

The Elephant

-Aravind Adiga

All the employees of the furniture shop had gathered in a semicircle around Mr. Ganesh Pai's table. It was a special day: Mrs. Engineer had come to the shop in person.

She had seen her TV table, and now she was approaching Mr. Pai's desk to finalize the deal.

His face was smeared with sandalwood, and he wore a loose-fitting silk shirt through which a dark triangle of chest hair stuck out. On the wall behind his chair he had hung gold foil images of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and the fat elephant god, Ganapati. An incense stick smoked below the images.

Mrs. Engineer sat down slowly at the desk. Mr. Pai reached into his drawer, then held out four red cards to her. Mrs. Engineer paused, bit her lip, and snatched at one of the cards.

"A set of stainless-steel glasses!" Mr. Pai said, showing her the bonus card she had picked. "A truly wonderful gift, Madam. Something you'll treasure for years and years."

Mrs. Engineer beamed. She counted off four hundred-rupee notes, which she put down on the desk before Mr. Pai.

Mr. Pai, moistening the tip of his finger in a small bowl filled with water which he kept on his desk just for this purpose, counted the notes afresh. Then he looked at Mrs. Engineer and smiled, as if expecting something more.

"The rest after delivery," she said, getting up from her chair. "And don't forget to send the bonus gift."

"She may be the wife of the richest man in town, but she's still a stingy old cunt," Mr. Pai said, after seeing her out of the store, and an assistant laughed behind him. He turned and glared at the assistant, a small, dark Tamilian boy.

"Get one of the coolies to deliver it, fast," Mr. Pai said.

The Tamilian boy ran out of the shop. The cycle-cart pullers were in their usual position—lying on their carts, staring into space, smoking *beedis*. Some of them were gazing with dull avarice at the store on the other side of the road, the Ideal Traders Ice Cream Parlor, where fat kids in T-shirts were licking vanilla cones.

The boy stuck out his index finger and motioned to one of the men.

“Chenayya—your number is up!”

Chenayya pedalled hard. He had been told to take the quick route to Rose Lane, so he had to go over Lighthouse Hill. He struggled to move the cart with the TV table, which was attached to his cycle. Once he was over the hump of the hill, he let the cycle glide. He slowed down on Rose Lane, found the house number, which he had memorized, and rang the bell.

A plump, fair-skinned woman opened the door: Mrs. Engineer herself.

Chenayya brought the TV table into the house and put it down in the spot she indicated.

He went out, and returned with a saw. Mrs. Engineer watched him draw the instrument out at arm’s length, and suddenly it seemed enormous: a foot and a half long, with a serrated edge, rusty, but with patches of the original metal-gray color still showing through, like a sculpture of a shark made by a tribal artist.



*“Not enough money is being spent
on safety, so be careful.”*

Chenayya saw the woman’s eyes grow large with anxiety. To dispel her fear, he grinned ingratiatingly at her—it was the exaggerated death-mask grin of a person not used to grovelling—then he looked around to figure out where he had left the table.

The legs were not all even. Chenayya closed an eye and examined them one by one; then he began moving the saw over each of the legs, creating a fine dust on the floor. He examined them again, to make sure they were level, and then dropped the saw. He searched his dirty white sarong, which was the only garment on his body, for a relatively clean corner, and wiped the table off.

Mrs. Engineer had not been watching; she had retreated into an inner room. She returned and counted off seven hundred and forty-two rupees.

Hesitating a moment, she added three one-rupee notes to it.

“Give me something more, Madam?” Chenayya blurted. “Give me three more rupees?”

“Six rupees? Nothing doing,” she said.

“It’s a long way, Madam.” He picked up his saw and pointed to his neck. “I had to haul it all that way, Madam, on my cycle-cart. It hurts my neck very much.”

“Nothing doing. Get out, or I’ll call the police, you thug. Get out, and take your big knife!”

As he left the house, grumbling and sulking, he folded the money into a wad, then tied it into a knot on his sarong. He threw the saw into the cart.

He picked up a rotting banana skin and hung it on the leaves of a neem tree that grew near the gate of the house, so that it would startle the owners when they came out.

He was so pleased with himself for this that he smiled.

About ten minutes later, he was on his bike again, heading back to Umbrella Street. He was cycling, as always, with his butt elevated off the seat, his spine inclined at sixty degrees. Only at traffic intersections did he straighten himself, relax, and ease back into his seat. The road, as he drew near Umbrella Street, was jammed once again; pushing his front wheel into the car ahead of him, Chenayya yelled, “Son of a bitch, move!”

At last, he saw to his right the sign for Ganesh Pai Fan and Furniture Store, and stopped his cycle.

Chenayya wiped his palm against his sarong, pushed the door open, went into the store, and crouched by a corner of Mr. Pai’s table. Neither Mr. Pai nor the Tamilian assistant took any notice of him.

His neck was hurting again; he moved it from side to side to relieve the pain.

“Stop doing that.”

Mr. Pai motioned for him to hand over the cash.

He moved slowly to the boss man’s desk and handed over the notes to Mr. Ganesh Pai, who moistened his finger in the water bowl and counted off seven hundred and forty-two rupees. Chenayya stared at the water bowl; he noticed how its sides were lobed to make them look like lotus petals, and how the artisan had even traced the pattern of a trellis around the bottom of the bowl.

Mr. Pai snapped his fingers. He had tied a rubber band around the notes, and was holding out a palm in Chenayya’s direction.

“Two rupees short.”

Chenayya undid the knot in the side of his sarong and handed over two one-rupee notes.

That was the sum he was expected to give Mr. Pai at the end of every trip: one rupee for the dinner he would be given at around nine o'clock, one rupee for the privilege of having been picked to work for Mr. Ganesh Pai.

It would be some time before Chenayya's number was called again, so he walked down the road to a spot where a man was sitting at a desk on the pavement, selling bundles of small rectangular tickets that were as colorful as pieces of candy. He smiled at Chenayya; his fingers began flipping through one of the bundles.

“Yellow?”

“First tell me if my number won last time,” Chenayya said. He brought out a dirty piece of paper from the knot on his sarong. The seller took out a newspaper and glanced down at the bottom-right-hand corner.

He read aloud, “Winning Lottery Numbers: 17, 8, 9, 9, 643, 455.”

Chenayya had learned enough about English numerals to recognize his own ticket number; he squinted for several moments, and then let the ticket float to the ground.

“People buy for fifteen, sixteen years before they win, Chenayya,” the lottery seller said, by way of consolation. “But in the end those who believe always win. That is the way the world works.”

“I can't go on this way forever,” Chenayya said. “My neck hurts. I can't go on like this.”

The lottery seller nodded. “Another yellow ticket?”

Tying the ticket into his bundle, Chenayya staggered back and collapsed on his cart. For a while, he lay like that, feeling not refreshed from the rest but only numb.

Then a finger tapped on his head.

“Number's up, Chenayya.”

It was the Tamilian boy from the store.

To be delivered to 54 Rose Lane. He repeated it aloud: “54 Rose Lane.”

“Good.”

The route took him over Lighthouse Hill again. Halfway up the hill, he alighted and began dragging the cart. The sinews bulged out of his neck like webbing, and, as he inhaled, the air

burned through his chest and lungs. You can't go on, his tired limbs and burning chest told him. You can't go on. This was when the sense of resistance to his fate waxed greatest within him, and, as he pushed, the restlessness and anger that had been inside him all day became articulate at last:

You will not break me, motherfuckers! You will never break me!

If the thing to be delivered was something light, like a mattress, he was not allowed to take a cycle-cart; it had to be carried on his head. Repeating the address to the Tamilian boy from the shop, he set off with a slow, light step, like a fat man jogging. In a short while, the weight of the mattress seemed unbearable; it compressed his neck and spine and sent a shaft of pain down his back. He was virtually in a trance.

This morning, he was taking a mattress to the train station. The client turned out to be a North Indian family that was leaving Kittur; the owner, as he had guessed beforehand (from his demeanor—you can tell which of these rich people have a sense of decency and which don't), refused to tip him.

Chenayya stood his ground. "You motherfucker! Give me my money!"

It was a triumph for him: the man relented.

The odors and the noise of the train station made him sick. Outside, he squatted down by the tracks, pulled his sarong up, and held his breath. As he was squatting there, the train roared by. He turned around; he wanted to shit into the faces of the people on the train. Yes, that would be good. As the train thundered by, he forced out the turds into the faces of the passengers.

Next to him, a pig was doing the same thing.

He thought, God, what am I declining into? He crawled behind a bush and finished defecating there.

He closed his eyes.

He looked up and took a deep breath. The sky is clean, he thought. There is purity up there. He tore off a few leaves, wiped his arse with them, then rubbed his left hand against the earth in a bid to neutralize the smell.

At two o'clock, he got his next number: the delivery of a giant stack of boxes to an address in Valencia.

"There's a lot of work today, Chenayya," the Tamilian boy said. "Make sure you go the quick way—over Lighthouse Hill."

He grunted, rose up off his seat, shifted his weight onto the pedals, and was on his way. The rusty iron chain that double-locked the cart to the front wheels of the cycle began to squeal as he rode.

Down the main road, he got stuck in a traffic jam. When he didn't have the cart, he could do something—wiggle into the spaces between cars, climb onto the pavement—but now he could only curse from behind. His neck hurt. The sun seared his back.

Why are some mornings hard, some mornings simple? The other pullers never had “good” or “bad” days; they did their work like machines. Only he had his moods. He looked down, to relieve his neck, and stared at the rusty chain at his feet, coiled around the metal rod that connected the cycle to the cart. Time to oil the chain, he told himself. Must remember.

Uphill again. Leaning forward from his seat, Chenayya was straining hard; the breath went into his lungs like a hot poker. Halfway up the hill, he saw an elephant coming down, with a small bundle of leaves on its back and a mahout poking its ear with an iron rod.

He stopped; he could not believe his eyes. He began to shout at the elephant: “Hey, you, what are you doing with a bundle of twigs? Take this load from me! It's more fitted to your size, you motherfucker!”

Cars honked behind him. The mahout turned and gesticulated at him with his iron rod. A passerby yelled at him not to block traffic.

“What is wrong with this world,” he asked the driver of the car behind him, who, irate on the other side of his windshield, was jabbing his horn with the fleshy part of his palm again and again, “when an elephant gets to lounge down the road, doing no work, and a human being has to pull a cart with so much weight on it?”

The drivers behind him honked, and the cacophony grew louder.

“Don't you see something is wrong here?” he shouted. They honked back. The world was furious at his fury. It wanted him to move out of its path, but he was enjoying being exactly where he was, blocking all these rich and important people.

That evening, there were great streaks of pink in the sky. After the shop closed, the cart pullers moved to the alley behind the store; they took turns buying small bottles of country liquor, which they shared amongst themselves, getting giddy quickly and belting out Kannada film songs off key.

Chenayya never joined them. “You're wasting your money, you idiots!” he sometimes shouted; they jeered back at him.

He would not drink; he would not squander the hard-earned fruits of his labor on alcohol, he had promised himself. Yet the smell of liquor made his mouth water; the good humor and bonhomie of the other pullers made him lonely. He closed his eyes. A tinkling noise made him open them.

Nearby, on the steps of a vacant building, a fat prostitute had come out to ply her trade. She clapped her hands and made music by striking two coins together. A customer came up; they began haggling over the price. The deal was not consummated, and the man left, cursing.

Chenayya, lying in his cart with his feet sticking out, watched the action with a dull grin.

“Hey, Kamala!” he shouted at the prostitute. “Why not give me a chance tonight?”

She looked away and went on clinking the coins together. He stared at her plump breasts, at the dark tip of her cleavage that showed through her blouse, at her garishly painted lips.

He turned his eyes to the sky: he had to stop thinking about sex. Streaks of pink amid the clouds. Isn’t there a god, or someone there, Chenayya wondered, watching down on this earth? One evening, at the train station to deliver a parcel, he had noticed a wild Muslim dervish talking to himself in a corner about how the Mahdi, the last of the Imams, would come for this earth, and the evil would face their due. “Allah is the maker of all men,” the dervish had mumbled as Chenayya edged closer to listen. “And He observes our hurt, and when we suffer He suffers with us. And He will send, at the end of the days, the Mahdi, on a white horse with a sword of fire, to put the rich in their place and correct all that is wrong with the world.”

Chenayya had never forgotten about the Mahdi; whenever he saw a streak of pink in the sky at the end of the day, he thought he could detect some god of fairness watching over the earth and glowering with anger.

Chenayya closed his eyes and heard again the tinkling of coins. He tossed about restlessly, and then covered his face with a rag, so the sun wouldn’t sting him awake, and went to sleep. Half an hour later, he woke up with a sharp pain in his ribs. A policeman was jabbing his *lathis* into the bodies of the pullers. A truck was entering this part of the market. All you cycle-cart pullers! Get up and move your carts!

Chenayya spat, and walked a few feet away to urinate against a wall.

Behind him he heard jeers. The other pullers were urinating right where they had slept.

He said nothing to them. Chenayya rarely talked to his fellow cart pullers. He could barely stand the sight of them—the way they bent and grovelled to Mr. Ganesh Pai. Yes, he might do the same, but he was furious, he was angry inside. These fellows who pulled their carts with such big grins seemed incapable of even thinking badly of their employer.

When the Tamilian boy brought out the tea, Chenayya reluctantly rejoined the pullers. He heard them talking, as they did every morning, about the autorickshaws they were going to buy once they got out of here, or the small tea shops they were going to open.

“Think about it,” he wanted to say to them. “Just think about it.”

Mr. Ganesh Pai allowed them two rupees for each trip, meaning that, at the rate of three trips a day, they were making six rupees. Once you deducted for lotteries, and liquor, you were lucky to save two rupees. Sundays were off, as were Hindu holidays, so by the month's end you had saved only forty or forty-five rupees. A trip to the village, an evening with a whore, an extra-long drinking binge, and your whole month's savings would be dust. Assuming you saved everything you could, you'd be lucky to earn four hundred a year. An autorickshaw would cost twelve, fourteen thousand to buy, a small tea shop four times as much. That meant thirty, thirty-five years of such work before they could do anything else. Did they think their bodies would last that long? Was there a single cart puller over the age of forty around them?

Don't you ever think about such things, you baboons?

Yet, when he had tried once to get them to understand this, they had refused to demand more collectively. They thought they were lucky: thousands would take their jobs at a moment's notice. He knew they were right, too.

Nevertheless, despite the logic, despite their valid fears, their sheer spinelessness grated on him. That is why, he thought, Mr. Ganesh Pai could be confident that a customer could hand over thousands of rupees in cash and it would all come to him, every last rupee, without the cart puller taking any of it.

Naturally, Chenayya had long planned on stealing the money that a customer gave him. He would take the money and leave town. This much he was certain he would do—someday very soon.

Chenayya felt a tap on his shoulder. It was the Tamilian boy from Mr. Ganesh Pai's shop.

As he went up Lighthouse Hill, as he forced his cart over the hump, his usual sense of exultation was gone entirely.

At every turn of his cycle, the thought intruded itself, undid him, and slowed him down: You are unmaking yourself—destroying your guts and fibre and being! As he was cycling, he was working the wheel of life backward, crushing his muscle and fibre into the pulp from which they were formed in his mother's womb; he was unmaking himself.

All at once, in the middle of traffic, he stopped and got off his cycle, with the simple and clear thought: I can't go on like this.

That evening, the men were huddled around. A man in a blue safari suit, an important, educated man, was asking them questions; he had a small notepad in his hand. He said he had come from Madras.

He asked one of the cart pullers for his age. No one was sure. When he said, "Can you make a rough guess?" they simply nodded. When he said, "Are you eighteen, or twenty, or thirty—you must have some idea," they simply nodded again.

“Tell me, who are you?” Chenayya, who had kept his distance, asked. “Why are you asking us all these questions?”

He said that he was a journalist, and the cart pullers were impressed. He worked for an English-language newspaper in Madras, and that impressed them even more. Then he wanted to know what they were eating. While they waited expectantly, he made a list of everything they ate every day. At the end, with a wide, almost triumphant grin, he declared, “The work you are doing exceeds the amount of calories you take in. Every day, every trip you take—you are slowly killing yourselves.”

He held out his notepad, with its squiggles and zigzags and numbers, as proof of his claim.

“Why don’t you do something else, like work in a factory? Anything else? Why don’t you learn to read and write?”

Chenayya jumped off his cart.

“Don’t patronize us, you son of a bitch!” he shouted. “Those who are born poor in this country are fated to die poor. There is no hope for us, and no need of pity—certainly not from you, who never lift a hand to help us. I spit on you. I spit on your newspaper. Nothing ever changes. Look at me.” He held his palms out. “I am twenty-nine years old. I am already bent and black and twisted like this. If I live to forty, what is my fate? To be a twisted black rod of a man. You think I need your notepad and your English to tell me this? You keep us like this, you people from the cities, you rich fucks. It is in your interest to treat us like cattle! You English-speaking fuck!”

The man put his notepad away. He looked at the ground, and seemed to be groping for a response.

Chenayya felt a tap on his shoulder. It was the Tamilian boy.

“Stop talking so much! Your number has come up!”

Some of the other cart pullers began chuckling, as if to say, Serves you right.

Strangely, the man from Madras was not grinning; he had turned his face away, as if he were ashamed at what Chenayya had said.

Why don’t you do something, work in a factory, anything, to improve yourself? After all, for years you have taken things to the gates of factories—it is just a question of getting inside. The next day, he went to the factory. He saw thousands of men going in for work, and he thought, What a fool I have been, never even to have tried to get work here.

He sat down, and none of the guards asked any questions, thinking he was waiting to pick up some goods.

He waited till noon, and then a man came out. From the number of people following him, Chenayya thought, he must be the big man. He went running past the guard and got down on his knees: "Sir. I want to work."

The man stared at him. The guards came running up to drag Chenayya back, but the big man said, "I have two thousand workers, and not one of them wants to work, and here this man is, down on his knees, begging for work. That's the attitude we need to move this country forward."

He pointed a finger at Chenayya.

"You won't get offered any contract. Understand. Day by day."

"Anything, anything you want."

"What kind of work can you do?"

"Anything, anything you want."

"All right, come back tomorrow. We don't need a coolie right now."

"O.K., sir."

The big man took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one.

"Hear what this man has to say," he said, when a group of other men, who were also smoking, gathered around.

And Chenayya repeated that he would do anything, under any conditions, for any sort of pay.

"Say it again!" the big man ordered, and another group of men came and listened to Chenayya.

That evening, he went back to Mr. Ganesh Pai's shop and shouted at the other workers, "I've found a real job, you motherfuckers. I'm out of here."

The Tamilian boy alone cautioned him. "Chenayya, why don't you wait a day and make sure the other job is good? Then you can quit here."

"Nothing doing, I quit!" he yelled, and walked away.

The next day at dawn, he was back at the front gate of the factory. "I want to see the manager," he said, shaking the bars of the gate for attention. "He told me to come today."

The guard, who was reading the newspaper, looked up fiercely.

"Get out!"

“Don’t you remember me? I came—”

“Get out!”

He waited near the gate. After an hour, it opened, and a car with tinted windows pulled out. Running alongside the car, he banged on the window. “Sir! Sir! Sir!” A dozen hands seized him from behind; he was shoved to the ground and kicked.

When he wandered back to Mr. Pai’s shop in the evening, the Tamilian boy was waiting for him. He said, “I never told the boss you quit. I knew you’d come back.”

The other pullers did not tease Chenayya that night. One of them left him a bottle of liquor, still half full.

The rain fell down without stop. Chenayya rode his cycle through the rain, splashing down the road. He wore a long white plastic sheet over his body, like a shroud.

When it rained, the road turned into mud; the mud turned into wet clay. This was the most dangerous time for a puller. Wherever the road had broken up into a pothole, he had to slow down to avoid tipping his cycle-cart over.

The pain in his neck began biting again. I can’t go on like this, he thought.

From across the road, one of the other pullers, a young one, drove up side by side with Chenayya. “Have to deliver this fast and get back,” he said. “Boss man said he’s depending on me to get back within an hour.” He grinned, and Chenayya wanted to ram his fist into the grin. God, how full of suckers the world is, he thought, counting to ten to calm himself down. How happy this idiot seems to be, to destroy himself with overwork. You baboon! he wanted to shout. You and all the others! Baboons!

He put his head down, and suddenly it seemed a great strain to move the cart.

“You’ve got no air in one tire!” the baboon shouted. “You’ll have to stop!” He grinned one of his baboon grins, and rode on.

Stop? Chenayya thought. No, that is what a baboon would do: not me. Putting his head down, he pedalled on, forcing his flat tire along: Move, motherfucker!

Move!

And the cart, slowly and noisily, its old wheels and its uncoiled chains rattling, moved.

It is raining now, Chenayya thought, lying in his cart that night, with the plastic sheet over his head. That means we are through half of this year. It must be June or July. I must be nearly thirty now.

He pulled the sheet down and lifted his head to relieve the pain in his neck. He could not believe his eyes: even in this rain, some motherfucker was flying a kite! As if taunting the heavens, the lightning, to strike them.

In the morning, he went to the lottery seller. A boy, a total stranger, was sitting at the desk, kicking his legs merrily.

“What happened to the old fellow?”

“Gone.”

“Gone where?”

“Gone into politics.”

The boy described what had happened to the old seller. He had joined the campaign of a B.J.P. candidate for the corporation elections. His candidate had won. Now he sat on the veranda of the politician’s house. If you wanted to see the politician, you paid him fifty rupees first.

“That’s the politician’s life—it’s the fastest way to get rich these days,” the boy said. He flipped through his pieces of colored paper. “What’ll you have, uncle? A yellow? Or a green?”

Chenayya turned around without buying any of the colored papers.

Why, he thought at night, can’t that be me—the fellow who goes into politics to get rich? He did not want to forget what he had just heard, so he pinched himself sharply around the joint of his foot.

It was Sunday again. The free day. Chenayya woke up when it got too hot, then brushed his teeth lazily, looking up to see if kites were flying in the sky. The other pullers were going to see the new Hoyka temple that the Member of Parliament had opened, just for Hoykas, with their own Hoyka deity and Hoyka priests.

“Aren’t you coming, Chenayya?” the others shouted at him.

“What has any god ever done for me?” he shouted back. They giggled at his recklessness.

Baboons, he thought, as he lay down in his cart again. Going to worship some idol in a temple, thinking it’ll make them rich.

Baboons!

He lay with an arm over his face. Then he heard the tinkling of two coins.

“Come over, Kamala!” he called out to the prostitute, who was in her usual spot, playing with coins. When he taunted her for the sixth time, she snapped, “Get lost, or I’ll call Brother.”

At this reference to the don who controlled the hookers in this part of town, Chenayya sighed, and turned over in his cart.

He thought, Perhaps it is time for me to get married.

He had lost contact with all his relatives. Plus, he did not want to get married. Bring children—into what future? That was the most baboonlike thing the other pullers did, he thought: to procreate, as if to say they were satisfied with their fate, they were happy to replenish the world that had consigned them to this task.

There was nothing in him but anger, and if he married he thought he would lose his anger.

As he turned around in his cart, he noticed the welt on his foot. He frowned, trying hard to remember how he had got it.

The next morning, on the way back from a delivery, he took a by-route and went to the office of the Congress Party on Umbrella Street. He crouched on the veranda of the office and waited for someone important-looking to come out.

There was a sign outside, with an image of Indira Gandhi raising her hand, and the slogan “Mother Indira will protect the poor.” He smirked.

Were they completely nuts? Did they really think that anyone would expect a politician to protect the poor?

But then he thought, Maybe this woman, Indira Gandhi, was someone special; maybe they were right. In the end, she was shot dead, wasn’t she? That seemed evidence to him that she had wanted to help the world. Suddenly, it seemed that the world did have some good-hearted people who wanted to help the poor. He felt he had cut himself off from all of that with his excessive bitterness.

He saw a man in loose white clothes coming in, followed by two or three hangers-on. Chenayya rushed up to him and got down on his knees, his palms pressed together.

For the next week, whenever he knew his number was not going to be called for a while, he went around on his cycle, sticking up posters of the Congress candidates in all the Muslim-dominated streets of the town, shouting, “Vote for Congress—the party of Muslims! Defeat the B.J.P.!”

The week passed. The elections were over, the results were declared. Chenayya rode his cycle to the Congress Party office, parked it outside, went to the door-keeper, and asked to see the candidate.

“He’s a busy man now—just wait out here a moment,” the doorkeeper said. He put a hand on Chenayya’s back. “We would never have won except for your work, Chenayya. The B.J.P. defeated us everywhere else, but you got the Muslims to vote!”

Chenayya beamed. He waited outside the Party headquarters and watched the cars drive up and disgorge rich and important men, who hurried in to see the candidate. He saw them and thought, This is where I will wait to collect money from the rich. Not much. Just five rupees from everyone who comes to see the candidate. That should do.

His heart beat with excitement. An hour passed.

Chenayya decided to go into the waiting room, to make sure that he, too, got to see the man when he finally came out. There were benches and stools in the room; a dozen other men were waiting. Chenayya saw an empty spot and wondered if he should sit down. Why not? He had worked, too. He was about to sit down on a bench when the doorkeeper said, “Use the floor, Chenayya.”

Another hour passed. Finally, the doorkeeper came to him with a box full of round yellow sweets. “Take one.”

Chenayya took a sweet, almost put it in his mouth, and then put it back. “I don’t want a sweet.” His voice rose quickly. “I put up posters all over this town! Now I want to see the big man! I want to get a job with—”

The doorkeeper slapped him.

I am the biggest fool here, Chenayya thought, back in his alley. The other pullers were lying in their carts, snoring hard. It was late at night, and he was the only one who could not sleep. I am the biggest fool. I am the biggest baboon here.

On the way to his first assignment the next morning, there was another traffic jam on Umbrella Street—the biggest one he had ever seen.

When he finally got to his destination, he found that the owner of the house was a European. He insisted on helping to unload the furniture, which confused Chenayya terribly. The whole time, he spoke in English, as if he expected everyone in Kittur to be familiar with the language.

He held his hand out at the end, shook Chenayya’s, and gave him a fifty-rupee note.

Chenayya was in a panic—where was he expected to get change? He tried to explain, but the European just grinned and closed the door.

Then he understood. He bowed deeply to the closed door.

Buying four lottery tickets, he broke the note into forty-six one-rupee notes; stuffing forty of them near his groin, he gave the six to the shopkeeper.

He came back with a bottle of liquor, and he saw the other cart pullers staring at him.

“Where did you get money for that, Chenayya?”

“None of your business.”

He drank the bottle dry, then went over to the liquor shop and bought another bottle. When he woke the next morning, he realized he had spent his money on liquor.

All of it.

He put his face in his hands and began to cry.

He went to drink water from a faucet.

He could not switch off his mind. Like the faucet, it dripped. Think, think, think. He passed a statue of Gandhi, and he began thinking again. Gandhi dressed like a poor man—he dressed as Chenayya did. But what did Gandhi do for the poor?

Did Gandhi even exist? he wondered. These things—India, the River Ganga, the world beyond India—were they even real?

How would he ever know?

Only one level of society was lower than him: the beggars. Just one slide, and he would be down with them, he thought. One accident. And that would be him. How did the others deal with this? They did not. They preferred not to think.

When he stopped at an intersection that night, an old beggar put his hands in front of Chenayya. He turned his face away and cycled down the road to Mr. Ganesh Pai’s shop.

The next morning, he was going over the hill again, with five cardboard boxes piled up one above the other in his cart, thinking, Because we acquiesce. Because we do not dare leave with that wad of fifty thousand rupees—because we know other poor people will catch us and drag us before the rich man. Because we dare not kill the rich, out of fear of their police. We poor have built the prison around ourselves.

In the evening, he lay down exhausted. The others had built a fire. Someone would come and give him some rice. He was the hardest worker, so the boss man had let it be known that he ought to be fed regularly.

He saw two dogs humping. Life is so simple for them, he thought. It was a kind of release. There was no passion in them at all. That is all I want to do right now. Hump something. Instead of humping, I have to lie here, thinking.

The prostitute sat on the steps. “Let me come up,” he said. She did not look at him; she shook her head.

“Just one time. I’ll pay you next time.”

“Get out of here, or I’ll call Brother,” she said. He gave in; he bought a small bottle of liquor, and he began drinking.

Why do I think so much? My thoughts are like thorns inside my head; I want them out. And even when I drink they’re there. I wake up in the night, my throat burning, and I find all the thoughts still in my head.

He was awake, lying in his cart. He was sure he had been hounded by the rich even in his dreams, because he woke up furious and sweating. Then he heard the noise of coitus close to him. He saw another cart puller humping the prostitute. Right next to him, it went on. He wondered: Why not me? Why not me? He knew the fellow had no money—so she was doing it out of charity. Why not me?

Every sigh, every groan of the coupling pair was like a chastisement. Chenayya got off his cart, looked around till he found a puddle of cow dung on the ground, and scooped up a handful. He flung the shit at the lovers. There was a cry; he rushed up to them, and dabbed the whore’s face with shit. He put his shit-smeared fingers into her mouth, and kept them there, even though she bit them; the harder she bit the more he enjoyed it, and he kept his fingers there until the other pullers descended on him and dragged him away.

One day, he got an assignment that took him out of the city limits, into Bajpe; he was delivering a doorframe to a construction site.

“There used to be a big coconut grove here,” one of the construction workers told him. “But now that’s all that’s left.” He pointed to a distant clump of green.

Chenayya looked at the man, and asked, “Is there any work here for me?”

On his way back, he took a detour off the road and went out to the patch of green. When he got there, he left his bike and walked around; seeing a high rock, he climbed up and looked at the trees around him. Yes, he could live out here. If only he had a little food, what more would he want? His aching muscles could be rested. He put his head down on the rock and looked at the sky.

It was nighttime when he cycled back. To get to the shop faster, he took the route down over Lighthouse Hill.

As he was descending, he saw a red light and then a green light attached to the back of a large black cloud moving down the road.

It was the elephant he had seen earlier, only now there were red and green traffic lights tied with string to its rump.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he shouted to the mahout.

He shouted back, “Well, I have to make sure no one bumps into us from behind at night—there are no lights anywhere!”

Chenayya threw his head back and laughed—it was the funniest thing he had ever seen, an elephant with traffic lights on its rump.

“They didn’t pay me,” the mahout said. He had tied the beast to the side of the road and was chatting to Chenayya. He had some peanuts with him, and he didn’t want to eat them alone, so he was glad to split a few with Chenayya.

“They made me take their kid on a ride, and they didn’t pay me. You should have seen them drink and drink. And they wouldn’t pay me fifty rupees, which was all I asked.”

The mahout slapped the side of his elephant. “After all that Rani did for them—”

“That’s the way of the world,” Chenayya said.

“Then it’s a rotten world.” The mahout chewed a few more peanuts. “A rotten world.” He slapped the side of his elephant again. Chenayya looked at the beast.

The behemoth’s eyes were gazing sidelong at him; they glistened darkly, almost as if they were tearing. The beast also seemed to be saying, “Things should not be this way.”

The mahout pissed against the wall, turning his head up, arching his back, and exhaling in relief, as if it were the best thing he had done all day.

Chenayya kept looking at the elephant, its sad wet eyes. “I am sorry I ever cursed you, brother,” he said aloud as he rubbed its trunk.

The mahout stood near the wall he had just pissed on, watching Chenayya talking to the elephant, a sense of apprehension growing within him.

Outside the ice-cream shop, two kids were licking ice creams and staring right at Chenayya. He was sprawled on his cart, dead tired after another day’s work.

“Don’t you see me?” Chenayya wanted to shout out over the traffic. His stomach was grumbling; he was tired and hungry, and there was still an hour before the Tamilian boy from Mr. Ganesh Pai’s shop would bring out dinner.

One of the kids across the street turned away, as if the fury in the cart puller’s eyes had become obvious. But the other one, a fat light-skinned fellow, stayed put, sliding his tongue up and down his ice cream, staring nonchalantly at Chenayya.

Don’t you have any shame, any sense of decency, you fat fuck?

He thought he would black out in anger, and turned around in his cart and began talking aloud to calm his nerves.

“Maker of all men, why have you . . .”

His gaze fell on the rusty saw lying in his cart. “What stops me now,” he said aloud, “from crossing the street and slashing that rich motherfucker into shreds?”

Just saying it made him feel more powerful.

A finger began tapping on his shoulder. If that’s the fat motherfucker with his ice cream, I will pick up that saw and slice him in two, I swear to God.

It was the Tamilian assistant from the store.

“Your number has come up, Chenayya.”

He took his cart to the door of the store, where the boy handed him a small package wrapped in newspaper and tied with white string.

“It’s to the same place you went a while back to deliver the TV table. Mrs. Engineer’s house. We forgot to send the bonus gift, and she’s been complaining.”

“Oh, no,” he groaned. “She doesn’t tip at all. She’s a complete cunt.”

“You have to go, Chenayya. Your number came up.”

He cycled there slowly. At every intersection and traffic light, he looked at the saw in his cart.

Mrs. Engineer opened the door herself. She said she was on the phone, and told him to wait outside.

“The food at the Lions Club is so fattening,” he heard her saying. “I’ve put on ten kilos in the past year.”

He grabbed the saw and went in. She had her back to him; he saw the whiteness of her flesh peeping out in the space between her blouse and her skirt. He went closer.

She turned around, then covered the receiver with her hand. “Not in here, you idiot! Just put the bonus gift on the floor and get out!”

He stood confused for a moment.

“On the floor!” she screamed at him. “Then get out!”

He nodded, and dropped the saw on the floor and ran out.

“Hey! Don’t leave the saw in here!”

He ran back, picked up the saw, and left the house, ducking low to avoid the neem-tree leaves. He tossed the saw into the cart: a loud crash. The bonus gift . . . where was it? He grabbed it, ran into the house, left it somewhere, and slammed the door.

There was a startled meow. A cat was sitting up on a branch of the tree, watching him closely. How beautiful its eyes were, he thought. This wonderful creature was part of that world, like a small jewel that had fallen off the throne, a hint of a world of beauty beyond his knowledge and reach.

He stretched out his arms for it, and it came to him.

“Kitty, kitty,” he said, stroking its fur slowly. It wriggled about in his arms, restless already.

Somewhere, I hope, a poor man will strike a blow against the world, Chenayya thought. Because there is no god watching over the world. There is no one coming to release us from the jail in which we have locked ourselves.

He wanted to tell all this to the cat; maybe it could tell it to another cart puller, the one who would be brave enough to strike the blow.

He sat down by the wall slowly, still holding on to the cat and stroking its fur. Maybe I can take you along, kitty. How would he feed it? It had found some way to survive here, this cat; it was better off for being left on its own, so he released it again. He sat with his back to the wall and watched the cat move around, padding cautiously up to a car and then slinking under it. He was craning his neck to see what it was doing down there when he heard a shout from high above. It was Mrs. Engineer, yelling at him from the top of her mansion: “I know what you’re up to, thug—I can read your mind! You won’t get another rupee from me! Get moving!”

He was not even angry; he knew she was right. He had to go back to the store. His number would come up again soon. He got on his cart and pedalled.

There was a traffic jam in the city center, and Chenayya had to go over Lighthouse Hill again. Traffic was bad here, too. It moved a few inches at a time, and then Chenayya had to stop mid-hill and clamp his foot down on the road to hold his cart in place. When the horns began to sound, he rose from his seat and pedalled; behind him, a long line of cars and buses moved, as if he were pulling the traffic along with an invisible chain♦