

I WANT freedom from this bunch of keys.

This small object that hangs so innocently at my waist or lies in my handbag - how heavy it weighs on my heart.

A change is needed.

To throw it away, and to be - without household responsibilities, the duty of looking after husband's and children's needs, the compulsion to supervise servants, the weary waking at dawn to the burdens of another day...

Without the status of the mistress of the household...

Just to be... Ah! thinking thus is like spreading wings and flying... It is not to such weariness that the day should break. To hear the birds' voices, to see the face of the world revealed as the gray curtains of darkness are drawn aside one by one, to run up to the rooftop, to touch the sky, to be part of that splendour of redness slowly spreading below - it is for these that day should dawn. But the world speaks in prose, not poetry, when the bunch of keys comes to hand. Beauty, like a sign language, untranslatable, meaningless, comes before the eyes and passes away.

The cook said: "Amma, the lid of one of the milk bottles was loose. The milk in it was nothing but water."

She did not speak.

He continued: "Vellayan often cheats like this."

As she still seemed reluctant to speak, her husband intervened: "Why keep someone specially to get milk

when there are already four men servants in the house, and then complain when he cheats? Look here, Annam. Get rid of Vellayan and send one of our men to the milk depot from tomorrow."

"But all of them have other duties in the house. Whom can I send? And, besides, does milk arrive on time every day? Some days you have to wait a long time. Won't housework suffer in the meantime?"

"Then we had better keep drinking watery coffee and watery curd, and keep quiet about it."

Annapurani went into the kitchen. The milk in one bottle was indeed watery - some milk powder would have to be added to it. She always kept a tin of Amul milk powder for an emergency. When she opened the padlock of the store cupboard and took out the tin, the sight of the bunch of keys once again wearied her heart.

Annapurani had not been in the habit of locking up foodstuffs. But things had begun to diminish and disappear. When there are three or four men in a house, how can you accuse anyone unless you have actually caught him in the act? She blamed herself for having aroused someone's greed by leaving things around, and, since then, had begun to keep the cupboard locked. Another key in the bunch of keys.

"What, Amma - *dabba* milk today?" Her seven year old daughter pulled a face.

"Not *dabba - dabbi*", her elder brother corrected her.



# BUNCH OF KEYS

"It can be said either way, can't it, Amma? Both are tins, aren't they?"

"Yes, a *dabba* is a male tin and a *dabbi* a female tin."

"Ho, ho, ho, Amma is cracking a joke." The boy clapped his hands.

Annapurani came out of the dining room after everyone had finished breakfast.

"Amma." The washerman's voice was heard. As she prepared to count the washed clothes, her husband called out to her: "Annam, just give me the bunch of keys. I have to open the lumber room. Remember the tyre I changed yesterday? I have to put away the old tyre. There is still life in it - might come in useful some time."

Handing him the keys, she said: "Why don't you give me your soiled clothes before you go?"

"Just a minute. I'll be back before you finish counting." She sat down to count the clothes. After counting the washed clothes, she took out the unwashed ones from the soiled clothes basket

"Somu, Solachi! It's a holiday at school today, isn't it? Come help mother. Just collect the bedsheets and pillowcases for the washerman. The window curtains are quite dirty too. Take them off", she instructed the children.

"Here, Annam, the keys."

"Oh god."

"Why? What's happened?"

"Are you god?" She changed it into a joke. "Couldn't the keys stay with you a little longer? Must they be given to me right away?"

"OK, OK, take them." Pursing her lips, she took them.

"Have the right number of washed clothes come back? What's this? This doesn't look like my shirt. What's this colour? My shirt was blue."

"This is the blue shirt. It has been reborn in this form after a wash. This is the moment for the bard Kalmegh to sing a song."

After the washerman had left, she stood alone in the verandah for a while, looking at the lane. She felt like continuing to stand there.

"Amma, give me the key to the wardrobe. I am going to wear my maxi today", said her daughter, coming to her. Annapurani turned round. Sighing deeply, she came in and opened the wardrobe. The washed clothes had to be put away. She had to take out fresh bedsheets, pillowcases and curtains. Clothes for her husband, herself and the children to wear for the day had to be taken out too...

All this she did and closed the wardrobe.

Getting ready for office, her husband, combing his hair in front of the mirror, asked: "Shall we go out this evening?"

The children were thrilled. The boy said he wanted to go to the cinema and the girl wanted to go to the beach.

"Somu, you have become too fond of films after all the films you keep seeing on TV at your friend's house. Annam, where do you think we should go?"

Annapurani, proudly gazing at her daughter who looked tall in her maxi, was startled and said: "Oh - anywhere." Then she smiled and said: "Solachi has grown tall, hasn't she? Somu was tall from birth. Now, brother and sister make a nice pair."

"Righto, Annam, I am going to the office. We'll go somewhere in the evening, OK?" Then he said: "See, I forgot. No money at all in my purse. How can I go out without any money? I must take some - give me the key to the Godrej."

She gave him the keys. Then she remembered. She had taken off her gold earrings before having her bath because they had given her a rash. She had kept them in the table drawer. The rash might take a few days to

heal. She had better keep them in the Godrej cupboard until then. She took the jewels to the steel cupboard and put them inside a leather bag. This bag contained other keys. The key to the bank locker. The key to the trunk which held her dead parents' mementoes. The key to the big trunk, in the locked store room, which contained her dowry articles and her festival dolls. The key to the house of her maternal uncle who lived in the same city and had suddenly had to go to Trichy with his family for a week...

She locked the cupboard. The bunch of keys once again clinked at her waist.

"I'm going, Annam."

"OK."

His voice was again heard from the compound: "Annam, I think I've forgotten the car keys in my room. Could you get them, please?"

"This too", she thought, and brought him his keys. "Thanks. Will you lock the garage after I leave? I'm already very late." He took the car out without waiting for her reply. Annapurani stood looking after him for a few moments. Then she locked the garage and put the key on his table in the house.

After lunch, she had dropped into a doze when a shriek was heard. Waking up with a start, she ran towards the compound from where the sound had come. Her son had just sat up after a fall. In his hand was an unripe mango, and beside him a broken branch of the mango tree.

"What, Somu, did you fall from the tree?"

"Yes, mother." He grinned shamefacedly and bit into the mango. It was her daughter who narrated how he had fallen from the tree when the branch broke. It was she who had screamed when he fell. Yet, she seemed proud too of her elder brother's having climbed the tree. It

was a matter of prestige. The tree belonged to the neighbours but some of its branches curved over their garage roof. Often, huge fruit would fall and dent the delicate asbestos roofing. Or they would fall on the servants sitting near the wall or on the playing children. They had often requested the neighbours to lop these branches but to no effect. Today, the boy had decided to declare war on the neighbours. He had climbed onto one of the overhanging branches and plucked some of the unripe mangoes. After throwing some down, he had just begun to eat one in token of victory when the branch broke. Not letting go of his prize, he continued to munch it, his face and eyes sparkling.

"I have plucked many mangoes, Amma. Serves them right, doesn't it? The mangoes are very tasty. They're Rumanis, Amma. They'll be very good when they ripen. Have one. Solachi, you try one."

Annapurani held back her laughter and said: "Wonderful! Isn't it wrong to climb the neighbours' tree and pluck their fruit?"

"Why don't they lop those branches? If we can be plagued by these mangoes, don't we have a right to eat them? They are protruding into our house, aren't they?"

"Well, this is certainly not the *parijatam* tree that Sri Krishna brought! All right, now, get up and come in."

"What is that, Amma? A story?"

"Yes."

"Tell us the story, please, Amma."

"I'll tell you later. Now come in, out of this blinding heat."

"What'll we do inside? Tell Appa to buy a TV, Amma. Then, at least,

we'll have that to watch."

"Oho, Maharaja! So if there's no TV, you'll keep perching on trees, will you? Come in at once."

The boy got up. He was limping. Annapurani now noticed that he had bruised his left knee and it was bleeding slightly.

"You've hurt yourself. I must put on some medicine." She unlocked the medicine cupboard in her bedroom and put Burnol on her son's bruise.



Then she unlocked the bookcase, gave each child a book, and told them to sit quietly and read. She locked the bookcase and medicine cupboard and stared at the bunch of keys in her hand for a moment. Must she always carry it at her waist as if it were a child? She flung it on the floor and, with a somewhat lightened heart, she lay down.

"Amma."

She saw the maidservant at the door and sat up. "What is it, Selvi?"

"A man just came from Adyar to say that my elder brother's father-in-

law has died. Can the two of us go?"

"Of course. When someone dies, one must go. Poor man - how did he die? Was he ill?"

"No, nothing like that, just old age. It was time for him to go. There'll be many people there. We may not be able to return at night. We'll come early tomorrow morning."

"All right"

"The bunch of keys has fallen in the corner."

"Yes."

The maid came in to pick it up for her.

"What's the great hurry? I'll pick it up myself later. Go now." The servant couple left.

In the evening, when Annapurani had washed her face, changed her *sari*, and come into the hall, the cook asked: "Amma, could you get the key to the store cupboard, please? Lentils and oil are needed."

She brought the bunch of keys from where it was lying. She was reminded of the time when she and her brothers and sisters used to tease their mother. A.J. Cronin's novel *The Keys of the Kingdom* was then fresh in their minds. When their mother moved around with the bunch of keys

chinking at her waist, they would laugh and say: "Amma, isn't this house your kingdom? So, as far as you are concerned, these are the keys of the kingdom!" Mingled with their joking was a sort of pride in having thus exalted their mother's position. Their mother would smile silently.

Now she wondered, had her mother really enjoyed that responsibility and authority? Or was she too suffocated by the tyranny of those keys? Had she smiled because she could not weep?

In a little while, her husband

returned from work. After looking in vain through the dailies for a film that would please everyone, they decided to make a long planned visit to a store on Mount Road which was having a discount sale of terycloth pieces, and then to go to the beach.

“Somu, sand should not get into the bruise on your knee. Go and wear long pants. Can you manage to walk in the sand?” Annapurani asked.

“Oh yes. It’s hardly anything. This Solachi yelled like a witch for nothing. I hardly felt any pain even at that time.”

“How could you feel any pain? After all, it was a badge of heroism! Did you eat all the mangoes yourself or have you kept a couple, for me?” her husband, who had heard of his son’s exploits, asked, laughing.

The cook had finished cooking dinner. Leaving the covered dishes on the kitchen counter, he went home. He wouldn’t reappear till next morning. When they were all ready to set out, Annapurani exclaimed: “Oh! I forgot -Selvi and Manickam have gone to Adyar -someone died. Now there’s no one to guard the house. How can all of us leave? Shall we go to the store and the beach tomorrow?”

The children, who were already in the car, refused to get out. “Let’s not spoil their fun. The collapsible gate has a mechanism which people normally lock from inside. Today, we can lock it from outside. That will solve the problem. Annam, go lock the gate and get the keys.”

“No.”

Her husband looked at her in surprise. “What, no?”

“I won’t go and lock the gate. This locking and opening is endless - it’s too irritating. You go and lock it”

“What has happened to you?”

As if possessed, she said: “I hate even to touch the keys. Here, let me give them to you. You run the house for a few days. You look after the locking, opening, everything. Let me

eat, sleep and bathe on time like the children. I’ll do what I feel like doing and no more. You take all the responsibility.”

Her husband looked at her in amazement. The children too stared at her. Complete silence overshadowed them for a few moments. Then her husband, still looking at her, said slowly: “As far as I know, I have never deliberately kept you in want of anything, Annam. I think I have been a good husband and father. I’m very surprised that you feel something is greatly lacking.”

She too looked into his eyes and replied: “Nothing great is lacking, nor anything small either. Just a little weariness. Can’t a human being feel that way?”

“Appa, will you get us cardamom flavoured milk from the Aavin milkbar?” their daughter asked.

Annapurani turned her head away. Her husband got out silently, locked the iron collapsible gate, put the key in his trouser pocket, and returned to the car.

It was beginning to get dark when they reached the beach after their shopping. The children jumped out and began to run about on the sand. Sitting on the front seat, Annapurani rummaged through her bag. “We must lock the car. All the shopping bags are in it. Aren’t you getting down, Annam?”

“Yes, I am. Take the bags off the back shelf and put them under the back seat, out of sight.”

“That’s a good idea.”

She was out of the car by the time he had done as she suggested. After locking the car, they began to walk and sat down on the sand only after walking a long way. They felt a certain queasiness at the idea of sitting near the entry walls. After once seeing some tourists use this area as a urinal, in utter disregard of the people sitting there and the children playing, they

felt a reluctance to sit there.

It was almost eight by the time they returned home. Her husband took the key out of his trouser pocket, opened the lock of the collapsible gate, and they went in. Her daughter ran towards the kitchen, yelling: “I’m hungry, let’s eat first.” As usual, the cook had locked the kitchen before leaving, and had given the key to Annapurani. As was her habit, she had attached it to her bunch of keys.

“Give me the key to the kitchen, Amma. Let’s eat”, her daughter said.

“We’ll put away the new clothes in the wardrobe first, and then eat, Come.” Her husband carried the plastic bags upstairs and the children followed him. Each one took out his or her new cloth pieces once again, admired them and then put them back.

“Amma, open the wardrobe. Let’s put away the clothes”, her son said.

“Open the Godrej also, Annam. Let me put away the money left over from shopping”, her husband said.

“The bunch of keys isn’t here”, said Annapurani.

“What?”

“The bunch of keys isn’t here.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Is a bunch of keys something that gets lost? It must be in your handbag as usual.”

“It’s not there now.”

“Look properly.”

“I have looked properly. You look too, if you like.”

In the handbag were a purse, a small notebook with a pencil, a comb, a powder compact, a pair of goggles, a handkerchief, bills for the clothes bought that day and an advertisement leaflet someone had given them at the beach, which said: “Buy petrol from us.”

“The bunch of keys isn’t here”, said her husband.

“That’s what I said.”

Her husband’s eyes dropped to her waist

“What are you looking at my waist



for? I keep it at my waist only when I'm at home. When I go out, it is in my handbag. Don't you know that?"

"Then where can it have gone?"

"That's what I don't know."

"You opened your bag at the store to put in the bills. At the beach you gave change to the snacks vendor. Could it have fallen out at one of those places?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"I see. Very good. Is that the answer to give after losing the whole bunch of keys? Standing there, quite unaffected!"

"What do you want me to do? Will the keys come running back if I jump around?"

"So you have washed your hands of it, have you?"

"Amma, I'm hungry. How will we open the kitchen now?" asked her daughter.

"Perhaps you didn't take the keys at all. Could they be somewhere in the house?"

"Could be."

"Then why don't you start looking for them at once? What do you mean by just standing there like that? You don't seem at all worried at the loss of the keys. The kitchen has to be opened, the wardrobe has to be opened, the Godrej has to be opened, and all the other keys are in that bunch too! How will the house run if everything remains locked? Get a move on, look everywhere. Solachi, Somu, you look too."

"Won't you look too, Appa?"

"Of course I'll look. What else is in my fate? One must be ready to do anything and everything after marrying such a useless woman. Annam, why are you still standing

there like a tree? Look for it. Losing the keys! Stupid nonsense! Has anyone ever heard of such a thing? Even if we forget the rest, the key to the Godrej is in that bunch. What if it falls into the wrong hands?"

"Won't we be able to eat if we don't find the keys, Appa?" Her daughter began to cry.

"Stay hungry since you were born

do anything until the keys were found. She need not open the kitchen, she need not open the wardrobe, no locks, no keys, no duties, no responsibilities... No burden of running the house. Ah! how light her mind and body felt. Was the bunch of keys so heavy? She had been pressed down into the earth by the weight of the keys. Now she could breathe easily as if a weight had been lifted

from her body. This release from the keys ever ready to swallow her - brief, impermanent, yet sweet was this freedom she had given herself...

"What a woman to lose the whole bunch of keys! Is this how a house is run? Shall we have to break all the locks now?" she could hear her husband yelling, somewhere.

Shall I say I'll check the car as if I have just thought of it and then fetch the bunch from the glove compartment, saying it was lying on the car seat? I can do it. But not right away - maybe fifteen, ten or even five minutes later.

Let me enjoy this relief, this sense of not having to do anything, this pleasure of having shed a burden, just for five minutes, with every second expanding into permanence. Five minutes with no contact with anyone, five minutes which are not accounted for on any time scale...

Still she lay there without opening her eyes. Her son's plaintive voice downstairs: "Nothing can be opened without the keys, Appa", was like sweet music to her ears. □

*(Translated from Tamil by Prabha Rani with Ruth Vanita)*



to such a mother!" her husband yelled. He ran his eyes over the table and went out of the room. The children began to search the whole house. Annapurani smiled softly. She was not affected by her husband's unusual outburst of anger. For a little while, a great freedom was hers. Solaced by this feeling, she lay down on her bed. When she closed her eyes, she felt as if she had gone beyond all the world's compulsions and was securely crouching in a solitude somewhere in space, where no one could touch her. She need not