strike. Everybody in this country must down tools, the cleaners, the mine workers – “

“I doubt any Whites will support you.”

“I’m not calling on them. There are enough of our own to bring this country to a standstill.”

“That may be true. But how do you plan to go about it? Do you have a team...”

“Appa, my team is my people – our people. Next week we march, to as many towns and cities in this country. Total work stoppage!”

“The people out there, they will certainly respond to your call. And I am proud of you.”

“We have received information that a group from Phoenix in Durban are ready to head for the border between Transvaal and Natal. Their aim is to cross the line dividing our two provinces at Volkrust, in defiance of the immigration laws that apply to us only. I know Gandhiji’s wife, Kasturbai, will be among them.”

“Go with God, then, my dear child. Yours is a noble mission.”

“I’m not sure I’m going with God. But I know that He is at my side.”

“As are all of us. But God protects those who protect themselves...”

“Appa, I don’t need any protection. It is our rulers who have to watch their backs. And they will pay for their sins, I promise you that much. I’ll sort them out long before God decides to step in. I am their karma. After that, He can have what’s left of them!”

Chapter Fourteen

West End Hotel. Durban 1970.

“Gott!, uncle Soobry,” Sonny Murugen said, “I’ll think of Valliamma the next time we tangle with those wit gangs on the beachfront.”

Billy Nair burst out laughing, so explosively that the beer that he had been swallowing almost spurted through his nostrils. After blowing his nose, he said, “Sonnyboy, you thugs are engaging in gang wars. Valliamma was fighting for justice. There is a huge difference between those two concepts.”

“You don’t think that we are also standing up for our rights, Billy? You reckon we go out there looking for shit? I’ve seen you okes go to the post office and demand that you be served at the White counter. What is the difference between those two concepts?”

“The difference, my boy, is that you lighties resolve your problems by resorting to violence. Valliamma followed Gandhi’s teachings – “

“Ya, sure. Turn the other cheek! And get your head knocked off! Thanks a lot, bro. But my ma didn’t raise no skaapies. They touch our toes, we tramp their faces! And that works a stack better than what you okes have been doing for over a century.”

“I’m not too sure about that, boet,” Sam Naidoo said, by way of a compromise. “That sounds to me too much like survival of the fittest. Like... you know... ‘you got a gun! I can get a gun too.’ The only winner is the guy with the biggest gun.”

“Sure,” Abbas added, “all you end up with is a span of dead bodies. I don’t see how that helps.”

“Well...” Mohan chuckled, “better your dead body than mine!”

They were still laughing uproariously, when Bily held up a hand requesting silence. “You have to lose someone you love, someone killed violently, you have to stand over his dead body and then ask yourself if there wasn’t a more civilized solution.”

“Gandhi gave us the solution!” Soobry said, outraged. “Valliamma lived by that solution. And you lot are still looking for it? You won’t find it by fighting for it with weapons. And one of those dead bodies that you laughed about, it could be yours. Maybe you want to think about it.”

“Come on, uncle Soobs, we’re just speculating here.” Abbas protested. “We are not plotting a revolution.”

“Okay,” Sam said, conclusively. “Now that we have all identified ourselves, can we hear how Valliamma planned her protest strike? Uncle Soobry?”

“Yes...Yes...well, that girl, she did exactly what she said...”

Chapter Fifteen

Johannesburg. 1913.

After a simple lunch with Thambi Naidoo's family, Valliamma had quietly escaped into the large yard at the back of the Naidoo home. The need to be alone, to retreat into herself and gather her thoughts, had been overpowering.

Now, as she sat cross - legged on the bare ground, her back resting against the trunk of a huge jacaranda tree and her eyes half-shut, she contemplated her future, occasionally sighing in frustration. She was aware that her thoughts, entirely in Tamil, with only a passing English phrase, came naturally to her. Well, she reminded herself, that was appa's influence, his insistence that any communication in our home would only be conducted in our ancestral language, which is as ancient as time itself and a product of our heritage. "Forget your language," her father reminded her at every opportunity, "and you forget your origins, of where you come from. And then you are no better than a wild animal that knows not where it comes from nor where it is going."

She sighed again, heavily. The world is too much with me, too soon, she reflected. I don't play games with friends of my own age. I never go to a picnic or some family celebration. And then she perked up: but I love to dance, especially the Bharata Natyam. But even that, because I am shy, I only indulge in it in the privacy of my own home, when I am alone.

She raised her head and, as if for the first time on that day, noticed that she was surrounded by a veritable forest of fruit trees, tiny sugarbushes and flowering shrubs – a haven of peace and tranquility – with only her mind steeped in turmoil.

A bee buzzed past her ear and she reflected: you are

free. You don't have a care in the world. You fly around with total abandon. Apart from drinking from the stamens of these flowers and obtaining sustenance, your life is not troubled by the unfair and unjust ways of this universe, the cruelty of your own kind against your own sort. But maybe I'm being unfair to you. You too must have your own fears, from birds of prey and animals, perhaps anteaters and suchlike.

She sensed a movement, then saw a leaf, almost as large as her palm, float gently and gracefully through the air and land near her feet. Ah my friend, you have come to provide me with company. Do I really look so lonely?

She raised her head, pushed her neck back, and relieved the ache in her shoulders. She squinted at the clear sky above her, marveling at the bounty of nature, when, almost immediately, the beauty of the blue heavens was marred by the thought that a storm was brewing. But it won't come from the sky, she speculated. It will be the people who will rise up and pour their anger on this land of ours – their eyes have dried up from their tears, they have lost their patience. I pray to God that they don't lose their sanity and that their hatred of our oppressor doesn't force them to resort to violence.

It was then that she realized, with a start, that whatever the outcome, she had little influence over it. She had experienced mob frenzy on occasions when peaceful protestors had been viciously and barbarously whipped by the police and their underlings. Well...she thought impotently, if I can't stop them and avoid chaos, the least I can do is lead them and exhort them to behave in a civilized way. After all, this march, tomorrow, is entirely the result of my own urging. It is now my responsibility.

"Valliamma, where are you!" she heard her mother call out.

"I am here, here," she replied, snapping out of her

reverie, unaware that she had said it to herself. As she rose to her feet, she wondered: but where will I be in the next few days? Will I be gobbled up like that poor bee, by a hawk or some such bird of prey, and end up with my bones spat out over this land? And then she shrugged. It is my destiny. I will be there, where I have to be. My fate is not in my hands, to be decided by me. As it is written, so it will be.

After a scant meal of beans and a piece of roti, Valliamma sat in a corner of the room, some distance from her mother and her friends. She listened to them conversing in low tones, planning a protest march to Volksrust and then to Newcastle.

Her mother had taught her never to interrupt when the elders were talking and Valliamma now maintained her silence, not daring to interrupt even when the burning questions threatened to spill from her lips, demanding answers to the many controversial arguments that surged through her mind. But she listened, attentively and carefully, keen to examine every allegation and pronouncement that the satyagrahis made.

When Veeramal, Thambi Naidoo's wife, began to speak Valliamma perked up. She knew, from listening to her in the past, that she was a fiery speaker and a leader who feared no one.

"The time has come," Veeramal firmly insisted, "to do something that will really hurt the government and open its eyes. Talking to those people is a waste of time and they don't listen to us anyway."

"I agree," Mrs. P.K. Naidoo asserted, by way of support. "But whatever we do, it must have the people behind us. We have to prove to our rulers that we have run out of patience."

"What more can we do?" Valliamma's mother

asked, her voice subdued and sounding defeated. “We hold rallies every weekend, we make it clear that we have had enough of their brutality. So far we have achieved very little.”

“But that is exactly my point,” Veeramal added, in her usual reasonable manner. “It is time, Mangalam, to look for other ways to shake them out of their smugness.”

“You have something in mind?” Baikum Pillay asked. “A different approach...”

“I think I have the answer to that,” Mrs. P.K. Naidoo said. “What will really hurt this government? Put a huge nail into its coffin? It’s a simple solution and I can’t think why I hadn’t thought of it until now! Although, I have to admit, it was Gandhiji that planted the seed in my mind. We must incite the workers to go on strike! That will hurt their pockets and shake their confidence.”

Valliamma sat up, almost jumping out of her chair. Yes! she thought, that will really frighten them and be a painful message, like a spur into a horse’s side. And now is the time to do it, while the people are still angry.

The conversation had, in all that time, been conducted entirely in Tamil. Valliamma easily followed the discussion, only occasionally getting lost when some woman added a word or two in Telugu or in some other dialect that she was unfamiliar with.

“We will have to discuss this with our husbands,” Mrs. Chinsamy Pillay suggested. “We must draw all of them into our plans, make it a national strike. For that we need their assistance and their participation.”

A strike! Valliamma exulted, with all the workers joining in! I have to be a part of it. I must march with them, be in the front and encourage every one of them to stop working and demand to be treated fairly. And I am sure that Gandhiji will lead us, with uncle Thambi and

uncle P.K. right there with all of us, telling the workers that they have little to lose.

And then, completely unconsciously, Valliamma shouted out, “Shatham Prati Satyam! Truth against a rogue.” When the women looked up in surprise, Valliamma hung her head in embarrassment, only to find that all present had responded to her call and, raising their fists in the air, repeated with fervor: “Shatham Prati Satyam!”

When her mother hugged her, Valliamma’s heart soared with delight and brought tears of pleasure to her eyes. And she silently repeated the rallying cry to herself, glorying in her invention.

“Do not be afraid,” Valliamma exhorted the women that surrounded her. “Be steadfast in upholding your rights, be fearless against this injustice. This government humiliates us. It must be abolished! And always remember, their only strength is your fear. Conquer it and they’re helpless. Now our march begins. Be prepared to be harassed. It will be a long trek, there will not be the support we receive here at our homes And some of us will suffer from illness and pain during this journey. We must expect it and face up to it. That is what Gandhiji taught us when he explained the meaning of satyagraha. And they will surely throw us in jail. That too is the price we must pay for freedom. It is a honourable cause, a fight for justice. Are you ready for it?”

“Lead the way,” P.K. Naidoo’s wife replied stoutly. “We are not women of straw! They can kill us but they will never break us. We are fighting for our freedom. If death is the price that has to be paid for liberty, we will pay it. And God will exact vengeance, as he always does.”

An old lady, nearing the age of fifty, said, “When we marched from Tolstoy Farm, to that place – Viljoens-

drift – many of us carried our babies with us. We made sure we broke the law so that we could be arrested. They were too frightened of us and kept their distance.”

“We dared them to openly brutalise us,” a young girl scoffed. “They were too clever for that!

“I have been on many marches,” Baikam Pillay said loudly. “Those dirty men who pushed us about and put their hands on us, where are they today?”

“I was with you, Baikum,” Lutchmi Pillay called out. “Let them come now. They won’t be so arrogant this time.”

Valliamma listened with half her mind, the other half pre-occupied with the rigours of the epic journey and the outcome of their mission. That first day had gone well, and in most of the towns that they passed through the Indian merchants provided them with food and accommodation, displaying the legendary Indian custom of hospitality and concern for travellers.

At night she almost cried when she listened to the sounds of rumbling tummies and watched the women moistening their parched lips as they ran their dry tongues into their mouths. She got up often, checked that the satyagrahis were resting, albeit for short periods, before settling down for a brief respite.

Watching the bright night sky and marveling at the shining stars twinkling above her, she thought: This is how it must have been for the first woman on earth. She must have survived, for us to be here today. And we will survive too!

Over the next few days, drunken pseudo-officials cruelly harassed them, demanding to know why they were carrying pangas and axes. Veeramal Naidoo explained that these were no more than wood-cutting tools, to light a fire at night and keep their bodies warm from the freezing weather. Defeated, the rude men asked for

their permits and were met with cold stares and a deafening silence. When one of the men arrogantly asked them to turn back, insisting that they could return only when they had their permits, Valliamma asked, "What will you do to us? We are not going back. Arrest us, if you wish!"

The official-looking and arrogant man took a backward step, unused to being spoken to in that manner by an Indian - and a woman at that.

The man then smiled snidely, hinting softly that if they gave him a bribe he would overlook their transgressions. "Pay you!" Valliamma asked, equally softly, "with what? We have no money!"

When their tormentor angrily strode off, threatening to return with reinforcements, Lutchmi shouted at his back, "What for? We are not resisting you. Why don't you just arrest us! We will follow you peacefully."

"He won't come back," Mrs. P.K. Naidoo grumbled. "Just hold your ground the next time, as you did now. You can be sure we will eventually be taken in. If so, that will be fine. We are on a noble mission. We pursue it to the end or perish!"

They stumbled into Vereeniging, some limping and nursing their soles by wrapping rags around them. Two of the younger women dragged their feet, their arms hugging their chests and their eyes moist. They had both lost their children and were mourning in silence. Others just pushed on, ignoring the excruciating pain and the hunger pangs.

"We suffer like this, for what?" an emaciated young girl moaned. "Is this the price we pay for our freedom?"

"Listen, my sister," Valliamma said consolingly, "Freedom is our birthright, but we have to fight for it. Nobody hands it to you like a lotus flower. When Mr. Kallenbach, a white man, who is sympathetic to our cause, can march with us, as he has done often - and he is not the

only White person to do so – it motivates us and adds to our determination. If we don't stand up for it now, the generations to come will still be suffering under these unjust laws. The price we pay today will free those that come after us. It is not a lot by comparison. And you can't place a value on it."

"And talking about it will achieve little. Our pain is nothing!" the elderly woman scoffed. "Our people know this, have lived with it for many years. That time, in Vereeniging, we were taken in by our own. When people like Asvat, Bharoochi and his wife, and others took us in, fed us and gave us decent clothing, they too were contributing to freedom. It was the same in Charlestown, then Volksrust. It was Mrs. Bayat, Mr Munshi, and his friends who took care of us and accommodated us. The authorities harassed us and detained us. In Charlestown our people enclosed the mosque grounds with tents and gave us food, provided by local Indian traders. But in the end they let us go. What else could they do? They knew we were on a noble mission!"

"That journey," an emaciated and frail woman in her early thirties cried, "was painful. We slept in the open veld at first before we reached Volksrust. Some died, still with their babies in their arms.

"When the police let us go, that was a good thing," another of the women said firmly. "If they had locked us up in Vereeniging we would not have been here today. If writing petitions, breaking sick laws by hawking to earn a living, telling our people to strike for justice, is a sin, then I'm a sinner. Let God be the judge!"

"It has been said that God only helps those who help themselves." Veeramal said with conviction, closing the subject.

"I think we are approaching Newcastle." Valliamma announced. "We have survived up to now. If we manage

to talk to only one group of labourers, just the miners and railway workers, we will succeed in getting them to strike. And then the others will follow.”

“Somebody is coming towards us,” Bhawani Dayal warned. “I can’t see him too clearly from here, but he looks like an Indian...”

“My name is Dawood Mahomed. I have been visiting here with a few friends. We are all Passive Resisters and we have been expecting you. Mister Badat and Vali Peerbhai sent a messenger who rode through the night from Volksrust, to inform us that you were on your way. If you come with me I will take you to the people in Newcastle.”

“Take us to the mines and the railways,” Valliamma said. “They are the people we want to meet. And to talk to.”

“Patience, my girl. You look tired, and some of you are in great pain. I can see that. Rest for a while, gather your strength and you will be better prepared to address the workers. We have been told all about you and we adore you. Our community in Newcastle is very hospitable, they’ll take good care of you.”

“Yes...yes. A short break will be welcome, especially for our older sisters. But we have nowhere to stay, so we can’t be here for too long. And we have much to do, many towns to call on...”

“Everything has been arranged. A good night’s rest will refresh you and you will be more effective when you face the workers. There is a very good doctor and a learned hakim, both Passive Resisters – you can depend on them to minister to the sick.”

“Thank you, father. If you will lead the way...”

“But slowly, my child. Slowly. Joy, and grief, both are impostors. You must also prepare yourselves to be

cruelly harassed by the police – they may even be aware of your visit.”

“We are immune to them now. They’ve done their worst. What more can they do?”

“You know, I met Gandhiji once, not too long ago. He told me you were our greatest asset. I’m not sure I believed him then, especially when he mentioned your age. I was wrong to doubt him. You have been campaigning incessantly and you are indeed our most valuable crusader, a veteran before your time.”

Valliamma found it difficult to respond to praise graciously, although she wasn’t slow to praise others. All she could say was, “My appa always reminded me that Lord Krishna taught us to think of pleasure and pain, victory and defeat...it is all the same thing. I can only stand up for what is right – so that I bring no evil on myself.”

“Your father is a very wise man. We can all learn from him.”

They had been talking as they walked, the others close behind them, when their benefactor said, a little loudly so all could hear him, “we have reached our destination. And here is our welcoming committee.”

Valliamma and her companions were speechless. They hadn’t expected such a large crowd waiting for them. It seemed as if every Indian in the town had turned out and was looking forward to receive them.

The merchants of Newcastle, together with their wives and families, took the women into their homes and even pitched a few comfortable tents in their backyards. Valliamma and her group were treated like heroes and fed sumptuously, until one of them complained smilingly, “We are stuffed like our mothers-in law, you have tended to our wounds and opened your arms to us. You will all be richly blessed.”

“God has already blessed us,” Mariam Seedat added softly. “He gave us the opportunity to look after you. We can ask for no more.”

“When you walk out of here,” Mariam’s daughter cautioned, “be on your guard. We have just heard that Bai Fatima, the wife of Sheik Mehtab, Gandhiji’s great friend, together with her seven year old son and her mother, Hanifa, were arrested in Volksrust. They were protesting peacefully. The police treated them very roughly, almost kicked them to the ground, and nobody knows what happened to the son.”

“When they asked her for her fingerprints,” Ayesha Bhayat complained, “to be included in the charge sheet, she refused. Both were thrown in jail and sentenced to three months hard labour.”

“This morning we were informed,” Mrs. Lazarus protested, “that Harbat Singh, an old man and a stalwart in the struggle, died in Durban jail. This is just not right!”

“Our people are dying every day!” Valliamma was outraged. “On our journey we lost several little children. One infant froze to death. Another just fell out of his exhausted mother’s arms when she was going across a river. A little girl, tired and freezing in the cold, with nothing to keep her warm, toppled on the wayside and we had to carry her on a rough stretcher to the nearest store. The merchant’s wife took her into her own home, and we were forced to leave her there.

“And yet, not one of us complained or thought of going back. We were single-minded in continuing our mission. Death is just a short interlude – the struggle goes on till victory is ours! And I assure you we will win! And if some of us die others will take over. The move is on and it is unstoppable! It is simply a matter of time!”

Chapter Sixteen

West End Hotel. Durban 1970.

Even Billy Nair, a veteran anti-apartheid activist, looked speechless. The younger men were stunned into silence.

“This was going on...” Abass muttered, “and, until now, we knew blow all about it! Its like...you know...it happened in another country, on another planet, and we had nothing to do with it...”

“Well...” Sam Naidoo mused, “It was a long time ago, before we were born. But I’ll be lying if I said the story of Valliamma’s life doesn’t excite me. But it depresses me too, makes me feel sort of guilty, like I’ve failed in some way, neglected my responsibilities and ignored the abuse...”

“Seems to me,” Sonny Murugen snorted angrily, “that we have allowed the witous to neuk us and we did nothing about retaliating, taking them on and putting them in their place.”

“We may not have done anything,” Thumba protested, “but a lot of our okes, like Billy here, Fatima Meer, Ismail Meer, Goonum...heck man, that list is as long as the street outside. Look at what they did to Phyllis Naidoo? And they’re still active, not shy to take our rulers on and paying the price. How about you, Billy, how many times have you been in the tronk?”

“I don’t keep count. And it was Amina Pahad who once said, when asked a similar question, ‘I don’t see the point of such a response, to reply to such inane queries. In a fight for basic rights, imprisonment is not a deterrent. It is a badge of honour.’ That was a brilliant statement. If we now have to consider the horrors of jail, of places like Robben Island, our determination will be diluted.

“And you lighties need to get a bit of perspective here. You can believe what you like, but you had better understand something: This is not an Indian thing! Every man and woman who loves freedom is fighting for liberty. That includes every White, Coloured, Indian and African in this country. Those racial tags, they insult every thinking person. We see ourselves as South African – period!

“Right at this minute, even as we talk, there is a man - a patriot who loves all of humanity – sitting in a prison on Robben Island. At his trial, in 1964, he made a statement that almost every man who loves justice has memorized. I have by-hearted every word of his speech and you boys will benefit from it if you do the same. What he said was: ‘This is what I believe in, this is what I live for, and if needs be this is what I’ll die for.’

“That man’s name is Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and he was talking about his battle against racial injustice. He went on to say: ‘I detest racism, because I regard it as a barbaric thing, whether it comes from a black man or a white man.’

“And then he added: ‘I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live in perfect harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.’

“Every one of us who is involved in the struggle have made those words our mantra! I suggest you guys write it down, paste it on your bathroom mirror, and read it at the beginning of each day. It will change your lives for the better.

“And, if I may add, what do you think the judge did after hearing those wise words? Do you think he gave Mandela a medal? He threw Mandela in jail, for life! He

is still there, ten years later, and he is not talking about vengeance...he is just sad that a man who claimed to represent a civilized race could descend to such despicable levels.”

When Billy stopped speaking, the silence was overwhelming. For almost a full minute nobody said a word, each digesting Billy’s speech and his comments. At last, Sonny broke the silence, his voice suddenly loud in the hush that had settled over them.

“Okay, my bra! Point made and point taken,” Sonny conceded. “But we’re talking like its now too late, that the battle is over and we lost it. Life is lekker, sweet and easy. All of us here know that is nowhere near true, more now than ever before...”

“You know, boet,” Mohan interjected, “listening to uncle Soobry and Billy, all I hear is about strikes, protest rallies, taking the witou on, that not all vitous are bad... there’s nothing about love here. I mean, didn’t people fall in love? How about Valliamma? Didn’t she have a boyfriend, feelings for some guy...”

“You’re mistaking the main issue here,” Billy Nair chuckled. “It is all about love! Love for liberty, freedom, justice, love for human rights...Valliamma was the epitome of everything those concepts represent. She didn’t live long enough to experience that other emotion...she was still a kid...”

“Okay, maat, okay!” Mohan said placatingly. “I take that back and I stand corrected. There’s a lot more to love than a man and woman thing.”

“Oh, there is that too. Do you think the wives of guys like Cachalia, Thambi Naidoo, H.O.Ally, P.K Naidoo and a hell of a lot of others didn’t love their men?” Billy demanded, somewhat angrily.

“No!” Mohan agreed, “I don’t think that. And I wasn’t being facetious or flippant. It was just a thought, stupid per-

haps, and I should have known better. My apologies, bro.”

“Now that is what I like about you lighties,” Soobry said, entering the debate for the first time. And it was obvious that he was very tired, he had been talking for hours and it was taking its toll. “Anyway, there’s not much more to tell you, we are near the end...Valliamma’s end...”

Chapter Seventeen

Newcastle, Natal. 1913.

Valliamma and her group were stunned, they couldn't believe what they were seeing. More than a thousand workers, men and women, had turned out to hear the crusaders. And the anger was reflected in their faces as they stood stiffly in tight little knots and silently waited to be addressed.

Looking at the sea of faces before her, Valliamma, for the first time, felt intimidated. They are here to listen to what we have to say, she told herself. All we have is a message. We can't free them. Are they aware of that? They are the only ones who can fight to escape from their bondage. Do they appreciate that they have the power to break the bonds and free themselves.

We must not, cannot, fail them, she repeated to herself. This is the greatest mission I have ever undertaken. Up to now, the rallies, the marches, the lives lost on our journey, were no more than sending a message to our rulers, telling them that they have to stop the brutality. But now, today, I will ask these poor slaves to stand up to their masters and demand what is rightfully due to them, by stopping work, going on a strike!

Do they not suffer enough? Will we deprive them of what little they have? Take away the meager food from their children's mouths and throw it back at those that deny them a living wage? Do I have the right to do that? Am I now playing God and encouraging these simple souls to stand up and shout out aloud for a fair share of their labour?

Why am I now doubting my determination to inculcate the need to ensure that justice is apportioned fairly and administered to all, regardless of race or skin

shades?

And then she mentally shrugged. I'm doing what I was born to do. All I am suggesting is that, through generations of suppression, they have lost sight of their basic rights. I am asking them to demand those God-given and legitimate entitlements and restore their dignity. They have been downtrodden for long enough, it is time they defied their taskmasters who for far too long have tyrannised them.

Valliamma straightened up, raised her right hand as if taking an oath, and shouted, her voice reverberating off the mine dumps and the sound waves echoing over the valley: "Shatham Prati Satyam – truth against a rogue!"

A thousand voices echoed her cry, fists pointed at the sky, their faces reflecting their anger.

Thambi Naidoo jumped onto the makeshift stage, hastily erected by the local Indian carpenters, and began a speech that would be remembered by all present that day for the rest of their lives.

"Your fathers were slaves, they were brought here as slaves, deluded into thinking they were coming to a new world where they could live happily and in comfort. That was enough to persuade them to leave their ancestral villages.

"When they experienced their pain, their subjugation, do you think they didn't dream about freedom? For themselves? For you? In their impotence they strived on, believing that you will escape the drudgery that had become a way of life for them. That became their new dream, their hope for change.

"And you let them down, you shattered their dreams for you, you betrayed them!

"But now you will say that you have to put food on the table, that you cannot stand to see your children

starve. Am I to believe that they are not already starving? That you don't have the means to educate them, to inculcate the ambition to better themselves, to succeed where you failed?

"You can continue dreaming until you die, but while you do that think about your children. Will you leave them with a legacy of slavery, to perpetuate the system of exploitation? Is that how you will show your love for them?

"But what can we do?' you ask, like helpless fish thrashing on a line. You don't stop to think, you forget that you possess an enormous power, the power to withdraw your labour and bring the mines to a standstill!

"Without your labour these mines will shut down! Those that abuse you will be hurt financially and it will be a huge setback to their profiteering schemes.

"Withdraw your labour! Send a message that you have been strangled for too long and you will now refuse to participate in your exploitation. Stop work! And then watch the agony of the mine bosses.

"I'm not asking you to stop working for ever, just long enough to shake those complacent profiteers out of their smug stance. I'm asking you to go on a STRIKE! For a week! A decent wage is not something that will be handed to you on a golden plate. You have to demand it! And you must also ask for better working conditions and better living quarters.

"Do not think, for a minute, that your employers, sitting comfortably in their palatial homes situated on the top of the hills, are unaware of your plight. They need to be shaken up, to finally acknowledge that you are not slaves, not tools good only to operate the spades and shovels that are thrown at you.

"Go back to work after a week, but leave the threat hanging in the air that you will strike again if they don't

respond positively to your fair demands.

“And make sure you are fair, that you don’t make the mistake of asking for more than what is due to you - the true worth of your labour – ask for more than you are worth and you will be no better than the mine owners and become exploiters yourselves.

“Of course they will threaten to fire you. You can be sure that it will be no more than that – just a threat. When their profits are hurt they don’t like it. But if you are reasonable about your demands the good people from amongst them will behave equally responsibly.

“You can go on and do nothing, you can continue to strut about in your fowl-runs pretending that you are some great heroes, you can keep on dreaming. Nobody will force you to act. And you will still be dreaming when you die. But if you want your children to progress, to educate themselves and escape this drudgery, now is the time to strike.

“But I must warn you - do not, whatever the provocation, resort to violence whilst you are on strike. Behave in the true teachings of satyagraha, go about your mission peacefully.

“Last night I spoke to the local Indian merchants. All of them promised, without hesitation, to provide you with food when you are not working. Your families will not starve.

“Go with God, secure in the knowledge that he is at your side at all times.”

When Thambi stepped off the makeshift stage and walked towards Valliamma and her team of reformers who had followed them from Volksrust, he was mobbed by a throng of workers, all demanding that he lead them on their campaign and set a date on which they should revolt against their masters. Thambi advised them to se-

lect their own leaders, from amongst themselves. “ P.K. Naidoo will guide you. I must move on. I still have many towns to call on, people to address.”

Thambi Naidoo, together with P.K., took Valliamma aside, away from the hordes and towards a quiet spot. “We have just been informed that Gandhiji is being harassed and continuously arrested. He isn’t bothered about himself. He has contacted the Minister of Interior, warning him that the satyagrahis are being molested and are thrown in jail. He has given a clear warning that the deaths of our people are going to be laid at the government’s door and will be their responsibility.”

“I will not allow myself to be deterred from my work. They can do what they like. The next towns I will be going to are Dundee, Dannhauser, and Ladysmith. Then to Pietermaritzburg and Tongaat. I will bring this government to its knees!”

“You are tired, my dear. I can see the exhaustion in your face. You have to conserve your energy.”

“To do what? What is more important? Freedom and liberty or my bed?”

“How old are you, my girl? Fifteen? You may look and have the brain of someone twice your age, that you are a genius is not in doubt. But you are also human and vulnerable to stress. If you collapse from fatigue now, the movement will be greatly weakened.”

“Others will take over! The people are incensed. They want action. We can’t afford to lose the momentum.”

“Gandhiji is convinced that the authorities have you in their sights. If they lock you up now our cause will be severely hampered. Please think about it.”

“If I stop to do that, uncle Thambi, I’ll lose my drive and perhaps never recover. For me that would be a calamity.”

“I’m not asking you to stop your quest. All I’m say-

ing is that you slow down, conserve your strength and give your body a chance to recover. Is that too much to ask?”

“No, it isn’t. I know you are concerned about me and I am not unappreciative. I assure you...a few more weeks and then I’ll go home. I’m missing my family. There are nights when I cry for them, just to feel their touch. I am not like some of our leaders, who make long speeches and then go home to sleep. The day I get every Indian, every person of colour, to strike, my work will be done. Is that too much to ask?”

“No...no...it isn’t. I have no arguments to refute your logic. All I can now say is that we will be at your side, always. From there, it is over to God.”

“And with him at our side, how can we lose!”

“I’m not sure what it is, P.K. That talk of hers, to the mineworkers in Newcastle, was brilliant. Looking at her no one will believe that she is not yet sixteen. Gandhiji is right when he says that she is gifted! What else can explain her choice of words, the depth of her understanding and concern for the workers. Even her formal education, such as it was worth, could not have prepared her for this task.”

“Thambi, you are judging her...no, that’s not true... you are assessing her by normal standards. This girl is way ahead of her years, when Gandhiji says that she is gifted I can’t help feeling as if it is an understatement. Dare I say it? I’m convinced that she is from the ranks of our greatest saints, a reincarnation of those that were created from Buddha’s ribs. It may sound fanciful, but it is what I believe and I have known her from the day she was born. She has never, not even under the greatest stress, slandered or humiliated anyone, not even those who violated her rights.”

“I’m not sure I will go so far. I have seen her, watched her develop over the years...I’ll readily concede that she is unique - a prodigy, a paragon of absolute moral principles - as for being a saint...I’m no expert, my brother...”

“Well...I guess we’re only speculating now. But the government’s dogs are on her tail, she has become too powerful, the people adore her and will follow her into the furnaces of hell. Our rulers know this, and you can be sure that they will stop her, whatever the cost. The word is already out. Its now only a matter of days before they come for her.”

“And that becomes our responsibility. We must find a way to keep her in some form of seclusion...”

“You know that she will never agree to that. All we can do is let it play itself out, let events take their course, and pray that Valliamma evades their clutches.”

“Talk about saints! Here she comes, full of bounce and skipping across the dusty road.”

“You can’t take the girl out of her! She is a contradiction within herself - alternating between an adult and a young maiden. I’d love to enter her mind, just for a minute...”

“Vannakum, Valliamma,” Thambi smiled welcomingly. “You look happy!”

“Vannakum, uncle Thambi, uncle P.K. Yes, I am happy. Tomorrow we march to Dannhauser and we are all excited. If we get a turnout like the one we had here it will be a cause for celebration.”

“And you are not worried about the government’s dogs who are on their way?” Thambi asked.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call them all dogs. Some are working for a living and simply following orders. And what’s to worry about? Our rulers do what they have to do, and we will do what we have to do. Whatever the outcome, we will be eventually successful and everybody in our coun-

try will benefit. Don't you think that is worth the effort?"

"Even if you have to spend the rest of your life in jail?" P.K. asked, sounding concerned.

"How long is the rest of my life? If I can just spend a day with my family I can face up to anything after that."

"Then go home, today," Thambi said persuasively, "Leave now. You can continue this mission after that."

"I don't have the time, uncle. I have to see this through! While I still can."

Chapter Eighteen

West End Hotel. Durban 1970.

“Okay, enough!” Soobry Pillay said decisively, rising from his chair and heading for the door. “I’m tired. And I have to see what’s going on out in the front. You boys have worn me out. Leave it for now.”

Billy Nair held up a hand, staying any objections. “Let’s join Soobry. I’m dry and hungry. We can persuade our raconteur to pick it up from where he just stopped, tomorrow.”

They silently trooped out of the room, heads bowed, each absorbed within himself, believing every word they had heard and yet unable to come to terms with it.

As they lined up across the bar counter, waiting to be served, Sonny Murugen fumed, “I hear all this, and sure, my heart goes out to that kid. But then I ask myself, what has changed? She put her ezie on the line, took those okes on, and what happened? The vitous still call the shots! You guys, Billy, you follow the same route that she and her connections did and we’re no better off. But out there, on the street, we don’t take their kuk, we neuk them!”

“Sonny has a point,” Abbas asserted. “From way back then you chaps have been singing the non-violent song, following the peaceful route. Comes a time when you have to say ‘no way, man! I’m gonna push back, somer take you on.’”

“It’s a funny thing,” Mohan said ironically, “When we bucklay with them, they back off pretty quickly. You want to tell me what your style has achieved?”

Billy Nair was about to reply when a harmless looking youngster, a White boy, strolled in and stepped up to the counter.

"This is an Indian bar, buddy," Sonny snarled. "You're in the wrong place."

"Ya? Hey, I'm new here. I only want a drink, man."

"You telling me you don't know the law?" Sonny demanded. "We look like a bunch of punks to you?"

"You said that, man," the newcomer protested. "I'm not looking for shit."

"You know something, mister," Sonny responded menacingly. "Your people make the laws. Now me, I don't know much about politics and I know even less about you witous. I've never seen you before, but I know your kind. You're nothing but full of crap, thinking you can walk in here and we will all say 'kom, baas, let me buy you a drink.' Well, I have news for you, pal, get the hell out of here while you can still walk!"

"And consider yourself lucky," Mohan added.

The youngster, looking flustered, turned to go when Soobry called out, "Wait, son. You come right in. Everybody is welcome here. This is my place. Sonny, we don't do the Security Branch's dirty work."

"Hey, ou maat," the newcomer said defensively, "I'm a bruinou, man. How come you okes tune false with me? You treat me like I'm a Naainigile Joe!"

Sonny looked crestfallen. Mohan held out his right hand, by way of apology. The others moved aside to create a space for the visitor.

"No offence, maatie", Mohan gave a friendly smile. Now I'll buy you a drink, boet."

"It happens quite often, manne," the new boy replied. "In some places it is an advantage, you get treated special. By the way, my name is Trevor Fassom."

"And I'm Mohan Govender. My friends call me Mo."

"Just bad timing, son," Billy said genially. "We happened to be talking about some unsavoury matters, about

the way us darkies are treated in this country. I guess the boys were all hyped up and when you walked in they just sort of...you know, lost it. It was the wrong reaction, even if you were White.”

“Its okay, mister. I’m used to it. Even my own mense, the okes who don’t know me, take off with me sometimes. And you know, those same chaps they don’t see me as a bruinou. They refer to me as a colourpean – a playwhite - like I’m a piece of shit, you know what I mean?”

“I do, indeed. We are our own worst enemies. We practise the most obscene form of racism, worse than anything the Whites throw at us...”

“Not where I come from, buta. I live in a block of flats in Bond Street. And we’re all one big family there – charous, bruinous and even a few peckyous. We julate in and out of each other’s posies and don’t knock on the door. And the aunties out there, they sommer khup you if you tune false.”

“Okay, great,” Sam Naidoo said in his usual easy-going manner. “Now that we have identified each other can we talk about Valliamma? Seems to me that kid is about to declare war. Uncle Soobry...”

“Not today son,” Soobry said, closing the subject. “I have a business to run. But you can come back tomorrow and you can bring this new recruit with you. He may learn something.”

“We have all the time in the world,” Thumba Pillay chuckled. “Varsity is closed for the holidays and some of you hustlers can take a break from your rackets.”

“Ya,” Sam Naidoo ironically added, “The Bush College, especially reserved for us darkies...”

“Hey, Sammy,” Thumba protested, “what can we do? Surely you know we’re barred from the other universities!”

“But when you go there,” Sam said derisively, “its

like you're participating in the system. Playing ball with..."

"Sam, my bra, you're missing the whole point here. Our education is our priority. Where we get it from, unpalatable as it may be, is a side issue. Once I get my law degree I'll take the government on, with confidence and authority on the Westminster System. That's when people pay attention to your arguments."

"We should just blow the place up!" Mohan added explosively. "That will get their attention."

"And their wrath," Thumba asserted. "Nothing of value will be achieved."

"You know what you lighties are advocating," Billy said impassionately, "you want to terminate a center of learning, kill the one place that still nurtures us. Guys like Thumba here, they go to the lectures, but under protest. To stay away altogether will kill our future, we'll end up as an illiterate community. What you are suggesting, Mohan, is like saying there's a sure-fire cure for cancer – just shoot the patient! You can't kill me to save me!"

"What're you complaining about, Billy?" Sam joked, "we will be elevating you to the status of a martyr."

"Martyrs are only celebrated when they're dead. I'm not ready for that yet," Billy laughed.

"This place, Tata," Abbas chuckled, "is breeding revolutionaries. And that back room of yours is turning into a college, with history lessons the only subject."

"Billy," Soobry said, "I have to see to my customers. Why don't you update this lighty, Trevor, on Valliamma. That way he won't keep interrupting me with a dozen questions. That's if he plans to be there."

"I donno what you okes been tuning about," Trevor said, "but maybe I will come, after I hear your story, Billy."

"I'm not as good as Soobry when it comes to story-telling. But I'll tell you what I've heard so far and you boys here can interrupt as often as you like..."

They strolled in, in ones and twos, heading directly for Soobry's private room. A minute later Trevor Fassom walked in. "Soobry pointed me in this direction, I was heading the wrong way..."

"Story of your life," Sonny chuckled. "Anyway, I get the feeling that today will be our last meeting, on this topic. Uncle Soobry sounded like he was reaching the end of his tale."

"And what will we do with it," Abbas asked accusingly. "Won't do much good if we go around bucklaying with every witou, or innocent guys like Trevor here. And he isn't even one of them."

"What you do, my friend," Billy suggested, "is you learn from it. And you repeat it. As often as you can! And when the time comes, tell your children so that they'll always know where they are coming from. And a word of advice, from a veteran freedom activist: don't make the mistake of knocking every White man you see. Don't confuse them with their government. A large number of them don't subscribe to this apartheid crap..."

"I don't dance to that jive, Billy!" Mohan objected. "Who voted this bunch into power? They did! We don't have the damned vote, my bra!"

"I'm not sure of the legitimacy of the system. I won't be surprised if it is rigged. But you must never respond with anger. It messes up your mind. It will overpower your logic and destroy your reason. Anger is for fools, for idiots who can't respond rationally. You make that mistake and you lose the argument."

"And then nobody listens to you," Soobry added as he walked in, heading for the kettle.

"Well...uncle Soobs," Abbas complained accusingly. "I've seen you lose your cool and it wasn't very funny. We jidigad sort of special outta here..."

“We’re talking politics, my boy, not thuggery.”

“And even in other situations, the advice holds true,” Billy shrugged, his face expressionless. “Anger results in anger, not a solution.”

“Okay, fine,” Sam said jokingly. “The next time I want lessons in life I won’t go to the mosque, I’ll come here.”

“You aint no slumou.” Abbas laughed, “You don’t go to the mosque.”

“And neither do you,” Sam responded, with good humour.

“Hey, my bro, a mosque is for sinners,” Abbas grinned. “Now me, I’m pure as undiluted milk, I have no need – “

“Cut it out, you two,” Mohan said, smiling widely. “I didn’t come here to listen to your thee and thy.” Then he turned towards Soobry Pillay and asked, eagerly, “Tata, tell us more about Valliamma. I like that vilt babe.”

“Vilt babe? Do you boys ever speak English? No, don’t answer that. You’ve already...how do you say it... neuked my mind!”

They burst into laughter and Billy Nair chuckled, “Well, Soobry, you seem to have acquired a sense of humour, not a bad start for a ballie...”

“Ballie my ezie!” Soobry snorted. “Listen to me now! I’m talking like these tunsels! I haven’t acquired a sense of humour, I’ve been corrupted. But okay, you want to hear about Valliamma? Not much left to tell you...”

Chapter Nineteen

Dundee. Natal. 1913.

Valliamma had been on the road for close two months. And it was beginning to take a toll on her health. After addressing the workers in Charlestown, Dundee, Ladysmith, Dannhauser, Pietermaritzburg and several other major towns, she took a break for a few days in rural Tongaat, a place that she had often thought about and which occupied a special spot in her heart. From stories her father had told her, she knew that Tongaat was where her own grandparents, from both her father's and her mother's side, had settled. She wasn't aware of any members of her ancestral families that still resided there, but couldn't help speculating that someone, not necessarily a relative, would know something of her origins and add to her knowledge.

She also had several speeches lined up for the residents of the town and the farms nearby. It was, after all, the heart of the sugarcane fields and the fountainhead of the exploitation of Indian workers, a derivation of slavery referred to by the subtle term: Indenture.

As soon as she had settled the satyagrahis who had accompanied her from Johannesburg, at the homes of local Indian merchants, she quietly and secretively contacted the employees at several of the farms and encouraged them to tell her their stories. For the first few days she slipped in and out of the farms and clandestinely spoke to many of the Indian workers. What she saw and heard shook her to the core of her being - their lives were far worse than anything she had experienced before. And their wretched living conditions were horrendous in the extreme.

On a sunny morning in early December she sent a

message to all the farmworkers – prepare for a rally, she would address them later that day.

It was a mistake, the biggest she had made in her career – she hadn't allowed for the power that the farmers wielded in the town. Within an hour, she had been arrested and hauled off to a prison cell. Before the day was over, her team of passive resisters had been picked up and thrown into prison.

The next morning they were herded to the railway station and sent to the jail in Pietermatizburg, without a formal hearing or a trial. As soon as they had disembarked, a team of police officers, who had been awaiting their arrival, threw Valliamma, together with her co-resisters, into a filthy cell that barely allowed them space to breathe.

The magistrate ordered that they be incarcerated pending his pleasure. And then, several days later, they were inexplicably allowed to go – on the express condition that they would be out of the town before the day was over.

Eventually, some two months after they had set off from Tolstoy Farm, they reached Volksrust, the border town dividing Natal and Transvaal. The eleven women that had accompanied Valliamma throughout the journey were worn out, fatigued and famished. And Valliamma sensed that they were beginning to sound somewhat disoriented and mentally exhausted. Only the thought of returning to their homes kept them going.

“Don't become dispirited,” she urged them. “Our rulers are shaken, they're getting worried. The number of times they arrested us, that alone proves that they are no longer as confident and as complacent as they used to be. Be brave and don't waver.”

“Yes, that's true,” Meenachee confirmed. “We have also stirred the workers and they are demanding their

rights. That alone warms my heart.”

“It will be nice to be reunited with our families,” Veeramal Naidoo said yearningly. “Thambi is pining for home too!”

They had hunkered down on an open veld and, after some of the women had gathered twigs and several dry pieces of wood, settled down to light a fire. Even in mid-December, normally the hottest days of summer, the evenings were distinctly chilly. And, in the absence of warm clothing, a fire was a lifesaver.

“Gandhiji, not long ago, led a group of satyagrahis to this very place. We are following in his footsteps,” Mrs. P.K. Naidoo said, to no one in particular. “They locked him up. But, just a few days ago, he organized the strikers in Pietermaritzburg. When we were there the other day I was told that the police had intervened brutally and thrown Gandhiji in jail. That was when the strikers rioted...”

“I think that man walking towards us is Mr. Badat,” Valliamma said, standing up and walking towards the visitor.

“Salaam, Valliamma. I hope you remember me.”

“Salaam, my brother. How can I forget! Your friends and family took care of us when we passed through here on our way to Newcastle.”

“We saw your fire and I decided to investigate. I didn’t know you had come back. But you can’t stay here, in the cold. Please come with me, all of you. You can stay with us and I’ll make sure you have a warm meal and some hot tea.”

“You are very kind. We are tired and need sanitary facilities and a bath.”

“You’ll have that, and more. Our people will provide you with a change of clothing too.” Then Badat smiled, charmingly, “I can see you are in need of that.”

They had barely reached the entrance to the frontier town when a little boy saw them and ran indoors. Within minutes a group of women, Ayesha Badat leading them, came up to the travellers, their lanterns casting a dull glow in the darkness.

“Come, my sisters,” Ayesha said welcomingly, then hugged Valliamma warmly. “News travels very slowly to this place, but we have heard of what you have been doing. Our people here view you as heroes. Our homes are now your homes. We will see to you.

“Your kindness,” Valliamma started to say, when Ayesha waved her fingers and then turned towards her husband, “what are you waiting for? Go! Get the men together and light some fires, heat a lot of water. Do it now!”

Ayesha kept to her word, within a few hours all the marchers had been provided with bathing facilities, fed well, and located in the homes of the small Indian community. Valliamma, on the verge of exhaustion, had collapsed on an improvised bed in a corner of Badat’s little son’s room, together with Meenachee.

As she drifted off, her mind, normally a hive of activity and constantly planning their next move, was beginning to slow down and the only thought lingering within her was that they would soon be home and re-united with their loved ones.

She sensed Meenachee, close to her and in deep slumber, moving restlessly and muttering under her breath. Automatically, her hand reached out and patted her friend’s shoulder, subduing and reassuring the tired woman. Meenachee turned on her side, sighed unconsciously, and curled into a ball.

The interruption, however, had disturbed her peaceful mood and feelings of tranquility. The brief interlude, when her buzzing brain had been on the verge of a much-needed rest, was lost. She was, once again, plan-

ning the next days journey and making a mental note to ensure all eleven of her companions carried some food to replenish their energy and keep them going.

She was listening to the creaking sounds as the old house settled, as if it too was preparing to sleep for the night. She heard Rashid, the Badat's little boy, cry out in his sleep, whimper for a second, and then he seemed to drift off into dreamland. Silence enveloped her once again.

Valliamma sighed, hugged her shoulders, and willed herself to get a much-needed sleep. Within minutes, she was in dreamland.

They came early in the morning, just as the sun was rising over the horizon and casting a dull shadow over the land. There were five of them, huge men with wide shoulders and barrel-chests. They moved in absolute silence, blending into the shadow around them. The leader, an imposing figure that loomed over his troop, glanced at one of his men, who was carrying a large axe, the type normally used for tree felling, and nodded commandingly. His subordinate, looking menacing and ready for action, smirked as he stepped forward.

When the axe connected with the wooden door, it was like the sound of thunder and the whole house shook. The next blow shattered the door and loosened the hinges. A mighty shove sent it flying to the ground.

Valliamma jerked upright, her mind completely disorientated, and jumped to her feet, heading for the ante-room. When she emerged from her room she saw Badat rush out, his sleeping clothes in disarray.

“What! What!” the old man cried, panting heavily, “How can you do this – “

The blow, on the side of her shocked host's face, sent him reeling and he almost fell to the floor.

“Shut your bloody mouth, coolie! Where are those bitches? Get them here, fast. Move your arse!”

Valliamma quickly stepped in front of her quivering guardian in an attempt to protect him from the hulking brute and looked the man squarely in the eye “Who do you think you are,” she demanded, “breaking into this house like a wild animal!”

“So...you are the famous bitch, the rabble rouser, the people’s savior. Time to break your skinny little back, you piece of shit! Where are the rest of your crew – “

Valliamma went into a crouch, raised her hands and, as she moved to adopt her intimidating pose, the ogre slapped her on her head and dropped her to the ground. Before she could recover, his minions had roughly lifted her off the floor and cuffed her hands behind her back.

“Throw her in the back of the truck! And you, you old bastard, start talking! Where are the other women? We know there were eleven of them, all troublemakers”

At that moment, Meenachee emerged from her room and softly said, ‘I’m here.’

“Take her with you!” the demented bully screamed to his men. “Now, Badat, where are the rest of them?”

“I’ve seen you before,” Badat replied defiantly. “Your name is Van Zyl. I deal with your people daily, when they come to my shop. The Afrikaner, they are not like you, they treat us with respect. You are a savage – “

“Take this bastard with you,” Van Zyl shouted at his headman. “Throw him in the same cell with these women, together with the common criminals. The rest of you, raid every Indian house in this area, round up the rest of the cows and bring them to the jail. I’ll soon show them who is the boss here!”

“Say nothing,” Valliamma told the sisters. “Maintain total silence. Mister Badat has some influential White

friends and they have freed him. He won't leave it at that. We wait and watch. And don't touch the food, it doesn't smell right and one of our African brothers signaled to me that there's something in it."

The women were sprawled on the floor of the tiny cell and shoved into a corner – the men, all African and arrested for various offences, courteously created a space for them and asked, solicitously, what they had been guilty of.

"We are guilty of nothing," Valliamma told them. "We have been talking to people all over, asking them to go on strike and stop work. We were on our way back home when they arrested us and threw all of us in here."

"Hau! My sister, I think I have heard of you. You are the one they call Valley mama, yes? We men, we are here because we went on strike. My name is Sifiso – "

"Shut up, bliksem," a warder snarled. "You want a taste of my sjambok on your black bum!"

The speaker lapsed into silence, his eyes smouldering, indicating by moving his hands in small up and down motions for his mates to remain quiet.

Covering his lips with his hands, Sifiso swore softly, "Some day...that dog...I'll send him to hell!"

"To do that, mkai, you have to kill him first," the man closest to Sifiso whispered back.

"Its all I live for. My day will come!"

"No!" Valliamma whispered back, "that is not our way. Violence will only create worse violence. Satyagra – "

"Hey, mama," Sifiso's companion murmured, "they started the violence, so we will hit back, with greater violence! When a man don't listen, you stop talking! An eye for an eye – "

"Have you heard of Gandhi?" Valliamma asked.

"Yebo! Great man, that one – "

"And that same great man once said that an eye for

an eye will make the whole world blind...”

Although they had been whispering, the warder must have heard them because he roughly pushed back his chair and faced them threateningly. “You don’t listen. I’m going to donner you!”

“You’ll have to open the cell gate to do that,” Sifiso challenged. “You think you can take us all on?”

“Gott!” their custodian flushed angrily, “Now you’re going to taste my –“

Before he could complete his threat, Badat walked in with an officious looking White man and stepped up to the bars.

“Okay,” Badat said, looking at Valliamma and her friends, “this gentleman is the local magistrate...”

Before he could complete his sentence, the magistrate stepped around him and asked, “Why are you ladies in here? In the male section?”

“We are on our way home, back to Johannesburg, The police just picked us up and –“ Valliamma started to reply when the magistrate cut in, “You have your travel permits?”

“No, we are citizens of this country. We don’t need permits to travel.”

“The law says otherwise,” the magistrate said, not unkindly. “It is my job to uphold the law. Where were you before you came here?”

“Pietermaritzburg.”

“Then you have to go back there and that court can decide your fate. But you can’t be allowed to travel on your own, crossing the border means you are criminals. I’ll make the necessary arrangements. You will have to stay in your cells for a few days, but I have agreed to allow Badat here to bring you your daily meals. I can do no more.”

“That magistrate was very courteous,” Mrs. P.K. Naidoo said somewhat derisively. “And then he throws us into this cattle truck!”

“It may not be his fault,” Valliamma added reasonably. “We’ve been through worse. And the trip won’t take more than a day.

“Its not the trip that bothers me,” Meenachee complained, “I’m more worried about what happens when we get to ‘Maritzburg.’”

“What can happen,” Mrs. P.K. Naidoo said, looking at no one in particular. “Do you recall what Hermann Kallenbach told us back in Tolstoy Farm? ‘They will do everything they can to break your spirit. Don’t respond to them and don’t demand justice, they have no concept of it. Go into yourself and be in a state of trance whenever they torture you. Then nothing can hurt you.’”

“It is time to fall back on that advice. We have all been in jail before, many times, and we survived. We will do it again.”

“But this truck,” one of the ladies complained, “Is hurting my back, in the place where that filthy policeman punched me. It bumps over every pothole and shakes me like a wild horse jumping in fear.”

“Try to sleep,” Mrs. P. K. Naidoo suggested, “Just ignore the pain and think of home, of all the people you love and for whose freedom you are now suffering. There is no pain that can break your spirit when you keep just that one thought in your mind.”

“Life and pain are inseparable,” Veeramal Naidoo advised. “Once, when I complained to Thambi about the way we were being treated in jail, he told me, very quietly, ‘We Tamils have always believed that pain is proof that you are alive. If you have no pain then you are dead!’”

“And the more pain you suffer,” Valliamma added contemplatively, “the more alive you are. We should all be

grateful that we live through this agony. It is an experience that will make us stronger.”

The rest of the torturous journey passed in silence, the women withdrawing into themselves and gathering strength from Veeramal’s and Valliamma’s words.

Chapter Twenty

West End Hotel. Durban. 1970.

Soobry stopped talking, rather abruptly, and took a deep breath before straightening up in his chair. He raised his arms above his head, stretched elaborately and then settled back and sipped on his tea, grimacing when he realized that it had gone cold.

When he remained silent, Abbas asked, his voice subdued but with a touch of anger in his tone, “Tata, what kind of man throws a child in jail? Valliamma was... what? How old? Fifteen? And she was hucked into a cell with hardened criminals, men who had likely been sentenced for some atrocious crimes...”

“Abbas” Billy Nair replied, preventing Soobry Pillay from responding, “I have been in jail...I forget the number of times...but I want you chaps to understand something...even the most hardened criminal, often despised by society, has some pretty high moral values. He hates rapists and he admires a political activist.

“That may not be a universal trait, but it exists – a lot more often than one is inclined to believe. A rapist, especially one who abuses a child, becomes a pariah and is subjected to a rather drastic type of punishment, imposed by his own cellmates. A person sentenced for his political stance is treated as a hero and is protected by those same cellmates. I wouldn’t be surprised if Valliamma was accorded that respect.”

“But, Billy,” Sam Naidoo protested, “I can’t accept that a girl of Valliamma’s age would escape the crude attentions of guys who, in all likelihood, were incarcerated for being rapists themselves. That kind of an animal lives by his own rules, contrary to civilized behaviour. To believe that he would restrain himself simply because she

was fighting the government...”

“I was generalizing, Sam. Of course it isn’t the norm. But it does exist.”

“I’m interested in what happened next...” Thumba Pillay said haltingly, “They couldn’t have just left her there, for the rest of her life...”

“For the rest of her life?” Soobry questioned ironically. “Are you boys forgetting that she continuously maintained that she was not for this world for long...”

“Ya, sure,” Sonny Murugen conceded, “but this kid, they gooied her in the tronk and didn’t give a damned that she was only fifteen. I mean, that’s bloody young, even for someone who can predict her own death.”

“What are we saying here,” Mohan Govender demanded, “Was that it? They dumped her in jail and that is the end of her life?”

“I think you lighties should let Soobry finish the story. You’re jumping to conclusions...”

“Okay, lekker,” Abbas cut in, “It’s just that we’re pretty mal about what was done to her. Tata, you’re going to tell us what happened next?”

“I already told you boys, we’re coming towards the end of her life...not the end, but nearly there. When they threw those ladies in jail, they eventually transferred them to a kind of communal cell – the worse kind – nothing like you can even imagine...”

Chapter Twenty One

Pietermaritzburg. December 1913.

“**I want you** to remember what we spoke about on our way here,” Mrs. P. K. Naidoo said, stressing each word and drawing all of them in. “They are sure that they will break us! They stuffed us in this tiny cell, with no toilet facilities, a bucket of water – to wash with or to drink – as we see fit, and food full of weevils and roaches.

“They give some of us decent food, to tempt the rest of us to fight over it. And they know that, as the days pass we will begin to smell and try to create our own space – and that will lead to even more quarrels.

“We must prove them wrong! We have to show them that a Tamil woman is made of greater courage and comes from a civilized race. They can brutalise us at will, but our response to it is in our hands. They can’t control that!”

“They can’t keep us in here for long,” Veeramal pointed out. “They have locked up several thousands of our women, and that’s not counting the men. Even the filth they feed us requires money and they don’t like that. Just the amount it takes to making sure we don’t walk out of here must be enormous.”

“I don’t think that bothers them,” Mrs. P. K. commented, rather derisively, her lips curling in contempt. “It’s our own money that is paying for all this – money that rightfully belongs to the people. They take our houses, they confiscate our properties and impound our goods – all in the name of some sick laws that we have no say in – and then they claim that we are the exploiters.”

“Yes, my sister. Two of our more wealthy men, my own husband, Thambi - and Ahmed Cachalia - have both been reduced to nothing. And so have hundreds of oth-

ers, people who broke their backs to save for their families and their future. What they are now doing to us is nothing!”

“My father and my mother,” Valliamma added bitterly, “slaved from early in the morning till late at night, carrying their baskets on their backs. They took nothing that didn’t belong to them. My appa always told me, ‘take a penny that doesn’t belong to you and you are no more than a common thief!’ And my amma lived in the belief that money that is stolen, even just a tiny amount, taints all of it. Uncle Ally called it dirty money, like a drop of urine in clean water.

“But who is paying for that crime? While we, my appa and amma, and five thousand others are suffering in jail the real criminals are living in luxury.

Velliamma burst into a coughing fit, her hands pressed to her chest and her legs buckling under her. She quickly straightened up, then wheezed, “How God punishes them is His business. I intend to break their power and see justice being done long before God decides to find the time to make them pay for their sins! And I’ll do it Gandhiji’s way – I will not spill a drop of blood, ours or the exploiters, as I achieve my aims.”

“It is very easy, my child, for your anger to run away with you. When you then resort to fury you lose your humanity. Guard against hatred for your enemy – Gandhiji tells us this all the time. We must never lose sight of it.”

“I’m no longer angry, ma,” Valliamma replied quietly. “I’m just saddened by the way we are abused, by people we have never harmed. And why are we here, in this hell-hole? We refused to be treated like pariah dogs with no rights! It is not hatred but demanding our God-given rights that I fight for.”

“Hush, here comes that warder with our mush!” Veeramal warned, her finger on her lips.

The warder pushed the food bowls through the bars, then said, not unkindly, "I don't think this is food for humans. I wouldn't give it to my dog!"

"It's not your fault, my brother," Mrs. P.K. said reassuringly. "We do not grudge you in any way."

"But that child, she needs medicine. I hear her cough, her chest heaving like a sick animal. I don't think this is right!"

"She has to be seen by a doctor, urgently," Veeramal stressed. "Please tell your superiors to attend to her."

"They don't welcome my suggestions. I've complained to them about this child often..."

"She is fifteen years old! She could be your own granddaughter. What kind of people do you work for?"

"Gott, meisie! I am not in charge here..."

"Please... just speak to someone. If she doesn't receive attention soon she could be in danger..."

"I will try, but nobody listens to me."

"I can go home? Why? They didn't lock me up because I was sick! I am here as a political prisoner, for protesting against their laws. Will they now repeal those laws too?"

"Valliamma," Mrs. P.K. said persuasively, "You need treatment. And the people need you. When you are better –"

"Then what? Must I come back here? For crimes that the rest of the world thinks I am innocent of? If they want to release me, they must admit I am guilty of nothing."

"They won't do that, my child. They don't apologise to anybody –"

"Then I will sit right here. I refuse to be released for medical reasons. If anybody is guilty, they are! For crimes against humanity – that is what uncle Ally always called

it.”

“But even he is now demanding that you be released, immediately.”

“General,” Gandhi asked, “Am I to believe that the rule of law, as recognized internationally, no longer applies in South Africa?”

“That’s ludicrous! We have always maintained that we are a democracy, that we subscribe to the decision of the judges –“

“Look here, Smuts, this is an argument that you have already lost. But what am I asking for? This is not a discussion on a repeal of your illegitimate regulations, which in any case only apply to people of colour. I lost my respect and high regard – if I ever had any – for your government a long time ago. All I am asking from you is that you release a fifteen year old child who is dying in jail. Why are we now talking about ‘democracy’ and ‘judges’. That has no relevance to my appeal.”

“Mr. Gandhi, we have differed, often, but never in anger. And I know that you despise it. Why do you now sound so very cross? Can we not...”

“General, we can continue this debate at some later stage. That child, Valliamma, is in urgent need of medical care, and your prison can’t provide it. The world will judge you by how you respond to my appeal.”

“I am not insensitive to the matter. My secretary was instructed to attend to it. She has reported that your Valliamma refuses to accept pardon, on medical grounds. The matter is now out of my hands...”

“No, my good friend, you can’t dismiss it so simply. She doesn’t want amnesty, because she doesn’t think she is guilty of any crime. You know it. I know it. Why prolong her agony! It is within your power to release her unconditionally. With the greatest of respect, I find it difficult to

reconcile your words with your actions.”

“I won’t take that as an insult, because I know it is not in your nature to be rude. Okay... I agree to however you wish to handle it, but you must personally convey that to her. I wash my hands off this matter, as of now!”

They waited at the gates, an appreciably large crowd. Their eyes scanning each face as the women walked out of prison. A number of dignitaries, amongst them international luminaries such as Parsi Rustoomjee and Albert Christopher, stood silently and raised their fists in salutation as the satyagrahis emerged, in various stages of disarray.

Some of the detainees were being assisted by their co-prisoners as they stumbled onto the street, barely able to walk. The sympathisers, eyes moist, rushed forward and embraced their frail sisters, then fell back when the police officers threatened to horsewhip them.

And then, when it appeared as if there were no more due to be released, a solitary figure, almost bent doubled and in obvious pain, helped by an elderly warder, stumbled through the gates and lifted her face, her eyes closed in agony.

“It’s Valliamma,” someone shouted. “That’s Valliamma!”

Valliamma opened her eyes, grimaced in pain, and then, to every onlooker’s surprise, she called out, her voice strong, “Shatham Prati Satyam!”

She repeated the mantra before her legs gave way.

“Shatham Prati Satyam,” a hundred voices echoed the call before the police moved in.

Chapter Twenty Two

Doornfontein. February 1914.

Nothing had changed. The shack was still as dismal as always, the winter chill froze the cement floor and the cold wind howled through the cracks.

Munuswami had either bought or borrowed a single bed and Valliamma was tucked onto the lumpy mattress when Gandhi walked through the door, bowing respectfully towards Mangalam and her husband.

“Valliamma,” Gandhi asked, looking at the emaciated body, his voice concerned and soft, “You have paid a bitter price for our freedom. Do you have any regrets about going to jail?”

“Regret? I am even now ready to go to jail.”

“But what if it results in your death?”

“I don’t mind. Who would not die for one’s motherland?”

“I am proud of you. All of our people are proud of you. Now rest, get your strength back. I will come to see you again, before I leave for India. May God watch over you.”

“Gandhiji,” Mangalam whispered as soon as they stepped out of the house, “Valliamma is extremely sick. The doctor is worried. She is not responding to his treatment..”

“She has been through a trying time, a painful experience that even the strongest adult would have succumbed to. She needs a few weeks, to recover and get back to her usual self. Have faith.”

“Her dear friend, Meenachee, comes over daily and attends to her needs. She will be here soon. It gives me the chance to get on with my housework and prepare nourishing meals for her.”

“Valliamma is now an icon amongst the people. Her spirit is invaluable to the Resistance. Her friends from her earliest days, who were with her at every rally, young fighters like Nagappen, Ahmed Mohamed, and Narainsamy, are now dead, killed by the harsh regime. We must not let them take her too!”

“Thanks to God, her voice is still strong. Her appa and me, we can only pray for her to get better.”

“Indeed she will! I return to India in a few days. I intend to let everyone there know about your brave daughter. Her reputation has already preceded my return – people there are talking about her valiant stand for our rights.”

“Go then, and may Lord Vishnu be at your side, always.”

“And yours. And Valliamma’s.”

Meenachee came early the next morning and went directly to Valliamma’s bed, checked that she was resting, pulled the bedsheet over her, and then turned toward Mangalam, who was washing clothes in a tub in her backyard. “She is breathing well. I think she has passed the worst stage and is sleeping comfortably. She’s on the mend.”

“Yes, I think last night was her best night since she came back home. She wasn’t mumbling in her sleep and crying from the pain. In a few days she will be walking around.”

“Let me do the washing, ma. You need to rest too.”

“Me? Rest? Tchah, child! I’ve done a lot more than this. In prison we were forced to wash the clothes that the prisoners had used. And also the clothes of all the white criminals. That was all day, every day. This is nothing.”

“But you need to rest now, just for a while. I’ll make tea and I have brought a piece of cake that the shopkeeper gave me – it was his son’s birthday. Come, we may even

give Valliamma a piece, if she is awake.”

Mangalam considered Meenachee’s request, shrugged then said, “Come, child. I’ll make the tea. In this house that’s my job.”

The two women, one barely a teenager, walked towards a corner of the room, which Mangalam used as a kitchen, and filled a pot with fresh water from a covered jug. Before she could light a fire, they heard Valliamma groan, then call out, “Amma! Please come to me.”

“Valliamma, my child, are you hurting?”

“Amma, I can’t breathe! My chest hurts and my heart is heavy, like I’ve been running.”

Meenachee was already through the door, screaming for someone to call the doctor urgently. When she was back in the room, she said, “Aunty Savthree is gone to fetch doctor Ebrahim. He always comes here very quickly.”

“Valliamma is breathing very hard. Get a wet cloth. She’s sweating a lot and is in pain.”

For the next ten minutes Meenachi wiped Valliamma’s forehead and Mangalam gently massaged her child’s shoulders, praying softly and crying, the tears running down her cheeks.

When doctor Ebrahim walked, he threw a quick glance at Valliamma, took her wrist between her fingers, and checked her pulse. “This is not good,” he said, very quietly. “This child needs to be in a hospital – “

“Amma!” Valliamma called out, sounding delirious. “I love you and appa. SHATHAM PRATI SANGAM!”

The doctor gently folded Valliamma’s hands over her chest, turned towards Mangalam, then said, “Ma, she is gone. We have lost her.”

Mangalam’s scream floated down the street and over the hills! And then she moaned! It was a sound like

The Agony of Valliamma

none other on earth – the cry of a mother as she watched
her daughter's soul depart from the body.

Chapter Twenty Three

West End Hotel. Durban, 1970.

Soobry's pub was silent, like a place of worship before the priest delivered a eulogy. The regulars - who had lived in tandem with their heroine's life - lined up against the bar counter and resembled a group of mourners in various stages of grief, their faces a strange mixture of pain, loss, and anger. They had forgotten the drinks in front of them, lost their bearings and were not even certain of where they would go from there.

At last, when the hush became overpowering, Billy said, somewhat haltingly, "we are fond of saying 'Rest in Peace'. Does Valliamma rest in peace? I doubt it! She fought for a united South Africa, one nation and one people, and that has not happened, to this day."

"Shit!" Abbas cried, his upper lip stretched tightly over his teeth. "Tata...you could have warned us, prepared us -"

"For what, Abbas?" Soobry demanded. "Prepared you for death? Didn't I warn, at the very beginning, that she was not of this world for long?"

"But, Tata, they murdered her," Abbas swore, "It was no different to stabbing her in the chest with a knife!"

"You boys want to think about this," Billy said very quietly, "Valliamma's death was not a death. Her sacrifice, for all of us, continues to this day. The big question here is what did you learn from it? Do you understand that 'justice' is more than a word, more than the noises that corrupt politicians make when they can no longer justify their behavior?"

"We hear you, Billy," Sam said slowly and clearly. "We knew nothing about that struggle - this struggle. Today we are better for it. Freedom is never handed to you

on a plate. You have to fight for it!”

“Which is what we are doing. And will continue until we are all free, from bondage and prejudice. Our battle goes beyond just politics, there are moral issues that need to be fought for... Gandhi knew that, Valliamma emulated him. Until the very idea of colour is expunged from our minds we will never be a free nation.”

“I agree with every word you said,” Abbas confirmed, somewhat disappointedly. “But I have to ask: In all this time, for over a hundred years, there isn’t even a bust, never mind a statue, of that great girl. Those larnies, in Jozie, they couldn’t have honoured her, a legend who we now know all about? Perhaps her likeness on the very piece of land where her home stood?”

“I could ask all of you the same question: what are you going to do about it! You can no longer say ‘I didn’t know.’ And I’m not talking about building statues, I’m simply asking about your political stance – from this day on.”

“Billy,” Soobry quietly added, “they are not answerable to us. That is a decision that only they can make. They can remain third class citizens, or they can demand justice. I am too old to care what these lighties will do!”

“My point is that it’s not who the government is, but what it does for you or to you. We pay their salaries – whether through PAYE or whatever. They are our servants, answerable to us. Their job is not to line their pockets or benefit only themselves. We have the right to demand answers from them. And if we don’t like what we hear, we kick their backsides. We need to wake up!”

“What we need...” Soobry muttered, with a tinge of sadness, “Is another Valliamma!”