



“No! No! Noooo!”

The little man’s pitiful wails reverberated around the tiny, bare interrogation room.

Oblivious to his pleas, the uniformed officer stepped forward purposefully and brought his lathi down on the little man’s right leg, just above the knee.

The little fellow let out a bellow of pain and collapsed to the floor, clutching his leg.

The uniformed officer looked down at him expressionlessly.

“W... why?” the man on the floor whimpered. "I can’t... What do you want from me?”

“I asked you a question, Mr Manian,” the officer said, speaking in a clipped, businesslike tone. “Did you or did you not come home on the evening of January the tenth inebriated and...”

“You can't do this! Constable Ezhumalai is a close friend of mine...”

The officer smiled. This was even better. For him, this interrogation was as much about sending a message to his fellow officers as it was about alerting the local populace that there was a new sheriff in town. Metaphorically speaking, of course, as his official title was ‘Inspector’. He stepped forward and stuck the man again, in the same spot. The little man gave another yowl of pain.

The inspector asked slowly and clearly: “Did. You. Come. Home. Inebriated. On...”

“Yes! Yes! You've broken my knee! How am I supposed to gather the harvest? We will starve! I have five children,” the little man moaned.

The inspector’s eyebrows rose.

“Really, Mr Manian, you have hidden depths!” he said with heavy sarcasm. “I was under the impression that your wife did all the farming while you just played cards with your friends and got drunk with the money she brought in. Several witnesses believe this is the case. Perhaps they all saw wrong?”

The little man squirmed on the floor, whimpering with pain.

“Only... Occasionally... Occasional drink...” he managed.

“Just a reward for your hard work,” the officer nodded. “And all those times you came home and beat your wife. You were just... letting off steam?”

Manian nodded, but somewhere in that thick skull of his, he must have realised the consequences of admitting such a thing out loud.

“Never touched her,” he said hastily, or at least as hastily as he could manage between whimpers.

The officer raised his lathi again and the man squealed: “No! No! I know the panchayat leader! I know Rajaratnam!”

The inspector paused. This was more of a conundrum. Rajaratnam was a powerful local honcho, a member of parliament who was the head of the local district, or panchayat, as it was more commonly known in India.

Why had Manian waited so long before dropping such a powerful name? Either he knew that getting a favour from Rajaratnam came at a heavy price and he had wanted to avoid invoking the name until absolutely necessary or... he was bluffing.

The officer stepped forward, raising his lathi menacingly. The little man flinched.

At that crucial moment, the door to the little room opened with an almighty bang and another uniformed officer entered the room.

“Inspector Palanivel! Stop!” the new entrant said, turning horrified eyes to the man on the floor.

“Ah, Constable Ezhumalai,” Inspector Palanivel said affably.

Despite the identical attire, the two officers could not have looked more different. Inspector Palanivel was slender and goodlooking. He had calculating eyes and somewhat thin lips below a trim moustache. Muscles strained against the shoulders and arms of his uniform.

The only thing that strained against Constable Ezhumalai’s uniform was his massive paunch. This was by far his most noticeable characteristic, but he also had a thatch of ink-black hair and would have been a good-looking man if his face wasn't bloated with overeating.

“This... this man's wife has dropped her complaint, sir!” the constable declared.

The whimpering man on the floor sighed with relief.

“Has she indeed? And filed her withdrawal in triplicate?” Inspector Palanivel asked. He knew very well that this was the case, but he had hoped that the police clerk, a bright young

woman, would have dallied enough over the paperwork to give him time to complete his interrogation.

“Yes! I have it here,” Ezhumalai said, holding up a thin piece of paper.

Inspector Palanivel looked hard at his constable, enough to cause the man take a step back. Then, without looking at the quivering man on the floor, he said: “Mr Manian, get out of my sight.”

Supported by Constable Ezhumalai, the erstwhile suspect made his painful way out of the room.

The inspector followed him out into the courtyard of the colonial era police station. All around them, police officers were going about their tasks, though many of them looked up at his entrance.

Inspector Palanivel saw shocked eyes from all directions looking from him to the limping Mr Manian and then back again. The suspect’s yells of pain must have echoed through the old building, loud enough for everyone to clearly. And now they knew that the new boss meant business.

Inspector Palanivel felt that familiar sense of satisfaction and loneliness. Then, one police officer stepped forward and Palanivel recognised his second-in-command in this new godforsaken post.

“May I have a word, sir?” Deputy Inspector Senthil asked with dignity. Palanivel pursed his lips in thought, cocked his head towards his office and walked in that direction, closely followed by his deputy.

Upon entering his spare little room, Palanivel collapsed into the uncomfortable chair behind his desk. He suppressed a wince of pain. He must have twinged his hip when he had beaten that little worm.

“How can I help you, Senthil?” he asked, looking up at his deputy.

Senthil was a stocky man with a bristling moustache, somewhere between Palanivel and Ezhumalai in terms of fitness. Since he had not been invited to sit down in front of his inspector’s desk, he stood with his arms folded in a mild gesture of defiance.

He was the only officer in this police station who did not seem to fear Palanivel, and Palanivel quite liked him for it.

“May I speak frankly, sir?” Senthil asked, his steady eyes trained on his superior.

“Always,” the inspector said.

“Why did you beat him?” Senthil asked abruptly.

Palanivel's eyebrows rose. Usually this was enough to quell his staff but Senthil simply looked blandly back at him.

“I was questioning a suspect,” Palanivel said haughtily.

“Your methods are quite strong,” Senthil said, grimacing.

Palanivel gestured to a pile of papers by his elbow.

“You see this, Senthil? This is the list of pending cases that I inherited from my predecessor. Fifty cases of theft. Forty cases of assault. Twelve murders. Seven cases of rape. All in this tiny town in the middle of nowhere called Ramananpettai and some mountain in the heart of the Indian countryside called Arasur. How do you expect me to clear this backlog?”

“Perhaps by not taking on cases where the victim has withdrawn her complaint?” Senthil asked astutely.

Inspector Palanivel sighed, leaned back and motioned towards the chair in front of his desk.

When Assistant Inspector Senthil continued to stand mutinously, Palanivel tutted and said tersely: “Sit down, Senthil!”

After the other man had subsided into the chair he leaned across the desk, placing his elbows on it, and said: “Look, I took this position on two months ago. I need to send a clear message to the town of Ramananpettai that the law will be clearly and rigidly followed. In order for this, backlog of cases to remain as it is, I need to send a message that domestic abuse will not be tolerated. Maybe this Manian character will change. Maybe he won't. I don't really care. What I do care about is drawing some boundaries for the people of this town. They have been living in a lawless manner for too long.”

Senthil hesitated, started to speak, and then hesitated again.

“Spit it out!” Palanivel said impatiently.

“You can't just come from the big city and expect to run this place like this is Chennai or Bangalore!” Senthil said in a rush. He looked fearfully up at Palanivel, and then, taking heart from the other man's silence, continued: “Listen, Inspector, I like your intentions, and there is no doubt Manian is a scumbag. But you have to be tactful. This isn't the city where you can get reinforcements just like that. If you upset the local landowners, the moneylenders, or the head of the panchayat – they can have you beaten or even killed, you understand. We are alone here!”

“Seriously, Senthil?” Palanivel asked derisively.

“This isn't the big city, you fool!” Senthil said, nettled. Then he clapped his hand to his mouth. “I'm sorry, sir! I didn't mean to be rude.”

Inspector Palanivel laughed and stood up. He came around and stood behind Senthil, who tensed. Palanivel clapped his deputy on the shoulder.

“I like you, Senthil. I want you to continue to speak your mind – in private.”

“Yes, sir,” Senthil said with as much dignity he could muster while his boss was leaning on him from behind.

He then flinched as Palanivel leaned over him and picked up the little portable sign on his table that bore the legend ‘Insp. A Palaniel’. He held it in front of Senthil's face.

“You know those scary people you told me about, Senthil? I want to be one of them. And not just me. Anyone whose name is on here. It could be you one day. For now, though, I just need information and guidance. I want to understand Ramananpettai and Arasur. You will help me, won't you?”

“Yes, sir,” Senthil said stiffly.

Palanivel clapped him on the shoulder again.

“Good man,” he said and left the room without looking back.

Let Senthil think over things for a while, Palanivel thought to himself. But the truth was, he needed an ally badly. Or two. But it would not do to show his underlings how desperate he was. He needed to act cool.

The minute he walked out into the main room of the police station, all the officers looked away and focused on their work. The performance with that rat Manian seemed to have terrified everyone. This was absolutely fine by Palanivel, and in fact he planned to leave the station while this impression was still strong.

But before heading out, he stopped by the clerk who worked at a desk by the entrance.

“Thank you for your help with Manian,” he muttered softly so no one else could hear. The woman looked up at him with a rather bored expression and said: “What help? Paperwork takes time time.”

Palaniel smiled for the second time that day. Another person who wasn't afraid of him.

“So, Manian's wife – any idea why she withdrew her complaint against him? Surely he definitely was beating her?”

“Brutally. She even had a fractured skull. But her family made her withdraw,” the clerk said and Palaniel saw a flash of anger in her eyes.

“He will be out of action for a few months,” he said shortly.

“Good!” she replied.

The inspector smiled again.

“Can you pass me the moneylender case file please?”

The clerk handed him a folder.

The inspector leafed through its contents and said absentmindedly: “Thank you, Gautami.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

