

Weeds in Her Curly Hair

HAREENDRAN KALLINKEEL

“I need a dagger,” Shiva says, “double-edged...and razor-sharp.”

The blacksmith turns from his furnace and stares at him in surprise. *What the hell is a renowned writer doing here?* he thinks as he stands up and walks towards Shiva.

Shiva smiles at him, an awkward effort, as if to justify his presence there, running an errand that any of his servants could have done.

“Please do come in, sir.” The blacksmith dusts the single chair in his workshop.

“It’s okay.” Shiva shifts his stance. “I just...”

The blacksmith pauses. He shouldn’t have asked the man in. Dignified men who live in cooled homes can’t bear the heat inside, or the stench of sweat emanating from the skin of a toiling man.

“Why’d you need such a dagger?” The blacksmith regrets his question as soon as he asks it.

“What do I pay for it?” Shiva asks, sweeping a lock of his curly hair back from an already perspiring forehead. The heat, even outside the shack, feels unbearable to him.

“That’s usually a couple grand, for the best quality.” The blacksmith beams at him. “But for you, fifteen hundred.”

“I don’t need the discount.” Shiva takes out his wallet from the pocket of his jeans, pulls out two two-thousand rupee notes.

The blacksmith’s eyes gleam.

“The additional money should quell your curiosity,” Shiva says.

The blacksmith accepts the cash. "Sure, sir, it's more than enough to guarantee my silence."

"Have it ready by four in the evening."

"Whatever you say...Mr. Shiva."

"Good." Shiva leaves, gets into his car parked on the opposite side, and drives away.

The blacksmith gazes after him wondering, *Aren't pens anymore the weapons of writers? What do they need a dagger for?*

Shiva sits by a pond's side, watching the weeds. The morning sun casts golden rays across the crystalline water. As a cold breeze sweeps, ripples form on the surface, the pond becomes alive. "Do you ever listen, to the music playing in me?"

Shiva stares in response. Weeds, with stems like dancing tentacles, jut from the bottom, raise their head in a floating carpet of green algae. He listens to birds hum in the nearby bushes, and laughs aloud.

The breeze carries his laughter to the bamboo-grove on the opposite side. Bamboos' reflection gyrates on the ripples in a chaotic fashion as the wind gathers speed. Bamboo stalks strain against one another, producing noises like lingering sounds of a wail. He hears the rustling of dry leaves as a serpent slithers out of its hole.

"All I can perceive," he says, "is the bamboos' lament, the hiss of serpents. And, I see too...the trap you lay beneath the allure of your calmness."

"Train your ears, focus, you'll hear my hum. Look beyond the veneer, you'll see my beauty in the depths."

"I hear the cries echo in the bamboo grove."

“Concentrate deeper, look farther beyond...”

Shiva places his hand on his forehead, presses his temples with his thumb and middle finger. “The pain thudding in my skull, words that keep nudging its walls, the images dancing in my mind’s eye... I just want everything to fade.”

“You are a writer, right? The things you complain about, those are your blessings, can’t you see?”

Shiva moves his hand, sweeping his long hair back. “I don’t need that blessing, just want my head clear.”

“Try to see through, everything will be clear.”

He takes a deep breath. “All I see is the raised hood of a serpent... and the weeds. Weeds entwined in her curly tresses. Beyond, it’s foggy, I see nothing.”

Ripples move faster, lap against the stone steps, the cacophony of the pond’s laughter keeps reverberating in his ears as Shiva falls back and curls on the ground.

“Your son is a damn fool,” Kannan says.

Strange, Madhavi wonders, that her husband ignores the aroma of garlic-marinated lobster, his favorite seafood that roasts in the fry-pan. The accusations, well, all husbands blame their wives for anything bad the children do, and they take the credit when a child does something good.

“The lobster is about ready,” she says. “Wash your hands, I’ll lay the plates.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Well, it’s the same thing.” She looks at the stove, takes a deep breath. Flames lick their way along the coffee-pot’s side. Coffee

swooshes up to the brim. She turns off the stove and pours the coffee into a gold-rimmed cup. "What are you so agitated about?"

"He's announcing his decision to decline the Literature Academy Award in a press conference tomorrow," Kannan says. He loosens his tie.

Madhavi stares at her husband for a moment. "How can he do that? It's something he always wanted." She places the cup on the dining table.

Kannan sits on a chair, picks up the cup, and takes a sip. "Serve me the lobster," he says.

"I'll heat up the rice pancake."

"No, just the lobster," Kannan says. He inhales deeply, relishing the scent wafting into the dining hall. Perspiration has broken on his bald head, shining in the overhead lamp's light.

Madhavi places a plate in front of him and serves him a big lobster.

Kannan bends down, takes a whiff from the plate. "Smells great," he says. "But he's a hopeless case, your son."

"Did you ask him why?" She stretches to take out a fork from the nearby shelf.

"No need," he says, scissoring his fingers. "You know, you need to feel it, the hard shell and the soft flesh, relish the contrast." He breaks a pincer and bites into it.

She hears the shell crack, watches the paprika-red oil seep onto his fingers. "He appears restless these days. I'm sure something is wrong." She pulls her sari tight around her bosom.

"The way you pamper him, that's his problem." Kannan lays the cracked pincer on the plate, hooks his finger and digs out a portion

of the flesh. "I wanted him to pursue an MBA, but he preferred literature," he says before having it.

Madhavi watches, with satisfaction, the way her husband relishes the lobster. It's always a joy to see him eat, slow and systematic. He'll first finish the flesh, then crack the bones, chew on them for a while. "Why don't you talk to him," she asks.

"What's there to talk?" Kannan spits out a lump of the chewed shells into the waste-plate. "I pay thousands to the managers when my educated son whiles away his time, writing fiction. And, when he receives an award, he chooses to reject it. Do you think a scribe's career will get him enough to live the life he wants?"

"Have you ever read what he writes?" Madhavi asks her husband. "It's very emotive, he's quite talented. One day he will become famous, I'm sure."

"It's not that, Madhavi," Kannan says, cleaning his fingers with a napkin. "I don't doubt his abilities. But we must be practical. He's the only one who's there to take care of the family business. I can't bear the pressure alone. You must realize I'm getting old." He leans back against the chair and stretches his arms.

"I understand, dear." Madhavi places her hands on his shoulders and presses. "But, what's the point in pushing him into something he doesn't want to do? If it's writing that he chooses as a career, he must accept the award." She pulls out a chair and sits by his side. "In any case, you talk to him."

"You know how he evades me. It's been a while since we spoke to each other." Kannan holds her hands.

"He came home early today, maybe around five, and went to the pond. I don't know, he carried a knife or something... and a net. His

behavior worries me.” Madhavi looks at her husband. A thin veil of moisture blurs her view of him.

“It’s that girl.” Kannan takes a deep breath. “I don’t know why he can’t get over his guilt? Nobody can blame him for what happened.”

Madhavi’s fingers grip his wrist.

“I’ll talk to him, don’t worry,” Kannan says.

The twin ponds, Shiva’s paternal grandmother’s legacy, are the family’s pride. The first one, seven meters wide and ten meters long, holds memories as large as its size. Grandma supports Shiva splaying both his limbs, her forearms under his belly, as he is learning to swim; sweet, savory recollections of olden times. After grandma’s death, the pond receives less of the kick of energetic limbs and more of the slippery-slope of encroaching algae.

It decides to pay back.

The second pond, smaller in size, holds memories less significant; watching the male servants bathing the cattle, maids washing clothes...

Now, everyone likes to take a bath in the Jacuzzi, the pond remains unused. Algae grow thicker, weeds proliferate.

Shiva inspects a small stream that flows from the first to the second pond, then another from the second to the paddy field. He throws a magazine into the water; current carries it to the second pond, from there, to the other stream, and into the paddy fields.

Good, he can trust the streams to carry the waste.

He examines the weeds. The algae carpet sways in slow motion as ripples dance on the pond’s surface. Bamboo stalks shake in the wind. Dry leaves rustle as serpents slither on the ground.

Serpents never change. Their hiss sounds the same as it did twenty years ago.

He had stared then, open-mouthed, surrounded by water, when a serpent's body glided out from between bamboo stalks, like a nightmare coiling around the thread of his dreams.

The dark skin of its spread hood reflected sunrays in tiny sparkles. The sound of its hiss traversed into Shiva's ears through the calmness in the air as he struggled to stay on the water's surface.

Then he felt the pull from the bottom. Algae turned into vicious masses of membranes, engulfed his body.

Weeds became fetters that coiled around his ankles, and a vice-like grip dragged him down.

As his feet landed at the pond's bottom, the slush, choking in its own stench, heaved breaths of relief, causing bubbles to escape towards the surface.

Pressing his feet further down, Shiva flung his body upwards. Feet kicking, arms flailing, he rose. The water broke around his chest in furious waves and bubbles burst, spilling the scent of mud.

Shiva gasped, lungs craving for fresh air.

Frantic ripples escaped in circles around him and he struggled in the water, hoping his grandma's forearms were beneath him.

Shiva's reverie breaks as a chilly breeze laps up his face. Has he ever written a word, whose promptings are those scribbling? Do emotions flow from a pen he holds, or the keyboard he madly taps his fingers on?

He hates the award, not his to accept.

A reward for a death, a curse of a lifetime, a sin one takes to the grave. Can he ever bear the burden?

The weeds need to be cut. The blacksmith has done a fine job. The blade, on either side, can slice smoothly through any type of underwater growth. Gratitude for the additional money reflects in his craftsmanship, not merely a promised silence.

He'll shred the weeds to pieces, trap them in the net, and spread them on the shore. A day, maybe two, they'll dry up and be ready, to be licked clean by the tongue of a flame from his lighter.

Shiva takes a swig from the bottle of scotch he carried. The tangy bite of single malt assuages the chill he feels. He lights a cigarette, takes a few deep drags, and stubs it out.

He prepares for the kill.

Shiva drives a wooden stake into a corner of the pond, and it glides smoothly as the muddy bottom gives way. He tries to push it farther, but feels resistance. He picks up a large stone and hits the stake down. He secures one end of the net to the stake, pulls it across the pond's breadth, and ties the other end to a bamboo stalk.

Shiva wades through the water, begins to chop the weeds with his dagger. Its blade swish through, forth and back as if the rage in his guts flows through the veins in his forearms, and has transmitted to its body.

Bubbles, carrying shreds of weeds, rise to the surface and pop. Shiva feels a perverse joy as he watches broken algae clusters float in the water like amputated frogs.

These were the monsters that lurked in the pond's bottom, held his feet down as he yelled for help. Anu, at twelve, five years older than him, had taken the responsibility. He clasped the rope she threw towards him. Her tugs extricated him from the pond's treacherous tentacles.

She pulled him, standing near the bamboo grove. Then he noticed

the cobra, hood spread, and its body raised, ready to strike. Sunrays reflected on the tip of its fangs.

How could a seven-year-old be so mean?

He knew if he warned her she'd drop the rope and flee. He'd drown. He forgot the mythological legends, stories that grandma told about the sacrifices of great men and women. He chose to hide behind the shadows of barbarian princes, closing his eyes.

He'd crafted the first story, of survival, by means of treachery and betrayal, consigned an only friend to the mercy of a serpent.

The cobra bit her before she could pull him ashore. She fell on the ground.

He felt horror seizing him, as he began to sink. He saw her rise, a winged-fairy. The serpent's venom seemed to have pumped energy into her hands. She began pulling him back to the shore, her hands working frenetically.

Legends bowed before her might.

As he clambered to the steps, he saw her face light up in a smile. Then, abruptly, she slumped.

For a moment, he held her image in his eyes, and the next, her body slid to the pond from the bamboo grove's slope. Her still eyes stared at him from beneath a watery film.

He watched her lie there at the shallow end of the pond, on a carpet of algae, weeds entwined in her curly hair lapping up as the tiny ripples crashed against the shore.

Nobody knew she died saving him, nobody would ever know the story of deceit.

A shudder wakes him to the present. He sees bits and pieces of weeds float toward the opening of the pond and get entangled in the

net. He collects and throws them onto the shore. Within an hour the pond becomes clean.

A burst of light, at the pond's bottom, catches his eyes. He plunges into the deep towards its splendor.

Brightness at the bottom dazzles him, leaves him agape. Rainbows of vibrant colors explode before his eyes. He lies on the pond's bosom.

She rests there too, in a fluffy white bed, her luscious tresses spread around her head. Her eyelids flutter, like the wings of a butterfly.

She opens her arms in invitation. Shiva glides into them. He snuggles close, listens to the thuds inside her chest.

Whirlpools swirl around, the churning water swooshes.

"Anu, I belong here, not you."

"No, Shiva, you have a call; live up to it."

"The call...the lie I live?"

"You have a gift from God, Shiva, not all mortals are that blessed."

"It's a curse, Anu, payback for my treachery."

"It doesn't matter, Shiva. We're all like that. If I saw the cobra, I'd have thrown away the rope and fled."

"No, Anu...you'd never. You held on even after you were bitten."

"I did nothing, Shiva. I felt the pain shoot through my body, the fear grip me. I clasped at the rope. Then the angels came...and I was drawn to light."

"Whatever you say, I betrayed you."

"Any seven-year-old would do the same."

"The legends, Anu, what about them...we all grew up listening to their stories, their sacrifice... But I cheated you, let you die."

“No, Shiva. The tentacles held you down, and you had to grapple with them.”

“Yes, Anu, the weeds... Their serpentine coils curled around my ankles, the cold, slithery creepers held onto me, like fetters claspings. But, you know, Anu...I’ve finally severed the tentacles, shred the weeds... The pond is clean now, rid of the monsters.”

“Good, Shiva. They won’t any longer be anyone’s reason for remorse. I’m happy.”

Anu embraces him. “Pursue your call.” She moves up in slow motions. The light wraps around her.

Shiva struggles in the darkness, flailing his arms and kicking his legs.

Weeds entwine in his hair, pulls. It hurts. Where do they come from? Haven’t I rid the pond of weeds, he thinks.

The tentacles crawl beneath his arms, clasp around his shoulders. Shiva feels the tug...

Kannan sees the bubbles break on the surface as he approaches the pond. In the waning sunlight, he sees a heap of weeds on the shore. Large bubbles keep bursting in the water.

Kannan panics; the weeds on the shore, the bubbles in the pond, narrate the story.

He jumps into the water and swims in the direction of breaking bubbles, and dives deeper, groping in the water, his hands splayed.

He perceives someone struggling, flailing arms, and moves towards the site. His groping fingers clasp hair.

He feels an unusual chill in the water; the pond appears to have deepened, and without any weeds, it is easy to swim.

He pulls Shiva out of the water, lays him on the stone steps, and presses down his palms on his son's belly.

Water seeps out, and a few shreds of weed stick to his mouth. He regains consciousness.

"Father, where's Anu?"

Kannan stares at his son and touches his forehead. The skin burns against his palm. He scoops Shiva in a tight hug. "My child..."

"She's here, father. That's why...the pond hums..." Shiva's voice breaks as he coughs.

"Your mom," Kannan says. "She's concerned."

"The ripples, father...those tiny ripples..." Shiva says, "You know, they're desires. Anu's unfulfilled longing...Weeds, algae, held me... crafted her death"

Kannan feels tears sting his eyes. Maybe, his son knows the deeper meaning of life he's never been able to see. Maybe, he needs to honor his call.

"Do whatever you want, Shiva, just be with us."

"The pond, father..." A thin trickle flows from the corner of his son's mouth. Pieces of weed crawl down his chin, clots of algae drop on his chest, as he sits up. "Grandma's pond had a purpose, it was not death. But, I failed to keep flailing my limbs."

"It's okay, son. Now the pond's clean. Try to keep it that way."

"I will, father." Shiva hugs him. "I'll have my penance too."

Kannan's arms tighten around his son's body.

"I know father, you all wanted me to accept the award," Shiva says. "I realize now, you're right." □