



Ivy: A Love Story

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For thirty-two years he had lived a life rooted in her care; he had eked out a meager existence on that generous soil, so now, how to live?

Coming home from the funeral, he had stood at the door to the flat and, out of habit or disbelief, jabbed at the calling bell button. Joyous peals bounded inside. He waited for footsteps, the clatter of the lock. The flat was silent. He had hurried down the three flights of stairs to the car and driven straight to the shop near Bangalore Club that he had not visited in so many victorious years.

The man there—smaller, dimmer, more defeated, but the very same man—had served him in a state of shock. He had rolled up a liter bottle in a sheet of newspaper, like a mummy, and pushed it across the counter.

Illustration by Liz Priddy

Now, four months after her death, he began at sunset—brandy, neat, peg by peg in a plain glass. His body still knew liquor as poison, an old and dangerous ally, and he had to take small sips and suck on a wedge of lemon in between. It was a slow journey, but reliably, every night, he reached a point when the TV became incomprehensible, a vague hubbub in the corner of the room.

Some nights he wept. He covered his mouth with his hands so the neighbours wouldn't hear. What issued from him was a series of comic explosions. He would stumble around the flat—a big, blubbing bear of a man, shirt unbuttoned and flapping in the wind, lungi tied in a loose knot under the overhang of his belly. He would come to in the dark, early-morning hours, flat on his back, felled across the bed, that side of his body so used to hers unbordered and cold. He spent most of the day behind drawn curtains, stupefied on the sofa.

Outside, people came and went, cars honked, children shouted, dogs barked. He kept the flat a sealed tomb. Once a day the cleaning servant, a rail-thin woman who raced through five homes, slipped in through the back door. Her life was elsewhere; she hurried through her chores without reacting to any of the signs in the intimate places she cleaned. The empty brandy bottles were whisked away, the fact that he left fewer and fewer clothes in the laundry basket efficiently ignored. After she had swept the mosaic floors and scuttled crabwise across them, whipping a wet rag back and forth in a semicircular arc, she would come and stand before him in an agony of waiting, while he tried to decide what meal he wanted fetched from the nearby restaurant.

How little you needed! How easy to retract! The newspaper went crisp and unread to the wastepaper basket. He'd had the phone disconnected, and he didn't answer the doorbell.

It was probably Vrinda. The next-door neighbour. In the lull that followed the ringing, he would hold his breath and listen, imagining her in a similar pose on the other side of the door, silently battling a dozen impulses before moving away. Sometimes there would be two people there and, invariably, a muffled struggle and the sound of something dropping to the floor and a booming shout—UNCLE! or GOOD EVENING!—hurled into the apartment through the chink at the bottom of the door.

There was something wrong with Nithin, Vrinda's boy. A hormonal imbalance of some sort that could not be corrected. He was overweight and hoarse and constantly lunging at things. They had moved in two years ago—mother, nine-year-old son and a huge, ferocious Alsatian, his collar buried in his bristling coat. The father was dead, in a car accident whose details could not be

properly imagined because it had happened halfway around the world, in Canada, and had involved fog and ice.

He tried his best to avoid Vrinda. It was the most care he took about anything. When he had to go to the liquor store, he crept out like a thief. Sometimes Bozzo ignored him; sometimes he barked at once, gleefully alerting Vrinda, who would come rushing out of her flat and catch him frozen on the landing. The inquiries would come hurtling at Mr. Ninan. The boy would tentatively crack open the door the mother had slammed behind her and, ignoring the arm she would hold out to stay him, wrestle himself through the small opening and shut the door, in his turn, on the outraged, howling dog. He would attach himself to his mother, and all the time they were out there he would strain and push against her like a sumo wrestler while she struggled to keep her balance and extract from Mr. Ninan some semblance of a response.

Some vegetables, then? Something simple? I have to cook anyway, no?

Out of nowhere, her eyes would fill up and she would say, I think of aunty all the time, every day. And he would want to shout, Don't you have your own dead husband to moon over, you bloody, stupid woman?

He drove blindly, through streets he did not recognize. Nothing he saw reminded him that he had lived in Bangalore half his life. The man in the liquor shop had claimed Mr. Ninan as his own shameful secret. He would drop whatever he was doing and hurry over and have him back in the car within minutes, an open cardboard box full of nodding bottles on the passenger-side seat. When he got back to the flats, he would throw a towel over the box and carry it up the stairs like a birdcage.

The brandy went into obscure parts of his brain and stripped old wires bare. When he screwed up his face and drew sharply on a wedge of lemon, his mouth was flooded with the taste of a slash across the heel from a glass piece he had landed on, leaping a puddle as a boy in Fort Cochin. The shady acreage of the Madras Christian College revolved on the squeaky wheel of his rickety bicycle. A black, skeletal arm rose from the pit of an ancient Remington typewriter and smote the paper a stiff, premeditated blow.

That particular sound had echoed across three decades of his life amounting to precisely nothing. The scenery shifted, years flew off the calendar; he went from plump to soft, black-haired to nearly bald. What raged in his mind had stayed there—clotted, unfinished. There were outlines on foolscap sheets, notebooks filled with jottings, the beginnings of an introduction, several titles of a Naipaulian bleakness—a quality that he came by quite naturally.

Everything that reminded him of Ivy he nudged out of sight—dropped behind furniture or put away in cupboards. The wedding picture hanging in the drawing room and the row of framed photographs on the sideboard faced the wall. He could not remove them altogether and, sometimes, well into his nightly routine, he stationed himself next to the sideboard and fell into a terrible, boozy weeping.

No book. Not even a letter to the editor. He remembered countless hours at the desk, wretched stasis, the congealing of all forward motion in perfect, marmoreal sentences. All those things he had wanted to say. Those caustic indictments that had tripped off his tongue so easily in the petrified lecture hall.

Every summer, after classes were over for the year, he would change the typewriter ribbon and imagine a fiery, three-month-long crucible from which he would emerge holding a slim volume of beaten gold—a collection of devastating essays on the state of India. He ended up most days motionless in bed, the taste of aspirin on his tongue and a damp cloth stretched over his forehead.

Ivy never lost faith. Each day was a turnstile, and he could rotate out into a future nothing like the past. Every time he cleared his throat and started tapping out a sentence, she could barely hide her pleasure. Precedence, logic, an airtight history of defeats, the savage affirmations of hopelessness with which he punctuated the fruitless days—none of these seemed to make any difference to her.

During her vertiginous decline, he had typed out yards of nonsense. Straightaway in the morning, he would sit down at his desk and put down anything that came into his head. Old lectures. Fairy tales. Rows of numbers. He broke only to eat or go to the bathroom. He slept on a narrow cot next to

the desk. Things happened in the house—nurses appeared, Vrinda let people into the flat with the key Ivy must have given her, strangers went into the kitchen, food was left on the dining table. Nothing could shake his resolve. He buried himself in typewriter noise.

Towards the very end, the smell of Dettol cut through everything. Bed sheets billowed on the balcony. He glimpsed a heap of pillows in one corner of the bedroom, used, he surmised, to address a rapidly shifting set of discomforts. There was one terrifying evening when he heard a man's voice in the living room. Vrinda's shadow fell across the desk. The priest from your church, she said. Her eyes were luminous in her sweaty face. He wanted to bolt for the front door.

How did they know? Who told them? He hadn't attended service in years, yet here they were, the Mar Thoma women with the Malayalam hymnbooks and the cycle of reading and praying, their saris reverently draped over their heads. And the priest right there in the bedroom, swaying over Ivy, shipwrecked on the pillows, in a passionate, eyes-closed outburst.

They would drag you out and deny you nothing. None of the ghastly rituals or raw formalities. The stench of flowers or the terminal, biblical pronouncements. The walking away from the coffin, still Ivy, abandoned in that barren spot.

In his extremity, he had fondly imagined the end of the world—something bumping the globe and everything going up like yesterday's newspaper.

Instead, there was the slow drip, drip of brandy, a sloppy version of what he suspected Ivy's doctors had conspired to do: kill mercifully if you cannot cure. Send vials of poison racing ahead of bumbling nature, with its fitful sequence of burst pipes and smoked circuitry.

He was down to one glass and a plate. A cockroach had smuggled its way into the kitchen. When he turned on the light in the morning to boil water for tea, he invariably stranded it on the kitchen counter—a big, glossy fellow who menaced the air with his antennae and showed no inclination to run.

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He was sure Vrinda heard. The doorbell would ring the following day. With or without his mother's knowledge, Nithin would litter the balcony with paper

airplanes hurled from his own sit-out ten feet away. There would be messages scrawled on them in the breezy phrases he had brought with him from North America.

WHATS UP
HANG IN THERE DUDE
I'M THINKIN OF YOU!
SHIT HAPPENS

All along he had blithely assumed he would precede her. A stroke, a blood clot, lights out in midsentence. And carrying on left to those who could stomach it.

On the way home with Ivy from the diagnosis, he could hardly drive. At a busy intersection, he dribbled forward onto the path of a double-decker turning laboriously to his right and got the car wedged in the bend between the cab and the body of the bus. The double-decker kept moving. The car, oddly snagged on it, swung sideways. The passenger side tilted up. An envelope skittered the length of the dashboard and fell into his lap. He clutched the steering wheel and raised himself an inch from the seat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ivy clinging to the passenger-side door to keep from sliding into him. She looked terrified. There were shouts. The bus squealed to a halt. Traffic was knotted around them, and exhaust poured in through the window. People were looking at the car curiously, as if it were a clever dog about to perform a circus trick.

The bus driver was apoplectic. A spray of spittle descended on the car. Mr. Ninan imagined him coming down from his perch in a murderous rage, tire iron in hand. Instead, he ground into first gear and lashed the bus forward, as if to flip the car over and kill them both. Ivy lost her hold and fell heavily against his shoulder.

He would fail her. He had no doubt. Even as the doctor gingerly swept up all the bad news into a monstrous heap. Even as he sat there in the car wedged between Ivy and the door, smiling idiotically.

A young woman jumped off her scooter and stood in front of the bus and matched the driver curse for curse, forcing him to reverse.

A maid Vrinda had arranged for slept on the floor beside Ivy's bed. He had already moved into the guest room after Ivy's return from the hastily arranged surgery (nothing more than the prompt closing of a window opened optimistically). A nurse visited twice a day. Things got done. He heard Vrinda's murmur

beneath everything. He made trips to Cash Pharmacy: horror enough in the pharmacist's pious deference and padded retreat to the back of the room where such medicines were kept.

Some days he could barely get out of bed. On others, the typewriter chattered insanely, and he rubbed ice cubes over his inflamed wrists. His dreams were crystalline, brilliant, each jumpy sequence and surreal scene so precise in the terrors it evoked that he didn't see how he could have had any part in authoring it. A week or so from the end, he woke up in the middle of the night and, out of some confused instinct, got up and went looking for Ivy. He parted the curtains to the master bedroom. A steel stand flared beside the bed. It was festooned with tubing and plastic pouches. An oxygen cylinder lurked in a corner like a bomb. The room smelled of latex. The maid was curled up on a mat with a sheet over her head. She stirred and confronted him with a blood-shot, addled stare he fled from.

The second hand of the clock ticked slowly, slogging through every soiled bed sheet and bed sore and labored breath; the hour hand raced. In less than three months he was sheepishly bumping up to the lip of a barren hole at the priest's signal, to release the requisite handful of earth.

In the beginning, he saw her everywhere. A sharply pressed cotton sari, a skinny elbow, prominent collarbones, and there was Ivy for an instant, clear as a heart attack. At four, when the schoolchildren swarmed home, there arose in him, regardless, a habitual excitement. Any minute now the door would swing open and she would come in and drop a load of notebooks on the dining table and head for the kitchen to fry up a plate of plantains and brew a pot of tea, a steaming cup of which he would hold under his nose in squinty, soft-headed pleasure.

Gradually, she went away. Sometimes he heard a word or a sound that seemed to come straight from her throat. There were occasional disturbances in his peripheral vision—the flicker of a sari, the flash of a utensil in the kitchen. Otherwise, nothing.

He lay on the sofa in an amniotic haze, remembering the past.

He owed Ivy to the ill will of his uncle. He had been thirty and languishing as a lecturer in history at a college in Bangalore. His mother had just died. (A cautious road crossing, a rash lorry driver, the subsequent details needlessly cruel.)

Moments after the funeral, his uncle had brought up the proposal. The girl was dark, average looking, twenty-eight and an orphan from the age of three.

There were some irregularities in the family—an uncle who had supposedly committed suicide, a cousin who some said was a cabaret dancer in Bombay. But where is the perfect proposal? She was a schoolteacher and spoke English well, an affectation, the uncle implied, that ought to appeal to Mr. Ninan.

The uncle and he went back many years. Two days before his sixth birthday, he had woken up to the sound of furniture being rearranged in the sitting room. His mother was crying in the kitchen. Her brother leaned against the door of Mr. Ninan's bedroom, smoking a cigarette and contemplating the changed relationship between them. Gone the brave, broad-shouldered father. Swept away by a thrombosis in his sleep. Now, the petty, vindictive uncle, with a vaster envy of other people's successes than anyone had ever suspected. It turned out that he had begrudged every aspect of his brother-in-law's charm—his wit, his sunny generosity, his independence—and he referred to his untimely death as proof of the irrelevance of such qualities. His own secretive, scheming ways he valorized, employing them, most noticeably, to advance the prospects of his son, a skinny boy with porcupine hair Mr. Ninan's age. He plied him with unknown amounts of tuition and tonic, kept him within striking distance of first place in every standard, and eventually heaved him into the last open seat at a competitive engineering college.

Sunday afternoons were reserved for head-to-head competitions the uncle devised to boost his son's confidence. They were in areas Mr. Ninan loathed—Malayalam grammar, arithmetic, Bible verses. The slate on which the uncle had scribbled an algebra problem would wave in the air, and the cousin would put down his head and sprint the length of his foolscap sheet like a dog after a rat. The quizzes were conducted in the drawing room of Mr. Ninan's house, which his uncle considered his own. His mother would have retreated to her bedroom. The uncle reclined in his father's easy chair, tilted all the way back, his legs splayed and resting on the extended armrests, his testicles a droopy convexity in his dhoti.

The cousin was a team player. If someone gave him a boiled egg, he walked the three furlongs to Mr. Ninan's house so he could peel and eat it in front of him. At every opportunity he lolled in his father's lap and looked out at the world as if he had a toffee firmly planted in his cheek.

Mr. Ninan's mother put away her good saris and bled herself voluntarily into insignificance. She came home from the clerical job her husband's employer had given her, on "compassionate grounds," swollen with exhaustion. She spent most of the evening in bed. At funerals and weddings, Mr. Ninan learned to

look for her among the tedious, older relatives or on the back verandahs of kitchens. For a time he was fiercely attached to her and felt her widowhood grievously, and on one occasion, on her birthday the year after his father's death, prevailed upon her to open the trunk under her cot and wear her red Kanjeevaram sari and gold bangles, if only for a few minutes inside the house.

For the most part they fought over her deference to the uncle. It was a chronic, dispiriting struggle that had them both resorting to exaggerated strategies. He poured out contempt; she repeatedly drew for him in dour, dispassionate detail the very narrow box in which she had been placed. What can I, a widow, do? The constant, sorry refrain.

He spent much of his time outside, roaming the hot or flooded roads of Fort Cochin, poking through the gutters or prying flattened frogs from the hot tar road.

The beach he avoided. His father had liked to go there, often sneaking out at night over the protests of his mother to enjoy the sea breeze. Sometimes he went with his father, hand-in-hand or riding high on his shoulders. The beach was broader then, with small fishing boats pulled up on the sand. One humid evening, his father had lifted him into a catamaran, shed his clothes and raced into the sea. A full moon lit the water. He saw his father wrestle with the waves, enter and disappear. A bird slid back and forth like a kite marking where he was for a while; then both bird and swimmer were gone. Nothing on the surface, no shadow, no disturbance of water. He stood on the cross-plank of the boat on his toes, searching for a long time. The sea grew emptier by the minute. His eyes stung from the salty wind, and just when he was about to give in to the panic he felt, his father struggled out of the foam, laughing as if he had won something.

He had run ahead and complained to his mother, who—a different woman then—had put her hands on her hips and leaned out furiously and let her sheepish husband have it.

There was a brief period when it seemed possible that she might be returned to a semblance of her former self. A distant relative of his father—a bishop—at a chance meeting suggested that Mr. Ninan should be sent to the Madras Christian College. A recommendation letter was offered and accepted, and before his uncle could marshal any objections, he was on the Madras Mail, trunk and bedroll tucked under his seat.

The world opened up; he discovered the humanities. With the encouragement of some of his lecturers, he sat for the IAS exams. The long and strenuous effort the enterprise required could not be kept secret. The Syrian-Christian

community held its breath. His mother's stock went up. Third parties made discreet inquiries on behalf of well-known families with eligible daughters. On the train roaring north to Delhi, when he went up for his interview, Mr. Ninan felt close to a revolution. The written exams were a miracle; the essays came pouring out of him. A rumor that he was already an IAS officer, fed by a misunderstanding, swept the bogie, provoking an awe that Mr. Ninan took as a thrilling foretaste. He spent giddy, late-night hours leaning out the compartment door, illegally thrown open to the ripping wind. His photo would be in all the Malayalam newspapers. Who would treat his mother like dirty laundry now? They would remember his father; a ray of the son's glory would reach back and burnish his name.

He got a bad interview slot. The last one before lunch, and they were running late. A peon came into the room where he was waiting and flung open the curtains. He gave Mr. Ninan an injured look, as if he were holding up the whole hungry building. A pigeon flew in through the window; in trying to chase it back out, the peon increased its panic. It erupted from perch to perch in an explosion of wings. Feathers floated down; a damp smell filled the room. A couple of chairs got knocked over. One of the interviewers came out, furious, and yelled at them both in Hindi.

He didn't remember much of what transpired in the thirty minutes he was interviewed. There was a general irritability around the table. He mumbled and was distracted by the rank odor that wafted up from the streak of bird excrement running down the front of his coat. He had done what he could with his handkerchief, in the little time he had.

On the trip home, the world felt more real. Someone else's name had been written over his on the reservation chart, and in the protracted argument that followed with the conductor and the usurper, Mr. Ninan proved the less persistent and ended up in an unreserved compartment.

His uncle, who had watched his foray with alarm, let it be known that he'd always thought the venture destined for embarrassment. And now that that little folly was over, it was time to get on with the business of living.

They dredged up a party of male relatives and went to see Ivy formally at her aunt's house in Quilon. Mr. Ninan got through it by thinking of the event as farce. She came out with a tray she could hardly carry and nearly toppled into his lap when she stooped to let him lift a cup of tea from it. He had an impression of collarbones that stuck out and sticklike arms and everything else buried in yards and yards of sari. On the bus back home, someone wondered aloud how they could find out without offense if she had ever been tested for

He had an impression of collarbones that stuck out and sticklike arms and everything else buried in yards and yards of sari. On the bus back home, someone wondered aloud how they could find out without offense if she had ever been tested for TB.

TB. There was a large wet spot on Mr. Ninan's sleeve. While they were waiting for the bus, a crow flying overhead had splattered his shirt generously. He took it as a sardonic sign that everything was as it should be.

His behavior in the early months of their marriage was monstrous. He used the house as a dressing room. He rushed to work in the morning, returned at five, gulped down his tea and, under pretext of working on articles, hurried off to the public library in Cubbon Park, where he wandered aimlessly among the grimy shelves. Sometimes he indulged in a compensatory, alternative life in which a trimmer version of himself came home in the evening from the secretariat in a chauffeur-driven car. A young wife, lovely beyond belief, opened the gates. He caught a fragrance as the car swept past. Her shoulders were beautiful, her hair long and glossy. A handful of scenes played and replayed in his mind hypnotically.

In reality, his secondhand Lambretta broke down frequently on the way home from college and he arrived at the gate sweaty and irritated from repeatedly working the kick-start. They had rented part of a house on Richmond Road from one Mr. Balsara, a retired, invalid widower. He spent the evenings hopping about like a wounded bird in his flower beds, and Ivy would be with him, bent over a rose bush, a pair of scissors in her hand. Her vertebrae showed alarmingly. Her sari hung shapelessly. She was always happy to see him.

She appeared to be waiting, with a certain amount of dignity, for him to represent himself in the enterprise they had presumably agreed to undertake together. In the meantime, there were small, judicious gestures. When he got down to washing the Lambretta on Saturdays, she took away the bucket of dirty water and returned with a dry rag. When he was visibly agitated over something one afternoon, she went into the kitchen and emerged with two glasses of fresh musambi juice on a tray.

The house was spotless, strung taut from sitting room to work area. There were cut flowers everywhere. The garden, tilled and pruned by Ivy and Mr. Balsara, had become wildly prosperous, necessitating the constant presence of the latter on the front verandah. A bush would shake from a hand that had sneaked over the low compound wall to tug at a rose, and Mr. Balsara would raise his walking stick and let out a roar incongruous with his desiccated body. During the incident that nearly broke both Ivy and Mr. Ninan, the old man had advanced on him in the parking lot of the hospital and called him a so-and-so and a such-and-such in the choicest gutter language and offered to whip him in the public street.

Ironically, it was Mr. Balsara who had presided over his baby steps. He had invited Mr. Ninan to join him at his nightly whisky and soda on the verandah. He was entirely new to alcohol. It broke over his tongue and sped down his throat, spreading an expansive heat. He felt flushed, roused to a charming state. A cool breeze poured over his skin. The garden bloomed under his very nose, bud by bud. What had happened to the battered, illustrated book about the abused donkey that his father had given him and that he had kept under his pillow? He remembered the torn yellow cover, and felt a rush of love for the characters. He loosened his belt and sank into the chair. The noise and smells of the world came over the compound wall, and he felt as spacious as a bungalow on the beach, lights blazing, every window flung open. Mr. Balsara puffed away on a cigar and gave free rein to an astringent streak, wiping the floor with politicians—pious fools and crooks alike.

Mr. Ninan's affability spilled over, and he climbed into bed chatty about something or the other. The cot was smallish, and it was impossible to keep their legs from getting entangled. Overtures were made and favorably received. It was dark, and the lights of cars rounding the corner swept across the room, catching isolated aspects of what they were doing. The framed photographs of three pairs of newlyweds—the two sets of parents and them—that Ivy had hung in a flow-chart configuration, looked down on the cot like a good omen. Later, after Ivy had removed the picture of her parents and taken it with her to Nilgiris, what remained, amputated and incomplete, became a wretched reminder of everything lost.

It was not polite to drink down Mr. Balsara's bottle, so he began taking over his own. He kept it open longer and longer into the night. If he found himself facing an empty bottle too soon into the evening, he made up an excuse and sped off at the last minute to the liquor shop, feeling exhilarated when he got there minutes before they closed. Soon, such dashes became unnecessary. He

had bottles stashed everywhere—in the scooter, in his briefcase, under a stack of shirts in the almirah.

He woke up groggy and bloated. The world rubbed like sand against his skin. At a rare staff meeting conducted by the Jesuit administrators of the college, he strayed so far in his comments from the general sycophancy practiced by his colleagues that he induced panic among them. Fortunately the fathers, whilst ruthless in the face of petty dissent, had an inexhaustible tolerance for the truly fallen, the criminal or the alcoholic, in which category they saw he now belonged.

One evening, when Ivy and he were on a walk, they saw a man beating his wife. They knew the fellow; he owned the tiny kiosk parked on the pavement at the end of the road. He had recently gotten married to a slip of a girl. You could hear them closing up at night, banging pots and talking loudly in Tamil. He slept on the pavement and she in the kiosk, only slightly larger than a coffin stood up. He had the girl by her thick, long hair and he was trying to ram her head against the wall behind the kiosk. Her cries were hoarse and hysterical. The man was drunk, capable of anything. The scene was not unfamiliar. The proximity was disconcerting. You could see the veins on the girl's neck and feel the heat from the struggle. Mr. Ninan turned to cross the street and saw, out of the corner of his eye, Ivy running towards the couple. He couldn't understand what she was yelling on account of the pounding in his ears. Luckily a man arrived from nowhere, jumped off his bicycle and right away began flailing at the drunkard. He released the girl and, finding the maneuver of stepping back too much, toppled heavily to the ground. The cyclist picked up a stone and cocked his arm, holding him at bay. The girl sat on the pavement and howled.

They abandoned their walk and returned home. Ivy disappeared into the bedroom. Mr. Ninan fiddled with some wires on the scooter and took furtive swigs at the bottle of rum he kept in the locked front pouch. He was beginning to feel angry, accused of crimes he was sure he hadn't committed.

It was a bad night to hear from Ivy that she was pregnant, although in retrospect he understood the logic of her timing. She had known for a fortnight, it turned out, and everything the delay implied only infuriated him further.

He was in the bathroom combing his hair after a defiantly long, hot bath when she came to the door and told him. He reached out and wiped the steamed-up mirror. His face was satisfyingly grim; he looked like a man absorbing a vicious blow.

He remembered the ensuing month in disconnected details and scenes. Here he was, doubled up over the washbasin, watching tightly scrolled-up bits

of tomato skin floating around in a pool of vomit. Here he was at the library, leafing through a medical textbook that contained graphic pictures of a developing fetus, a sort of flipbook that took you from blastocyst to bloody head emerging. He had a general impression of a parasitic creature with a swollen head and a translucence that confused surface and interior. He remembered a dream about his pretty, imagined wife disappearing into the depths of a mirror and calling out to him as she went. Day by day his fate was clarifying in somebody else's body, and there wasn't a thing to be done about it. He would hear her beating eggs in the kitchen and the next thing she would be racing past the bed for the bathroom sink.

One morning she stayed in there longer than usual, and when she came out she said there had been some bleeding. Can we go to a doctor, please? The only one open that early was a pediatrician on Infantry Road, an avuncular fellow whose plump fingers roamed knowledgeably over her stomach. He chatted all the while, as if he were trying to distract her body while he cleverly snatched away information it held. There was nothing wrong. Mr. Ninan, who had been dizzy with relief half an hour previous, felt cruelly abused. The doctor patted him on the back and said, What, you are not believing me? Everything is normal. Some hiccups there will be sometimes, but nothing to worry. Ivy's face was blurry with happiness. I was so afraid, she told him as she settled on the back seat of the scooter.

There was a space of two days when his head cleared. They went to the Chinese place on Grant Road for dinner, and, while he was rolling a sip of plum wine around in his mouth, the name Asha occurred to him. Asha. Hope. Asha Ninan. It had a nice ring to it. He leaned across the table and brought up the question of schools—Bishop Cotton's or Baldwin's? There were a lot of details to be taken care of. He got a pencil and piece of paper from the cashier and made a list. He felt very matter-of-fact. Tomorrow he was going to open an account so he could start saving towards her dowry. He was convinced it was a girl.

During the five years they were separated and Ivy was teaching at the boarding school in the Nilgiris, she had written him in response to an abject exclamation of grief he had mailed her. Everything she said to him then was direct and measured and kind. He was certain he had lost her forever. When I see her, Ivy wrote, she has a smile on her face. She forgives us both; she loves us both. After that, mawkish or not, Mr. Ninan thought of her, the child who hadn't even been a child, as a young woman, twenty or twenty-one, on the

It was a tribute to the battering, escalating brutality of his behavior that they soon arrived at a dull, dry-eyed evening when Ivy gave him what he wanted. Mind you, he hadn't asked outright; he had merely paved the way. . . . Regardless, her announcement came as a shock. One thing to break the dinner plates, another to receive the bill.

verge of marrying and moving away and provoking by the imminence of that event an especial fondness in her parents.

By the third month of Ivy's pregnancy, he was drinking a liter a day. Sometimes more. His liver grew taut and impressed its sore presence chronically on his consciousness. He slept in the sitting room, the divan a small, pudgy palm beneath his overflowing bulk. Two oscillating fans kept the room in a perpetual panic.

It was a tribute to the battering, escalating brutality of his behavior that they soon arrived at a dull, dry-eyed evening when Ivy gave him what he wanted. Mind you, he hadn't asked outright; he had merely paved the way. (The bristling silences were no doubt worse than the bitter monologues.) A: he could barely stand to look at her. B: he was on the verge of being buried alive in the most miserable of commitments. And C: when was she going to do the decent thing?

Regardless, her announcement came as a shock. One thing to break the dinner plates, another to receive the bill.

"It is safe, no? Proper doctor, I assume," he mumbled sheepishly. She got up from her chair and went down the steps to the garden. She moved gingerly, as if bruised black and blue. A needle of fear entered him.

His lectures the following day were gibberish. There were moments when he came to a blank stop and stood there reeling in front of an audience that from its collective expression thought him completely deranged. There was one instance of notable terror, when he turned from the blackboard and saw a sub-

inspector and two policemen marching past the door of the classroom. Their boots rang smartly in the corridor. What were they doing here? He imagined handcuffs, everything exposed in court, the incensed reactions of listeners.

The house was empty and dark. Mr. Balsara, who was sitting morosely on the verandah, ignored him as he came up the front path. He took a bath, a long walk, another bath, and, finally, a taxi arrived at the gate. He heard Mr. Balsara say something, a whisper of a response from Ivy and hasty footsteps. He practically ran out the back door and into the street until she had gone to bed.

A day later, the three of them, Mr. Balsara included, were brought together in violent fashion in the dead of the night. Mr. Balsara, a vest thrown over his pajamas, raced his rattling Ambassador through the deserted streets. Ivy lay in a small, soaked heap next to Mr. Ninan in the back seat, bleeding profusely. They were told they got to the hospital in the nick of time. The lady doctor who admitted Ivy had the truth out from Mr. Ninan in two seconds. "I need not tell you," she said severely, "the procedure was badly botched." Mr. Ninan was asked to sign papers absolving the hospital of responsibility should Ivy not survive her operation.

He walked Mr. Balsara to his car. It wouldn't start, and to make matters worse a freakish rain came down in sheets. Mr. Ninan stood by stupidly, the downpour drumming on his head, while Mr. Balsara worked under the bonnet of the car. His vest was off, and a trapped air bubble chased itself across his back. At some point, Mr. Ninan said sorry or thanks—he didn't remember which—and Mr. Balsara turned on him, spanner in hand, and let loose a stream of epithets.

"You are lucky she doesn't have any relatives," he yelled. "Bloody drunkard, ought to be expunged."

Where to even begin? How, after he had stopped drinking and rediscovered a rudimentary humanity, to make restitution? There she was, pregnant, alone, locked up night after night with a roaring drunk. What had he said or not said? At some point she stopped responding, and a growing silence that had the quality of a gestation took hold. What conversations had she conducted in the privacy of her mind? What options considered and reconsidered, clung to, then abandoned? At what point did she place a hand on her stomach and offer an explanation?

Imagine it—getting up one morning and taking a taxi all by yourself to some out-of-the-way street with an unusual amount of money in your purse

to let go of something that had already become a cherished personification in your mind.

The least he could do was stay away. Common decency. Ivy had gone straight from convalescence to the railway station and the job in the Nilgiris. He went through the motions during the day and survived the nights by pacing the three rooms, composing letter after letter addressed to her, two of which he regrettably put to paper and imposed on her.

An astrologer told him there was no chance. None. He was a young fellow who deftly swept a handful of seashells into a pattern that became the basis for a dry and dispassionate commentary. Mr. Ninan had seen the man's sign in Shivajinagar during one of his walks and hurriedly ducked into the dingy cubbyhole as one might into a video parlor showing pornography. It was the only time he ever did anything like that. It was an especially low day, and he assumed it was the function of such practitioners to offer relief. The astrologer delivered his prediction with more than a little satisfaction. The job Mr. Ninan would keep; the rest was gone, better forgotten.

Easier said than done. What about the fat heart of guilt? It kept him walking in circles around her, although at a distance. A year after her relocation he rented a room for a month at a YMCA near her school and sent her a trembling note on borrowed stationery. He happened to be in the vicinity; perchance he could drop by, if the school permitted visitors? The astrologer's blunt voice echoed in his head. He imagined decent people everywhere howling in outrage. First he beats her up, and then he hounds her for absolution. He shows up on the same day he mails his letter, relying on Ivy's kindness or shock to get him in the door.

They went for a walk around the perimeter of the eucalyptus woods behind the school. He lumbered dumbly beside her. Absurd things popped into his head. *Ninachan and Ninachi taking a stroll. A balloon dragging a stick.* He was petrified he would blurt out something obscene. Luckily, he stepped on a pile of leaves beside the path and shot thirty feet down a gravel slope. A bush in front of him shuddered violently, and a spotted deer, such as he had never seen in the wild, burst from it and soared away. Then there was calm, save for the measured calling of a bird uphill. The mentholated air seeped into his lungs. He noticed that his left leg, jammed against the trunk of a tree, was oddly bent, as if it had sprung an extra joint.

All is well, he felt like singing. *Leg is in pieces.* Given the windfall benefits of the accident, he wondered if he had done it on purpose.

His tibia had to be broken again and reset; there was an infection of some sort, a night of high fever and chills, nonstop itching about which nothing could be done. It hardly fit the crime; still, it was something. His blithe and understated fortitude (something he never again managed) won him the admiration of the YMCA staff, which treated him like returning royalty during his annual visits over the succeeding four years. He spent six weeks on the verandah in a rocking chair, his cast weighing like an anchor on the coffee table, and leafed through a stack of old magazines Ivy had scrounged up for him. She treated him appropriately, with consideration, but as a far-flung responsibility—the friend of a friend who had gotten in a fix away from home. He saw her half a dozen times, and they had tea and vegetable cutlets the evening before he boarded the train back to Bangalore, one leg pallid and thin.

He was heartsick with loneliness. The vibration of the wheels traveled up his shin and probed its fault line, producing a dull, leaden ache. The train wound down the mountain and rolled to a stop at Mettupalayam, where he dragged his pitiful leg from one side of the platform to the other and up the steps of the waiting express. Mr. Balsara was away, and the gate opened squeakily onto a wildly overgrown garden. He stood in the middle of the living room, his bags at his feet, taking in the musty air laced with the smell of something decaying in the kitchen. He had no idea what to do next. If he'd had the courage, he would have fled back up the mountain and thrown himself at her feet.

In point of fact, he pursued his suit cautiously over five years, one ripe moment to the next. One Saturday, during what turned out to be his last visit, they went to the flower show at the botanical gardens in Ooty. He stuck out like a sore thumb in shiny shoes and a brand-new safari suit. The place was swarming; they were swept along from tent to tent where bushels of flowers were exhibited. Such crowd conditions prompted automatic solidarity. His bulk came in handy as a shield and for surging through bottlenecks. He babbled on about this plant or the other. The roses were truly astonishing. He was dizzy from the scent. When they took a shortcut to the coffee stall through the muddy corner of a field, he slipped off one of the stones that made a wobbly path and put his foot right in the muck. He tried to extricate himself, but his foot popped out of his shoe and he flailed about and snagged Ivy, who was right behind him, and they wound up slipping and sliding clutched together like a couple of drowning monkeys. When they came to a stop, she was grinning at him. A great roar of something went up in his chest.

He couldn't stop shopping. The notes flew from his wallet and landed in the laps of all kinds of vendors—people selling brooms, tea cozies and other

useless stuff, as if he, normally well this side of generous, had absolutely no use for money.

Mere months later, he woke up in his own bed in Bangalore, the pillow next to his smelling pleasantly of Ivy. It was Saturday and sunny. The pressure cooker whistled in the kitchen and wafted a promise of idlis into the bedroom. The voice of the old gatekeeper next door scratched the air. He was explaining something at great pains to his son-in-law, in preparation for a request for money. A goat had fallen into a good rhythm, rubbing his horns against the gate. Lata Mangeshkar's unvaryingly virginal voice poured from a radio. Sundry other Saturday sounds—children playing cricket with their father, tap water gurgling up a watering can—came through the window.

There were thousands of days like this, days of amnesia and ignorance, thousands of bright mornings and lazy afternoons that sagged towards eternity. And all the time he was rushing towards this. This catastrophe.

Once, he couldn't imagine the world going on after his death. Now this was the miracle—you ate and slept and read the newspaper and scratched your bum while flying straight on a full tank for the mountainside. It was the one sure thing, and instead of running screaming through the streets, people ironed their clothes, chopped vegetables, did homework, took vitamins, bought calendars.

For thirty years, a false, glassy stretch. The same desk in the same corner of the lecturer's lounge, the same bits of frozen history thawed and served up to identical batches of students. The same rash hope at the start of each summer and the same three acres of well-worn misery, every twist and turn already known.

Twice a year (birthday and anniversary) he sneaked into a sari shop and fussed over the selections till he settled on one that he dropped casually on the dining table along with a dozen mangoes picked up on the way. Ivy blushed, and he turned away thoroughly embarrassed, and that was that.

He nursed his irritations religiously. Too many people invaded the house. If he didn't brace himself against the front door, the flat would be overrun and he would wind up squatting on the pavement. Her former students were the worst, dropping by unannounced, towing husbands and children he was left to entertain while the rest of the room collapsed in laughter and reminiscence. He was dragged to too many weddings. Hundreds of Ivy's girls, each one activating an ache in a phantom parent part, as if he were giving away his very own daughter. "A rose between two thorns," he would say lamely, stealing a quote

from history, as they flanked the resplendent girl and the photographer tensed in a crouch.

There were countless routine annoyances—dust, traffic, the fruit-stall fellow at the corner who always managed to palm off one spoiled fruit. Mr. Ranganathan downstairs couldn't talk on the phone without yelling like the house was on fire. The lift smelled of urine. And why did Ivy have to linger in every conversation with every bloody person on the street, while he hopped from foot to foot?

When Vrinda moved in next door he said, The dog will bark, the lady will shout, the boy will play cricket in the house. It was already too late. He could feel the heat of friendship between them. Vrinda had a hundred questions. They talked like lovers across the balcony. Soon they were shopping together and the boy was bringing over his homework. In between algebra problems Ivy set him to, he sprang up and ran from room to room, flipping over pillows and clambering under the cots. Screw loose, Mr. Ninan said, mother and son both.

When Ivy was sick, Nithin took money from his mother's purse and bought Ivy a sari. He heard the shouting through the walls. Was it okay? Vrinda asked him the next day, still furious.

Through a gap in the doorway curtain, Mr. Ninan saw the boy march in, ceremoniously bearing his wrapped gift. He plopped himself down on Ivy's bed. He heard the sound of paper tearing and Ivy's voice—a trickle in the desert. Her hand rested on the boy's fat knee.

In a universe he would never inhabit (where needs shook hands with solutions sensibly), the remnants of two households would be gathered to a sum greater than the parts. He would eat at Vrinda's, they would talk, watch tv. He would run errands for her, walk the dog, become a grandfather of sorts to the boy.

Not for him! Let Vrinda knock and knock. Let her put a stethoscope to the door. The business end, no doubt, of assurances given. I will take care, aunty, you don't worry one bit.

Beware of deathbed promises!

That afternoon they had sprung a trap. He had stepped out of the car, a pair of bottles tinkling sweetly in the cloth bag hanging from his hand. Nithin had swooped into the car park on his bicycle and whipped out his mobile. By the time Mr. Ninan had puffed up the stairs, Vrinda was waiting on the landing. Nithin bumped against his back; the dog was going mad in the flat.

He smelled. Now that he was at a standstill he couldn't help noticing it.

What Vrinda was saying he couldn't understand. She was between him and the front door, between key and keyhole. Somehow he managed to get the door open.

There were crumpled bed sheets on the sofa. He was surprised to see the framed photo of Ivy in front of a rose bush lying on the carpet.

Vrinda had followed him in.

"This is harassment," he heard himself say. "Do you have a police warrant?"

Vrinda wiped her face with the free end of her sari.

"Then you tell me what to do, uncle." She was on the verge of tears. "Every day I am sitting in my flat listening to you going down the drain. What shall I do? You tell. Grief I can understand, even terrible grief, but this is hardly proper, no? Somehow we have to carry on."

Somehow I am not interested in, he thought.

"What would aunty say?"

"She is dead, dear lady. She has nothing more to say," he mumbled.

Without thinking he extracted the two bottles from the bag he was still carrying and placed them on the dining table. There they sat, amber coloured and clearly labeled, in shocking view.

Nithin, who had slipped behind his mother, emerged from the kitchen. He was grinning. He was holding something in his outstretched fist.

"Look, amma," he said.

Vrinda pointed to the front door. "Go," she said.

Nithin opened his fist and something flew out of it, straight for Vrinda. The cockroach, big as a saucer, landed in the middle parting of her hair, and, one wing slightly lifted, veered off across her head. No sound came from Vrinda; only her pupils quivered upward. Then a tentative trilling issued from her mouth. Nithin looked at her curiously.

They stood like that—a tableau under a stuck stage curtain—till Mr. Ninan reached up and swiped the insect off. It went whirring out the front door.

"Shania!" Vrinda screamed and slapped her son resoundingly across the cheek. Nithin's eyes flew open. He seemed genuinely pleased by the sincerity of the response he had evoked.

Mr. Ninan sawed away at the cap of one of the bottles, trying to break the seal, and by the time he had done it, there was blood all over his hand. The smell had him rushing for the bathroom.

His body seemed to want to turn itself inside out. It went on and on, with the dog matching him bark for bark on the other side of the wall.

In the aftermath, he was weak and lightheaded. He switched on the geyser, and while the water was heating up, he shaved. The slash across his palm, irrigated by shaving cream, throbbed—a steady in and out. His eyes, those of a creature hiding in the undergrowth, peered back at him.

He was sweating. His liquor-logged body seemed to be wringing itself dry, squeezing from the inside out. The root of his tongue felt clean. He rubbed a finger against his teeth till they squeaked and spat out the last stale taste of brandy. Somewhere inside him a pulse had reasserted itself, like a beeper in a buried mine.

When he was dressing, he got dizzy and had to lie down on the bed, the damp towel still knotted around his brow. He kept his eyes closed. The ceiling fan was on, stirring the talcum powder he had sprinkled liberally all over himself, as of old. The room had a pleasant, familiar scent. The breeze from the fan knocked the metal hangers in the open wardrobe against each other. The curtains flapped. They were getting ready to go somewhere, to a movie, a reception. He had dawdled, and now they had to hurry. Hence the little burst of energy in the room. What shirt? What pair of pants? Ivy, wearing a pale green sari, so pale it made its own halo, was sitting in front of the dressing table. She wore no makeup and hardly any jewelry, but a dab of perfume under the watchstrap she liked. Or sometimes a little cloud of eau de cologne sprayed in the air and ducked through. He himself had a peasant's instincts when dressing. He held out and cracked like a whip, first his shirt, then his trousers before pulling them on.

Who had the keys? The car keys? The house keys? Was there petrol in the tank?

Then they would hurry down the stairs, not wanting to risk the cranky lift, get in the car and be gone, earning at the gate a crisp salute from the watchman who liked to acknowledge a special sallying forth.

His mind was clear, clearer than it had been for months, and, now, as he lay there, into it came floating, like a mountain he couldn't approach or fathom, the thought that Ivy was gone. Gone for good.

He couldn't breathe.

In a panic, he got up from the bed and went scrambling around the house looking for her, feeling, as he did, a brief, errant sympathy for Nithin's impulsive hunts.

Each room was empty, dark in all the corners. He stood in the drawing room, the loneliness of the hour and of all the hours and days that would follow crowding around him.

What was there to say?

He had loved her without limit. Everything about her he loved. Her thinking, her ways, her honesty, her great store of kindness, her surpassing loveliness.

When he was a child, he used to eat gooseberries one after the other, suffering the bitter taste till he could stand it no longer because a cold drink of water immediately afterwards tasted miraculously sweet. When his cousin taunted him with the sweets he had gotten from his father, he reached into his pocket for the gooseberries he always carried there. He would gnaw them down to their green piths, then go and catch a glass of water from the tap in the kitchen. These past thirty years had been like that, beneath all the ill-tempered grumbling and petty ingratitude: like standing in the dark kitchen and drinking from that glass.

She knew him inside and out. Saw what he wouldn't show, heard what he wouldn't say. Knew what he stepped around. Everything he felt, she understood.

They were like two lost children who had found each other.

Ivy did not remember her father. Of her mother she had one memory: an emaciated young woman with a mass of wild, curly hair leaned over the side of her cot, retching into a bucket. A maid rubbed her back, cooing words of encouragement. An adult hand pushed Ivy from the doorway and shut the door on the scene.

Her uncle, in whose house she had grown up, ran an unsuccessful chit fund. He was frequently attacked by enraged customers, some of whom ran into the house looking for items to take away. When Ivy was six, she had joined the small group of children who gathered in a huddle between the high wall and the back door of the St. Teresa's school kitchen during lunch period. None of them spoke or looked at each other. After the paying boarders had eaten, they were allowed to go in and serve themselves from the pots of leftovers. Some had been too ashamed to take anything at all.

Several years ago—he didn't remember the circumstances—Ivy and he had been in a taxi going somewhere with his uncle. It was morning, and they were on the highway between Cochin and Alleppey. An overnight thunderstorm had peeled the dust off everything. The tires swished on the wet road. A cool breeze rushed through the chinks in the car windows. The uncle sat in front with the driver and provided commentaries on passing sights—a temple elephant, a trade union shanty outside a factory—as if he were conducting

The crowd parted obligingly, so the occupants of the car that had reeled itself backwards into their midst could see. A man hung from the rafters. A small man, no bigger than a ten-year-old. He dangled at a slight angle, tilted forward, hands swinging free. . . . His dhoti fell down almost to his feet, which were dusty and swollen.

baffled tourists. He labored away in English, in case they had become foreigners to their mother tongue as well.

Something caught the uncle's eye on the edge of a small town and he had the driver pull off the highway and reverse along the muddy strip beyond the shoulder of the road. Mr. Ninan had wondered what it was—an acquaintance waiting for a bus? Something he wanted to buy?

The row of little shops they had just passed got larger in the rear window. They whined past a tea stall, a Ladies' Corner, a barber shop. A small crowd stood in front of a building looking at something on the verandah: about ten or fifteen men carrying folded-up umbrellas and a couple of absconding school-boys trying to sneak closer without calling attention to themselves.

A sign hanging from the eaves said:

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The uncle had craned his neck out the window, but it was the driver who first said, "Aiyyo, atmahathya, saar."

"Suicide," the uncle translated for their benefit, twisting around to face them. "Money problems, most probably."

The crowd parted obligingly, so the occupants of the car that had reeled itself backwards into their midst could see. A man hung from the rafters. A small man, no bigger than a ten-year-old. He dangled at a slight angle, tilted forward, hands swinging free. Sleeves rolled up, sticklike arms. Couldn't see above his shoulders. His dhoti fell down almost to his feet, which were dusty and swollen. His shirt, once white, looked brackish, and a musty odor reached

them. The smell of poverty, debts, malnourishment. Mr. Ninan estimated his age around fifty, enough time for a hopelessly disadvantaged life to wind down to its dismal end. The man looked like he hadn't been touched by another human being, even a stray dog, in years. He looked like he hadn't been seen by anyone in years. Or said a word. Or sat in a circle of friends, or talked to anyone, or been invited for a meal, or played, or owned a book.

A rain came splattering down and sent them on their way. Ivy was sobbing in the car. She cried as if there were no end to what she felt. They sat there speechless in the moving car, the three of them—the driver, the uncle and Mr. Ninan. Chastened, in the shadow of this outpouring.

He had been the luckiest of men. She had said to him, "Come, sit, this food is for you, this cup of tea, this house, this life." For thirty years. They had said it to each other because nobody else would.

My father would have loved you, he thought. My mother too. How pleased they would have been.

He was back in the bedroom, lying nearly naked across the bed. His arms were on fire and his body oddly twisted, as if in preparation for the blow that was to come, and all he could think was, What luck!



Mathew Chacko

Mathew Chacko's stories have appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Chicago Review*, an earlier issue of the *Missouri Review* and other magazines. He is currently finishing up a collection of stories and has begun work on a novel. Originally from India, he lives in Ohio.