

## Sweet Peas

You sit outside in a rickety chair by the banana palm and watch the last of the drizzle roll into a tight waterdrop at the edge of a leaf and prepare to drip on to the ground. You like to watch the water drip, the people pass by. The neighbour tying and un-tying the knot on his mundu, his legs thin and not hairy enough; he goes past your chair with a nod. The girl with coconut oil in her hair, too much oil, you want to tell her, too much, and does she wash her hair often enough? Because sometimes you can see lice flakes on her long plait. The two unmarried sisters whose skins don't wrinkle or bag. For sixteen years you've watched them sashay past in their colour-coordinated saris, you've peered into their faces with an inquisitive eye but their skins have never lost the old lush beauty. How do they do that? If they knew, if you knew, somebody would have distilled their secret into a bottle and made a fortune.

This chair you're sitting on has been rickety for sixteen years, but you don't throw anything away until it breaks, until it is fully unfunctioning, and that's the reason you're not on the scrapheap yourself. Not kaput, not yet. You don't know how long you could go on sitting here in your daily meditation, and neither do the passers-by. They've come to terms with the apparition of you just as you have. 'That's the old man who says he's roamed the world. The one who says he's been rich in other lands. He thinks he knows everything.' They toss their heads to dismiss you, two steps after they've passed you, two beats after they've thrown you a toothy smile.

When you stopped working on the merchant ships, when you stooped to tinkering with the engineering of smaller vessels, when finally you snubbed going out on the little boats - on those puny soap-dishes, when you stopped sailing in all its forms, you decided to retire here, to your hometown, because the tip of South India was where you were born and where you thought you should return to die. There are days you regret your decision, but the new habits you have fallen into keep you going. You emerge at ten in the morning, washed and dressed, position your chair exactly ten paces from your front door and sit still, forming waves with your hands. You may look silly but you pay no heed. The waves you don't want to crest are those in your head. You can sit here by the banana palm for the remainder of your life and no one need know about the unrest inside you.

People are kind. This is something you have always believed. Lalitha, next door, calls you in to share fresh appam, whenever she makes them, which is infrequently now because, like you, she can't eat too much herself, and her children and grandchildren seldom sit down together with her. She grumbles that family meals are a rarity, but you know that in some parts of the world three generations eating together twice a week is an extraordinary occurrence.

You tell Lalitha that. In fact, you tell her all manner of things. You've even trusted her with your Big Idea. At eighty-two she has a handful of years on you, and you can rely on her to be discreet. You tell no one else of your Big Idea. 'Cruise ships as fully-functioning old-age homes.' It makes you chuckle to think that unofficially this may already be the case, some of the time, on certain cruises, but your idea is a serious one. You want a proper set-up. Quality and high standards. A hospital ship with a difference. Cruise liners: the old-age homes where you are still going somewhere.

Imagine that. Not the end of the road, not the way a care home tucked away on an English country lane really is the end of the road. Not the 'I'm so helpless now, admit me here to die'

scenario. No, you're thinking more of the 'I'm so hopeless now, do send me on a cruise, darling' scenario. You're dreaming of the endlessly changing views of the ocean. Lalitha says, 'Doesn't it look the same, for days at a time? Sea today, sea tomorrow. Blue. Grey. Blue.'

You concede that to an undiscerning eye it could look the same for days. But even so, there is scope for change, you tell her, scope for land to jut into your horizon, beckoning your eye; scope for ambition. A chance to say, 'I'll stay alive till I set foot on that piece of land.' As opposed to, 'Should I stay alive for them to drip the same breakfast down my chin tomorrow?' Lalitha is unconvinced, but what does she know?

If there had been more money and vigour to back up all the big ideas you've had, well, you don't know where you'd be. On a cruise ship, at the very least. With carers to the left, carers to the right, carers behind...

When it comes to pass, as it will, who will know that the germination was here, in this rickety chair? The dream of the man with the thick white hair and vestiges of handsomeness in his jaw and lips. The man whose hands tremble like waves and over whose head hangs a small bunch of green bananas.

Lalitha asks about seasickness. She likes to put a spanner in the works, that's her personality. She likes to drill holes in your Big Idea. You snap at her that seasickness is not specifically an elderly affliction. The seasick population can stay away. You wonder about her, about people like her. She's lived by the sea all her life but never ventured on to its deceptive surface. Not even on a soap-dish. From the bow of a boat you used to look at the contours of land, those daring protrusions into ocean, and you felt sorry for all the trapped people in the miles and miles that ran inland. From the boat it was easy to tell that the sea just tolerated the land.

You tell yourself that this harmless wandering in the inane parts of your mind is good for you. It keeps you out of the insane parts. Your big ideas keep you steering onward, or round and round, but nothing spills out, nothing spills out to mark the street. Because if you drift off course, if you let yourself drift towards the beginning, or the days when everything mattered, then you are consumed, and your mind is as a room overwhelmed by the scent of sweet peas; so strong that it can make you sick.

In some parts of the world, you tell Lalitha, summer is a short-lived many-splendoured thing and the sweet peas are perfumed so as to make you gag. This is the kind of knowledge you impart to her quite smugly.

'Sweeter than here?' she asks, disbelieving again. 'Flowers smell more strongly than they do here?' She touches the purple flower pinned to her neat white bun and looks into the distance, thinking. 'Sweet peas grow in the coolness of the hills.'

'Not in England,' you explain. 'What I'm telling you is in the context of a short-lived summer. When long dreary months bring only the fragrance of damp bark and soggy grass, then filling a room with just-blossomed sweet peas from the garden can make you very ill.'

'It's always summer in Kotapuram,' she says, in placating mode. And then she adds, 'I like it better when you're angry.' This is what Lalitha says when she's afraid a strange sentimentality will drown you. She wants you to rage instead at unknown foreigners. Lalitha,

whose face and body are shrinking by the day, wants you to bang on the table and bawl out your furious questions, as if you'd been transported elsewhere, shouting at people in other lands: 'Why do you take no notice of the sea? Of what it has brought to you? The cars you drive. The toys you break. The tea you drink. The beef you eat. The Christmas baubles you hang up. The gadgets that fill your rooms. Containers and containers and containers wending their way on water.'

None of this is relevant to Lalitha. You wonder if this is why she prefers it when you're irate, when you swing your palm down to slap the rosewood and stop reminiscing about the nauseating sweet peas of an English summer.