



Officer in Exile



Palanivel sighed and hung his hat by the hook by the doorway of his house.

“I’m home,” he announced in resigned fashion.

At this, he heard the familiar patter of feet and then a little bundle of energy slammed into his midriff. He looked down, and the severity of his expression softened remarkably as he smiled down on his son. He ruffled the boy's curls, and then looked up at the doorway expectantly.

On cue, it opened again and a rather short woman with beautiful, expressive eyes and long, waist-length hair walked in.

Inspector Palanivel's heart skipped a beat, as it had done every evening he came home for the last eight years and looked at his wife.

“Ready for dinner?”

“Oh God, yes!”

She led him to a little courtyard, where a table had been set, groaning with dishes. Steaming sambar, potato curry, fried appalam – all of Palanivel’s favourites, in fact. His stomach rumbled.

“I thought we would eat out here now that it's getting warmer,” she said.

He sat down without a word.

“Appa! Appa! Guess what?” the little boy asked, plucking at his uniform.

“What is it, little brat?” he asked, accepting a steel tumbler from his wife filled with clear, cold water.

“Teacher sir has invited me to watch Manchester United play this weekend! It's the derby match!”

Inspector Palanivel sighed.

“Why can't you watch an Indian sport like cricket?” he asked.

The boy clambered onto a chair next to him.

“Cricket isn't an Indian sport, silly!”

“Pandu! Don't call your father silly!” his wife said thunderously, as she ladled some rice on to Palanivel's plate.

“Well, gilli danda or kabbadi then,” Palanivel said indulgently as he watched his wife pour the sambar onto the mountain of rice on his plate.

“Gilli danda!” the boy exclaimed joyfully. “Imagine watching gilli danda instead of the Mighty Reds!”

Palanivel looked inquiringly at his wife.

“It's another name for this Manchester United,” she explained. “Go do your homework, Pandu!”

The boy subsided and stalked off, his shoulders slumped in despair. It amazed Palanivel how well his wife had him disciplined. For all his strongarm tactics at work, he was a complete pushover at home.

“Why does he have such middle-class tastes?” he asked his wife.

“Let him enjoy whatever he wants, Aru. He is just a boy.”

“Hmph,” Palanivel vouchsafed, his mouth now filled with his wife's delicious cooking.

“Is this safe to send him off to this school teacher in the evenings? What if he is a molester or something?” he asked, after chewing and swallowing a mouthful.

“Chee! What a dirty mind you have. Laurent is harmless. He is just some rich Frenchman who is sick of the West and is perfectly happy running a school here.”

“No one is harmless, my dear. Every man is capable of violence,” Palanivel said soberly. He had learnt this from bitter experience.

“I should know,” his wife said enigmatically.

Palanivel froze.

“What?”

“I mean, I am married to a man capable of beating suspects to a pulp,” she said sardonically.

He winced. She had always been a straight talker and he loved her for it, but this meant she

frequently pushed his sore spots, intentionally or otherwise.

"Those boys... those boys... killed a child while driving drunk, and recklessly, Latha! And they were going to go free because of money and influence!"

But had that justified his actions? He had not only beaten those arrogant young men, but had confined his family to this one cow town as a result of the disciplinary action that had followed.

His wife's hand found his free left hand.

"I know," she said simply. "But I wasn't referring to that. I was taking about today."

His mouth dropped open. Was there anything this woman didn't know?

"This isn't Chennai, Aru," she said resignedly. "This is a small place. I was told by the neighbours."

"I..." A bead of sweat broke out on Palanivel's forehead despite the evening's chill. "He beat his wife, Latha," he ended pleadingly.

Her lips twitched. "The worst crime," she said solemnly.

He went back to his food, relieved that she wasn't upset with him.

"I do understand your job is not... what everyone would understand," she said, finally, watching him eat. "But I do know what you are at home. The gentle man that I see, and that Pandu sees – that is good enough for me."

She was a gem, was Latha. Palanivel took a gigantic swallow of his food and stared down at his plate.

"How was work?" she asked mechanically.

"You know. Difficult. Trying to bring law to this wild place has its challenges," he said, resuming eating.

"Such as?"

He paused and looked at her thoughtfully. Talking to her about his work had always made him very clear headed, so he considered carefully before giving her an answer.

"The police here are irrelevant, Latha. The people sort out their own problems. The town, Ramananpettai, is run by the landowners. The farmland on the slopes of Arasur are run by moneylenders. They have their own set of rules and the people are getting along with their lives following those rules," he said finally.

“So what’s the problem with that?” she asked.

“Well... think of an overgrown garden. It has its own ecosystem, it’s own system. But it’s wild. And the grass underneath all the weeds die. We need to keep it free so that the grass can breathe,” Palanivel said.

He leaned forward eagerly, now warming to his point. “India is a growing country, Latha. Not just economically, but socially as well. And places like this are being left behind. In a small, small way, I have a role to play in this. I am a small cog in the wheel, but cogs are also important.”

“You are actually enjoying this, aren’t you?” she asked wonderingly.

“I...” he stopped. Was he enjoying being in this remote town, so far away from civilisation? Perhaps a little. Perversely, this meant he felt struck with remorse at how he had uprooted his family from their comfortable life in Chennai while he was out on the field enjoying himself.

"Are you happy here, Latha? Do you.. should I look for another job?"

She laughed at this.

"Another job? Please, Aru. What else would you do? This is who you are. Besides, I come from a village just like you. Chennai was fine, but this – this feels like home for me. I am perfectly happy."

"You had a job in Chennai," Palanivel said, voicing the thought that had been bothering him the whole time.

"I have a job here, too. Taking care of my boys. It’s not very modern, and my teenage self will hate me for it, but – for the moment, this suits me just fine."

The Inspector let it go. He had been brought up the traditional way, expecting the wife to take care of the house. Then he had married Latha. She had fought and fought to get him to accept her independence and right to earn her own living. Now it seemed she simply giving that up and he was the only one concerned by it! Who could understand women?

"Do you... do you.. Want another child?" he asked.

She laughed at this.

"You just want an excuse to take me to bed now," she said, smiling at him, her eyes shining.

“Latha!"

"What? It's just us. Husband and wife. What's wrong?"

He pushed his plate away from him and tried to look at her sternly. Instead, all he could think

about was how beautiful she looked.

"Shall we go to bed?" he asked hesitantly.

"The boy need to go to sleep first, and you should finish your dinner and have a bath."

"After that?" he persisted.

"Whatever you say, inspector," Latha said half mockingly, half tenderly.

