

The Sultan's Battery

- Aravind Adiga

The Sultan's Battery, which appears on the way towards Salt Market Village, is one of the prime tourist attractions of Kittur.

He walked fast towards the white dome of the Dargah, a fold-up wooden stool under one arm, and in the other a red bag with his album of photographs and seven bottles full of white pills. When he got to the Dargah, he walked along the wall, without paying any attention to the long line of beggars along the wall: the lepers who were sitting on rags, the men with mutilated arms and legs, the men in wheelchairs and the men with bandages covering their eyes, and the one creature, with little brown stubs like a seal's flippers where he should have had arms, a normal left leg, and a soft brown stump where he should have had a second leg, who lay on his left side, twitching his hip continuously, like an animal getting galvanic shocks, and intoning, with blank, mesmerised eyes: "Al-lah! Al-laaaah! Al-lah! Al-laaaah!"

He walked past this sorrowful parade of humanity, and went behind the Dargah.

Now he went between the vendors squatting on the ground in a long line that extended for half a mile. He passed rows of baby shoes, bras, T-shirts bearing the logo "New York Fucking City", fake Ray-Ban sunglasses, fake Nike shoes and fake Adidas shoes, and piles of Urdu and Malayalam magazines. He spotted an opening in between a counterfeit shoe-seller and a counterfeit bra-vendor, and unfolded his stool there, and put a glossy black sheet of paper with gold lettering on the stool.

The golden words read:

RATNAKARA SHETTY, SPECIAL INVITEE, FOURTH PAN-ASIAN CONFERENCE ON SEXOLOGY, HOTEL NEW HILLTOP PALACE, NEW DELHI

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The young men who had come to pray at the Dargah, or to eat lamb kebabs in one of the Muslim restaurants, or simply to watch the sea, began making a semicircle around Ratna, watching, as he put down on the stool a mauve photo album, and the seven bottles of white pills. With grave ceremony, he then rearranged the bottles, as if their position had to be exactly right for his work to begin. In truth, he was waiting for more onlookers.

They came. Standing in pairs or alone, the crowd of young men had now taken on the look of a human Stonehenge; some with their hands folded on a friend's shoulder; some standing alone; and a few crouched by the ground, like fallen boulders.

All at once, Ratna began to talk. Young men came quicker, and the crowd became so thick that it was two-or three-persons deep at each point; and those at the back had to stand on their toes to get a partial glimpse of the sexologist.

He opened the album, and let the young men see the photos in plastic folders inside. The onlookers gasped.

Pointing to his photographs, Ratna spoke of abominations and perversions. He described the consequences of sin: he demonstrated the passage of venereal germs up the body, touching his nipples, his eyes, and then his nostrils, and then closing his eyes. The sun climbed the sky, and the white dome of the Dargah shone more brightly. The young men in the semicircle pressed against each other, straining to get closer to the photographs. Then Ratna went in for the kill: he closed the book, and held up a bottle of white pills in both of his hands. He began shaking the pills.

"With each bottle of pills you will receive a certificate of authenticity from Hakim Bhagwandas of Daryaganj in Delhi. This man, an experienced old doctor, has brought wisdom from Egypt, and has used his scientific equipment to create magnificent white pills that will heal all your ailments. Each bottle costs just four rupees and fifty paise! Yes, that is all you pay to atone for sin and earn a second chance in this life! Four rupees and fifty paise!"

In the evening, dead-tired from the heat, he got on to the 34B bus with his red bag and fold-up stool. It was packed full at this hour: so he held on to a strap hanging from the ceiling of the bus and breathed in and out slowly. He counted to 10, to get his strength back, then put a hand into the red bag, and took out four green brochures, each of which had an image of three large rats on the cover. He held the brochures up high in one hand, in the manner of a gambler holding up his cards, and spoke at the top of his voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen! All of you know that we live in a rat race, where there are few jobs, and many job applicants. How will your children survive, how will they get the jobs you have? For life in this day and age is a veritable rat race. Only in this booklet will you find thousands of useful general knowledge data, arranged in question and answer form, that your sons and daughters need to pass the civil service entrance examination, the bank entrance examination, the police entrance examination, and many other exams which are needed to win the rat race. For instance" - he took a quick breath - "The Mughal empire had two capitals; Delhi was one of them. Which was the other? Four capital cities of Europe are built on the banks of one river. Name that river. Who was the first king of Germany? What is the currency of Angola? One city in Europe has been the capital of three different empires. Which city? Two men were involved in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Nathuram Godse was one of them. Name the other man. What is the height of the Eiffel Tower in metres?" Holding the pamphlets up with his right hand, he staggered forward, bracing himself as the bus bumped over the potholes of the road. One passenger asked for a pamphlet, and handed him a rupee. Ratna walked back, and waited near the exit door; when the bus slowed down, he dipped his head in silent thanks to the conductor, and got off.

He walked into his house, hung his shirt on a hook next to the door, kicked the door open, and walked in scratching his armpits and hairy chest. He sat down on a chair, exhaled, said "O Krishna, O Krishna," and stretched his legs out; even though they were in the kitchen, his daughters knew at once that he had come in - a powerful odour of stale feet went through the house like a warning cannon shot. They dropped their women's magazines, and rushed at once to their work. The wife was making noise with some plates and pots.

After he had smoked his second beedi, and his body had visibly relaxed, she built up the courage to come near: "The astrologer said he would come at nine."

"Uhm."

The radio was turned on; he put it on his thigh, and slapped his palm on his other thigh to the beat of the music, humming constantly, and singing the words whenever he knew them.

"He's here," she whispered. He turned the radio off, as the astrologer came into the room and folded his palms in a namaste.

Sitting down on his chair, he took off his shirt, which Ratna's wife hung for him on the hook next to Ratna's own shirt. While Ratna's wife and the girls waited in the kitchen, the astrologer showed Ratna the choice of boys.

He opened an album, in which he had black and white photos; he gazed at the faces of boy after boy, who looked back at him in tense, unsmiling portraits. Ratna scraped one with his thumb. The astrologer slid it out of the album.

"Boy looks OK," Ratna said, after a moment's concentration. "The father does what for a living?"

"Owns a firecracker shop in Car Street. A very good business. Boy inherits it."

"His own business," Ratna exclaimed, with genuine satisfaction. "It's the only way ahead in the rat race: being a salesman is a dead end."

His wife dropped something in the kitchen; then coughed; then dropped something else.

"What's going on?" he shouted.

A timid voice said something about "horoscopes".

"Shut up!" Ratna shouted. He jerked the photo at the kitchen - "I have three daughters to marry off and this damn bitch thinks I can be choose?" - and he threw the photo back into the astrologer's lap.

The astrologer drew an X across the back of the photo.

"The boy's parents will expect something," he said. "A gesture."

"Dowry," Ratna gave the evil its proper name in a soft voice. "Fine. I've saved money up for this girl." He breathed out. "Where I'll get dowry for the next two, though, God alone knows."

Gritting his teeth in anger, he turned to the kitchen and shouted.

The next Monday, the boy's party turned up. The younger girls were made to go around with a tray full of lemon juice, while Ratna and his wife sat in the drawing room. Rukmini's face was whitened by a thick layer of Johnson's baby powder, and streams of jasmine ran through her hair; she plucked the strings of a veena and recited a religious song, while looking out the window at something far away.

The prospective groom's father, the firecracker merchant, was sitting on a mattress directly opposite Rukmini; he was a huge man in a white shirt and a white cotton sarong, with thick tufts of glossy, silvery hair sticking out of his ears. He moved his head to the rhythm of the song Rukmini was playing, which Ratna took as an encouraging sign. The prospective mother-in-law, another enormous fair-skinned creature, looked around at the ceiling and the corners of the house. The groom-to-be had his father's fair skin and features, but he was much smaller than either his father or his mother, and seemed more the family's domestic pet than the scion. Halfway through the song, he leaned over and whispered something into his father's hairy ears.

The merchant nodded. The boy got up and left. The father held up a small finger and showed it to everyone in the room.

Everyone giggled.

The boy came back, and squirmed into place between his fat father and fat mother. The two younger girls came with a second tray of lemon juice, and the fat firecracker merchant and his wife took glasses; as if only to follow them, the boy also took a glass and sipped. Almost as soon as the fluid touched his lips, he tapped his father and whispered into his hairy ear again. This time the old man grimaced; but the boy ran out.

Perhaps to distract attention from his son, the firecracker merchant asked, in a raspy voice: "Do you have a beedi, my good man?"

Searching in the kitchen for his packet of beedis, Ratna saw, through the grille in the window, the bridegroom-to-be urinating furiously into the trunk of an Ashoka tree that grew in the backyard.

Nervous fellow, he thought, grinning. But that's only natural, he thought, feeling a little affection already for this fellow who was going to be part of his family soon. All men are nervous before their weddings. The boy appeared to have done with his piddle; he shook his penis, and stepped back from the tree. But instead of walking away, he stood frozen. After a moment he craned his head back and gasped for air, like a man drowning.

The matchmaker returned in the evening to report that the firecracker merchant seemed satisfied with Rukmini's singing.

"Get the date fixed up soon," he told Ratna. "In a month, the rental rates for the wedding halls will start to -" he made an upward gliding motion with his palms.

Ratna nodded, but seemed distracted.

The next morning, he took the bus to Umbrella Street, walking past the furniture and fan shops until he found the firecracker shop. The fat man with the hairy ears sat on a high stool, in front of a wall full of paper bombs and rockets, like an emissary of the God of Fire and War. The groom-to-be was also in the shop, down on the floor, licking his fingertips and turning the pages of a ledger.

The fat man gave his son a light kick.

"This man is going to be your father-in-law, aren't you going to say hi?" He smiled at Ratna: "The boy is a shy one." Ratna sipped tea, chatted with the fat man, and kept an eye on the boy all the time.

"Come with me, son," he said, "I have something to ask you in private."

The two walked down the road, neither saying a word, till they got to a banyan tree growing near the side of a Hanuman temple. Ratna indicated that they should sit down in the shade of the tree. He wanted the boy to turn his back to the traffic, so they were staring at the temple. For a while Ratna let the young man talk, doing nothing except observe his eyes, ears, nose, mouth and neck. All at once, he seized the fellow's wrist.

"Where did you find this prostitute that you sat with?"

The boy wanted to get up, but Ratna increased the pressure on his wrist to indicate there would be no escape. The boy turned his face to the road, as if pleading for help. Ratna increased the pressure on the boy's wrist.

"Where did you sit with her? By the side of a road, inside a hotel, or at the back of a building?"

He twisted harder.

"By the side of a road," the boy blurted out; then turned to Ratna with a face about to burst into tears. "How do you know?"

Ratna closed his eyes; breathed out; let go of the boy's wrist. "A truckers' whore." He slapped the boy on the head. The boy began crying. "I only sat with her once," he said, fighting back his sobs.

"Once is enough. Do you burn when you pass urine?"

"Yes, I burn."

"Nausea?"

The boy asked what that English word meant, and said "yes" when he understood.

"What else?"

"A feeling that there is something large and hard - like a solid rubber ball between my legs all the time. And then dizziness, sometimes sickness."

"Can you get erect?"

"Yes. No."

"Tell me what your organ looks like. Is it black? Is it red? Are the lips of your penis swollen?"

Half an hour later, the two men were still at the base of the banyan tree, facing the temple.

"I beg you ..." The boy folded his palms. "I beg you." Ratna shook his head.

"I have to cancel the wedding, what else can I do now? How can I let my daughter get this disease too?"

The boy stared hard at the earth, as if he had simply run out of ways to beg. A drop of moisture on the tip of his nose gleamed like silver.

"I'll ruin you," he said quietly. Ratna wiped his hands on the back of his sarong. "How?"

"I'll say that the girl has slept with someone. I'll say that she's not a virgin. That's why you had to cancel the wedding."

In one swift motion, Ratna seized the boy's head, yanked it back, held it for a moment like that, and then slammed it against the tree. He got up and spat on the boy.

"I swear by the god who sits in the temple before us, I will kill you with my own hands if you do that."

Three months or so passed. One morning, he was back at his spot behind the white dome, shouting at the Stonehenge of worried young men, when he saw a face that made his heart stop.

Afterwards, when he was done with his talk, he saw the face again, in front of him.

"What do you want?" he hissed. "It's too late. My daughter's married now. Why have you come here now?"

Ratna folded his stool under his arm, dropped his medicines into his red bag, and walked fast. A flurry of footsteps followed him. The boy - the firecracker merchant's son - panted as he spoke.

"Things are becoming worse by the day. I can't pass urine without my penis burning hard. You must do something for me. You must give me your pills."

Ratna gnashed his teeth. "You sinned, you bastard. You sat with a prostitute. Now pay for it!"

He walked faster, and faster, and then the footsteps were gone and he was alone.

But the next evening, he saw the face again: then the quick steps followed him all the way to the bus stand, and the voice said, again and again, "help me", but Ratna did not turn round.

He got on to the bus. When the dark outline of the fort appeared in the distance, the bus slowed down and stopped. He got off. Someone else got off with him. He walked. Someone else walked behind him.

Ratna spun around and seized his stalker by his collar. "Didn't I tell you, leave me alone? What has got into you?" The boy pushed Ratna's hands away, and straightened his collar, and whispered: "Help me. I think I'm dying. Help me."

"Look here, I can't. None of those young men is going to be cured by anything I sell. Don't you get it?" There was a moment of silence, and then the boy whispered: "But you were at the sexology conference ... the sign in English says so ..."

Ratna raised his hands to the sky.

"I found that sign on the ground."

"But the Hakim Bhagwandas of Delhi ..."

"Hakim Bhagwandas, my arse! Those are white sugar pills that I buy wholesale from a chemist in Karwar; then my daughter bottles them and sticks labels on them at my house!"

To prove his point, he opened his leather case, popped a bottle open, and scattered the pills across the ground, as if broadcasting seed on the earth. "They do nothing! I have nothing for you, son!"

The boy sat down, picked up a white pill from the earth, and swallowed it. He got down on all fours, and scrambled about the black mud for the white pills, which he began swallowing in a frenzy along with any dirt attached to them. "Are you mad?"

Getting down on his knees, Ratna gave the boy a good shake, and asked the same question again and again.

And then, at last, he saw the boy's eyes. They had changed since he had last seen them; teary and red, they were like pickled vegetables of some kind. Individual blood vessels bulged and swelled large.

For several hours that night Ratna stayed awake, wriggling in his bed, and disturbing his wife. He had soliloquies with the boy, who seemed to be somewhere around his bed.

The next day, in the evening, he took the bus into the city, back into Umbrella Street. When he got to the firecracker shop he stood at a distance, with his arms folded, until the boy saw him. The two of them walked together in silence for a while, until they came to a sugarcane juice stand. As the machines turned and crushed the raw cane, Ratna said:

"Go to the hospital. They'll help you."

"I can't go to the hospital. They know me. They'll tell my father."

Ratna had a vision of that immense man with the tufts of white hair growing out of his ears, sitting in front of his arsenal of firecrackers and paper bombs.

The next day, as Ratna was folding up his wooden stand and suitcase, he saw a shadow on the ground in front of him. He went around the Dargah; he walked past the long line of pilgrims going in to pray at the tomb, and past the rows of lepers, and past the man with one leg who was lying on the ground, twitching from the hip and chanting: "Al-lah! Al-laaaah! Al-lah! Al-laaaah!"

He looked up at the white dome and stared for a moment. He went down to the sea, and the shadow followed him. A low stone wall ran around the edge of the land, and he put his right foot on it, and looked out at the sea. The waves were coming in violently; now and then there was a big crash of water against the wall, and thick white foam rose up into the air and spread out, like a peacock's tail coming up from the sea. Ratna turned around.

"What choice do I have? If I don't sell those white pills, how will I marry my daughters off?"

The boy, avoiding his glances, stared at the ground, and shifted his weight about uncomfortably.

The two of them caught the no 5 bus and took it all the way to the heart of the city, getting off near the Angel Talkies. The boy carried the wooden stool, and Ratna searched up and down the main road, until he found a large billboard of a husband and a wife standing together in wedding clothes:

HAPPY LIFE CLINIC

Consulting Specialist:

Doctor MV Kamath MBBS (Mysore), B Mec (Allahabad), DBBS (Mysore), MCh (Calcutta), G Com (Varanasi). SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

"You see those letters after his name?" Ratna whispered into the boy's ear. "That's the man for you. He's a real sexologist."

In the waiting room, they saw a half dozen lean, nervous men sitting on black chairs, and one married couple, in a corner. Ratna and the boy sat down in between the single men and the couple. Ratna looked curiously at the men; all of them avoided his glance. These were the same fellows who came to him - older, sadder versions; men in whom venereal disease had taken a deep bite, who had thrown bottle after bottle of white pills at it, to find no improvement - who were now at the end of a long journey of despair, that led from his booth at the Dargah, through a long trail of other hucksters, to this doctor's clinic, where they would be told the truth at last.

One by one, the lean men went into the doctor's room, and the door shut behind them. Ratna looked at the married couple, and thought - at least they are not alone in this ordeal. At least they have each other.

Then the man got up to see the doctor; the woman stayed back. She went in later, after the man had left. Of course they are not husband and wife, Ratna told himself. When he gets this disease, this disease of sex, every man is alone in the universe.

"And who are you in relation to the patient?" the doctor asked. They had taken their seats, at last, at his consulting desk. There was a giant chart showing a cross-section of a man's urinary and reproductive organs on the wall behind the doctor, and Ratna looked at it for a moment, and then said: "His uncle."

After examining the boy's genitals, the doctor moved to a washbasin with a mirror attached over it; he pulled a cord, and a tube-light flickered to life over the mirror.

Letting the water run in the basin, he gargled and spat, and then turned the light over the basin off. He took care of janitorial duties around his office - wiping a corner of the basin with a palm, then lowering a blind over a window, casting a glance into the state of his green plastic waste-basket. When he ran out of things to do, he returned to his desk, looked at his feet, and practised breathing for a while.

"His kidneys are gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone," the doctor said.

He turned to the boy, who was trembling so hard that his seat had begun to totter.

"Are you a homosexual?"

The boy covered his face in his hands. Ratna answered for him.

"Look, he got it from a prostitute, there's no sin in that. He's not an unnatural fellow. He just didn't know enough about this world we live in."

The doctor nodded. He turned around, to the image of the male reproductive system behind him, and put his finger on the kidneys, and said: "Gone."

Ratna and the boy came together to the bus station the next day, at six in the morning, to catch the bus to Manipal, to see if there was a good doctor at the Medical College who might help them out. A man in a blue sarong, sitting on the bench in the station, told them that the bus to Manipal was always delayed by a few minutes, maybe 15, maybe 30, maybe more. "Everything's been falling apart in this country since Mrs Gandhi got shot," the man said, and kicked his legs about merrily. "Buses are coming late. Trains are coming late. Everything's falling apart. We'll have to hand this country back to the British or the Muslims or the Russians or someone, I tell you. We're not meant to be masters of our own fate, I tell you."

It was late on the way back as well. The two of them had to stand in the midst of the thick crowd returning to Kittur for over an hour, until a pair of seats emptied near them. Ratna slid into the window seat and motioned for the boy to sit down next to him. "We got lucky, considering how packed the bus is," Ratna said with a smile.

Gently, he disengaged his hand from the boy's. The boy understood too; he nodded, and took out his wallet, and threw five-rupee notes, one after the other, on Ratna's lap.

"What's this for?"

"You said you wanted something for helping me."

Ratna thrust the notes into the boy's shirt pocket. "Don't go and get an attitude now. I have helped you out so far; and what did I have to gain from it? It was pure public service on my part, remember that. We aren't related: there's no blood in common between us."

The boy said nothing.

"Look! I can't keep coming around with you as you go from doctor to doctor. I've got my daughters to marry off, I don't know where I'll get the dowry for -"

The boy turned, plunged his face into Ratna's collar-bone and burst into sobs; his lips rubbed against Ratna's clavicles, and began sucking on them. The passengers stared at them, and Ratna was too bewildered to say anything.

It took another hour before the outline of the black fort appeared on the horizon. The man and the boy got off the bus together. Against the black rectangle of the fort, Ratna had a vision, momentarily, of a white dome, and he heard a throng of mutilated beings chanting in unison. He put a beedi in his mouth, struck a match and inhaled.

"Let's go," he told the boy. "It's a long walk from here to my house."