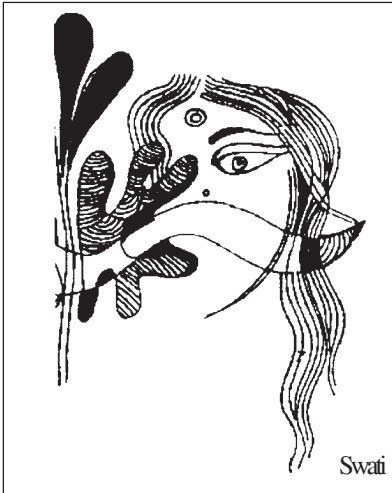


When Resolutions Falter

○ N Rathnasree



Vandana sank against the bluish grey rexene of the berth with a sense of enormous relief and approaching peace. Presentations and impossible-to-meet deadlines were behind her. Something attempted and accomplished, and now for a good week's rest! Deepti was enjoying her summer holidays with her *tata* and *nannamma* at their old-world house in Secunderabad. To have spent her entire summer holidays at the day care centre, over here in Bangalore, while Vandana was busy with the accelerating pace of an assignment on the verge of being finished would have been unfair to an active nine-year-old. After an extensive shopping trip solely for Deepti, she was eager to get her daughter back!

Her impatience subsided as the thickly wooded regions of the Cantonment area were crossed.

The train then passed through a group of 'frozen-in-time' buildings, all painted a different colour, with their high back walls enclosing their overgrown and neglected backyards. These were followed by people trapped in ugly, plastic covered huts, desperately struggling to find small pockets of undefecated regions to dry their produce of *agarbattis* and

papads. Then still more stretches of seemingly comfortable middle class lives which were sure to be seething with city pressures.

The city was now slowly being left behind. The deep greyish-blue of bushes on far-away rocky hills created a sense of peace, which was in no way disturbed by the noisy entry of the 'six-o'clock Bhelpuri' man into the compartment. The delicate aroma of cut *hari-mirch*, tomatoes, and onions mixed with green coriander preceded him and lingered long after he left, leaving many a passenger with the urge to call him back.

It turned out that the elderly couple in front of Vandana would be given seats only if some others cancelled their reservations.

There seemed to be only four adults in the cubicle opposite and nobody protested when she slid surreptitiously into an unoccupied seat. She didn't know what hit her after that, until two small boot-clad feet thudded on her head, slid over her and landed painfully in her lap. The restlessness of this youngster was quite in contrast to his plump elder sibling, Montu *dada*, who preferred sitting on the top berth with his booted legs dangling over it, almost in level with his father's hairline, receding just at that point. This youngster's face had the dullness of preferential over-indulgence, in contrast to the lean,

forlorn and resentful face of the eldest child in the family, a girl. The youngest boy had not yet caught on to this difference, but the older was certainly bent on taking the fullest advantage of the preference shown by his parents.

"Deedee...eee, ...," he would cry after deliberately dropping a toy on the floor from the upper berth. "*Dey naa, chhokri*" (pick it up for me, girlie). While the sister flinched at the rude words uttered by her younger sibling, the parents were ignoring it altogether. The father seemed to be a generally somnolent person with occasional bursts of loud behaviour — hiccups, belches, guttural noises, the lot. Or, when he addressed his youngest born with loud affection, "Mannayya, Mannayya, Mannayya, Mannayya hey hey hey, Mannayya ho ho ho, Mannayya, Mannayya, Mannayya". Or, his eldest born - "*Aye chhokri, dekh ke kyon nahin chalti?*" (Girlie, why don't you watch your step?)

Vandana's irritation at all this was somewhat mitigated on hearing the cries of '*chaai... kaapi...*' some distance away, but definitely on their side of the compartment. This *chaiwalla* was a very young boy, barely older than the over-indulged Montu *dada*. His dark mahogany form was covered in a loose shirt and pant. His face shone with a scrubbed, dark cleanliness. His eyes gave brownish

evidence of a persistent conflict between an inherently cheery soul and a harsh life. His friendly smile had a way of penetrating one's consciousness in a reassuring way. He kept reappearing with a full canister, whenever a station was passed. He added a degree of interest to the journey for the passengers. Meanwhile, the elderly couple were assigned their berths, one of which was a lower one on the side. The husband was to occupy this, and he readily agreed to exchange it with Vandana's upper berth.

After learning that the family with three children was from Delhi, touring the South, and were on their way to Hyderabad after seeing Madras, Bangalore and Mysore, that the elderly couple were going to visit their daughter, who had just given them their ninth grand-child, it was Vandana's turn to say something about herself. It turned out to be not so difficult after all. They were satisfied when she compressed her personal history a little, and mentioned that her *sasural* was in Hyderabad and she was in Bangalore for work.

"My husband just quit one day, leaving me, our daughter, and his ageing parents. He has never bothered to find out what happened to us. My *saas* and *sasur*, who were bewildered by the entry of a Maharastrian daughter-in-law into their household, hold me responsible, and barely tolerate me when I am with them. I live on my own with my nine-year-old daughter in a nice apartment in Jayanagar. I earn a decent salary and spend it in indulging my daughter. At my workplace I tell my co-workers that I am a divorced single mother..."

If she had been in a self-indulgent or a purely malicious mood, she would have said all this to her co-passengers and wrung out of them whatever she wanted — sympathy, shock or disapproval. However, reticence was the order of the day.

As these thoughts buzzed in her head, she tangentially noticed the small boy who was sweeping up the *katchra* with his bare hands. In contrast to the *chaiwalla* boy, this one had an extremely unhealthy aspect. His entire body, visible in bits and pieces through his tattered clothes was dry and caked with dust. His buttocks and cheeks were very



rounded, not however, a healthy roundness from overeating rich foods, but with a hint of extremely unhealthy and scary possibilities. His mind was not all there, and his standard response to grudgingly given money, or hard abuse thrown in his direction was, '*Babujeee*, ha, ha, ha....' His face had an upturned, unperturbed look, with his large teeth showing through his wide gums. People of all ages and sexes were *babujee* to him. Sometimes with an unfathomable but troubled look he would squat on the compartment floor next to a passenger. '*Babujeee*, *payne beka*. *Payne do dora*.' He would then touch all feet in sight with a strange persistence. He

had already collected a good amount of coins from the people around. So now, what did he want? What was *payne*? *Pant*? *Paise*? *Pen*? Wasn't he getting enough pain out of life already?

Later, when she was cleaning up at the washbasin, she heard some scraping noises behind her and glanced into the darkened luggage cubicle near the washbasin. Both the *chaiwalla* and the *babujee* boy had made it temporarily their sleeping place. The younger was about to pop a bit of dark stuff into his mouth when it was snapped away by the *chaiwalla*. His mentor then turned his attention to Montu *dada*, who was sitting on the Ticket Checker's seat near the opposite door. He was tentatively sipping his second *Mirinda*, much to the indignation of his *didi*. *Chaiwalla's* eyes lit up while explaining to his friend, '*Idi sharbattu. maastuntundi*' (This drink is great). He then gestured with a broken plastic *chai* tumbler towards Montu *dada* imploring him, with an impish grin, to spare a little of his *Mirinda* for them.

At this, Montu did not know how to react. His sister gave a generous helping of her brother's *Mirinda* to the waif. Montu was quick to retaliate. All he had to do was turn back in his seat and wail, '*Maammy, didi ko dekh naaa. mera saara Mirinda yeh chhokre ko de diya*,' (Mummy, look sister has given away my entire *Mirinda* to this boy). There was an immediate descending of the parents and heaping of recriminations on the young girl. After that there was peace. Vandana dozed uneasily and woke several times in between as the train had a habit of halting for long periods at stations, as well as in between stations. At one such stop she woke up fully to gaze outside at a strange, fairy tale like castle, all lit up. She guessed that it was a cement factory. Engine drivers seemed to have a

strange penchant for stopping in the wee hours of the morning, near such garishly lit cement factories.

In the yellow-orange glow of the light from the hundreds of neon lights, even the uncleanness of the dense smoke coming from the factory chimneys seemed mitigated. One could dismiss the whole thing as an advertising stunt. Or, one could throw harsh reality out of the window and imagine the whole thing to be a fairy tale castle. That long sloping platform, lit all along its way, would catch one's attention as a film heroine came gliding down it. The cement dust everywhere, totally hidden by liquid nitrogen clouds. But reality has a way of penetrating one's mushiest escapist fantasies.

She then noticed the dark form leaning over her legs in order to gaze up at the haze of enchantment. Small face, shining eyes, taking all the light greedily in and reflecting it in millions of small packets. So wide awake at this time of the night? Must have finished all the leftover *chai* in his canister, himself. What was he dreaming of, as he gazed at this fairy tale castle? He was surely dreaming that one day he would own a fine building that would be lit up like this everyday. He would have his own bathroom to use which would be cleaned three times a day? A vast bedroom, six meals a day with *chapati*, *sabji* and *mithai*?

He did not seem to notice that she was awake and stirring. When he finally did, there was a flash of white teeth which was part apology, part impudence. She felt a rush of affection for him at that time. Had he run away from home? Surely she could offer him a home and hope for a better future? What was she thinking? Did she think that she had the time, stamina and patience to take on additional responsibilities at this stage?



She motioned to him to move away and turned on her side in an attempt to shoo away all thoughts, and sleep through the stubbornly remaining ones. She woke up as the train was slowly pulling into a small town of slate and stone. Oh, yes, she knew this town. This was the place from where the Tandur Blue stones came for her father-in-law's house at Secunderabad. She was left with an impression of roughly rectangular slabs of stone stacked at angles against irregular groups of houses. But, so clean. The station itself had a clean stone slab platform with not many people on it. The *chaiwalla* boy had brought in a new canister of tea which was lying on one of the luggage racks at the end of the compartment. He, however, was crouching in the luggage cabinet and peeping out on to the platform through a gap in the carriage wall.

Outside, there was a girl running from window to window trying to sell something. The 'something' was quite creative. Small rectangular slabs of polished stone made into a longish open box in which two rods were stuck together to make a simple and sturdy

bangle holder. She was carrying these bangle boxes from their rods and peering anxiously into the carriage window. She did not seem to be paying as much attention to any particular customer as to the shuffle of people in the compartment, looking for something or someone she could not find. With her was a small boy with a basket on his head, loaded with ingeniously crafted articles from small, leftover slabs of stone. The likeness between them was very striking and somehow familiar. Mahogany face, brown, doe — shaped eyes, close, evenly-set teeth and pointed chin. Unmistakable.

The girl finished scanning the inside of the compartment and turned back towards a woman standing outside a small slate house situated just beyond the stick fence of the station. She shook her head and flayed her arms wildly. The woman stood her ground stubbornly for a while and then slowly, ever so slowly, bent her body down to lift up the parrot green plastic *ghada* (pitcher) from under the borewell pump, on to her hips, and went inside the house. The house looked so peaceful, so picturesque, even, with a palm tree in its small backyard. Did it house an alcoholic father and a battered mother doling out punishment to the children with burning sticks? So that a small, dark, pointed chinned and doe-eyed lad was forced to run away for a life on the tracks?

The train moved out of the station even as Vandana stood at the washbasin with all these thoughts coursing through her mind. She was in a quandary. Last night, for a brief moment, she had felt so strongly about giving the boy a good home and the opportunity of an education. One move from her would put her

thoughts into action, as the boy was standing right there just now. But, wait, should she really be getting carried away by impulse and say something that she would not be able to retract? Back home in Bangalore there would be so much upheaval in her life. How would Deepti react to this?

Then she remembered how many times, from a very early age, she had longed to do at least, one small, worthwhile thing in her life. Here was an opportunity. She was not answerable to parents, husband or in-laws. So, what was she worrying about? The train reached Vikarabad. Not much time to waste if she wanted to act. She tried several times to catch the boys' eyes and talk to him quietly, out of earshot of the other passengers. She just did not succeed. Meanwhile, the family opposite was trying to get rid of all the leftover food.

As the father handed over packets of *parathas* to the *chai* boy, a thought seemed to strike him. He asked him quite casually, "*kya hamare saath chaloge?*" (Will you come with us?) There followed several inducements. He would be given good food, a room of his own, good clothes. He would have only light household chores, and so on. The boy refused. No reason given. Just, "*Nai saab.*" Vandana felt relieved. There would be no point in repeating similar offers. It was now quite natural for her to drop all thoughts of approaching the boy and offering him a home. She spent the remaining half-hour of the journey in a pleasant and happy mood looking out of the window, thinking of seeing Deepti again. Thank God! She had not given the slightest indication to any other living soul about what she had wanted to do, now that she no longer wanted it or was going to do it.

The week in Hyderabad slipped by all too quickly and soon they were



back at the Begumpet station waiting for their train.

Deepti being with her meant she did not have much time for other thoughts.

She woke up late the following morning to the fragrant air of trees in bloom in the mud and stone platform of Dodballapur station. Deepti was still sleeping, apparently recuperating from summer holidays' excess of spirits. An extremely peaceful, clean morning.

She turned her gaze at the monkeys strolling on the platform staring at the passengers in the train in a disinterested, insolent fashion. Many passengers were quite happy to throw them leftover *chapattis*, biscuits and bread. The monkeys would pick up the food and speedily devour it. A small beggar girl and smaller boy, having collected a small quantity of food from the passengers in a dirty sack had left it on the cement bench around the tree with the fragrant blossoms, and gone for a drink of water at the tap.

Maybe they should have been prepared for what happened. The monkeys, while not showing much interest in the food being freely thrown to them from the windows, ransacked the contents of the dirty sack. These lay spilled on the dusty platform, while the monkeys scampered away in search of better loot, leaving behind the contents of the sack as the boy and girl came rushing back to retrieve their property.

Only then did the children and Vandana, as well as sundry other

passengers, notice the recumbent form on the cement bench. *Hey Bhagwan!* What was this? A dark, skinny form curled up in an awkward posture. One leg bent at a horrifying angle. The clothes totally tattered and stained with blood and vomit. Through the blood and vomit on the face, Vandana made out the features of the *chaiwalla* boy. No! She felt tears and vomit come out of her own self as she rushed out of the train towards those tattered remains even as Deepti got up and called after her.

How many beatings with a heavy instrument can a small body take before he ends up as the pulp that was piled in front of her? Was there life left in the bundle of bones, flesh, blood and vomit that she was staring at? No, it did not seem to be. Why had she not followed her first instincts and persuaded the boy to come with her? How could she have envisaged such an end to so much vitality? Who was responsible? Someone, who had abused the boy? A *dalaal* dealing with working children? Had the boy tried to cheat his *dalaal* or run away from him? Policeman? Drunkard? Who? ... Did it matter now? ... She was not in anyway connected with this, better get away... Where does one go from here? Yes, she would get back to normalcy. A picture kept floating in front of her, mitigating the horror of that other picture just left behind – an unhealthily, swollen boy with a retarded and innocent face laughing and shouting, "*Babujee, ha ha ha*". ... This time she would act.

Pictures have a way of fading. Daily routines and work pressures have a way of taking up days, months and years without one's noticing. Resolutions do not falter, it is just that one should make time soon and act swiftly. □