



**The Queen** (extract)

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With one foot curved around a knot between two ropes, the other on the window ledge of the poor wretch who lived in that part of the building, Mani fished for a box of matches under his filthy lungi. If he had a wife, he thought, he would ask her to wash the lungi. He lit his beedi and dragged on it with pleasure. If he had soap, he thought, he could wash it himself. He looked up and down the unfinished scaffolding, assessing the work that lay in front of him. Thanks to cut-out business, he could afford soap when he finished this job. Perhaps he could afford a wife by the time the CM was re-elected. He looked at the street, sizing it as though he were sizing up a prospective wife.

It was a small street. It did not have the typical length and breadth, or the volume of traffic preferred by the cut-out aficionados. The job was a two man job, no more. They were erecting the poles slowly, taking their time tying each piece of rope over each joint. After half a day's work, the scaffolding was one storey high. That was fast enough, decided Mani. It wasn't as if they got paid more if they worked faster.

Mani noted with mild satisfaction the handprint of dust he'd just left on the whitewashed wall beside the window. The man in the flat to whom the window belonged had pulled the shutters shut and hung a gunny sack to block himself in, and to block the likes of Mani from getting a look in. No matter, Mani told himself. If there was anything to see in this life, he had seen it already.

The sun was overhead. It was no time to be high up on the poles. What he needed was a cricket hat. Like that one there. But, even with the protection of the hat, the man underneath, new to the job, was struggling. The poles he was tying together collapsed for the second time. Plus, he was no monkey. He needed practice.

'Eda Mutthu,' Mani called to the man in the cricket hat.

Mutthu, who wore filthy, frayed trousers, and a yellow t-shirt that said 'Hello' in English, looked around to see where the voice was coming from. He finally spotted Mani, half a yard above. His hat was too low on his head. It covered his eyes.

'Want a beedi?' asked Mani.

Mutthu shook his head, and produced a packet of Goldflakes from his pocket. Mani climbed down and they both sat on the steps of the building, ignoring the dog within that had been barking all morning and now, sensing them so close, howled with renewed vigour.

'Ssss,' hissed Mutthu, fanning himself with his hat. 'What heat, what heat.'

'But good work, no? There are two more to do in the coming week, and who knows, perhaps more?'

'What I don't understand is,' said Mutthu, jabbing a finger in the air like some intellectual, 'why they want to build such an enormous cut-out on this small street.'

Mani surreptitiously looked at the hat which now rested on Mutthu's knee as he surveyed the street. It had a label in the front, a logo embroidered on it with the letters 'MCC. Madras Cricket Club.' Mani licked his lips as desire flamed within him.

'The traffic here isn't worth two of Ambur,' said Mutthu.

'Rumour is,' said Mani, bending towards Mutthu's ear, 'that the MP who is erecting this one has some information that the leaderess will take this road tomorrow as a short cut.'

'Or for security purpose,' said Mutthu, looking delighted.

'Yes, you catch my point,' added Mani in English, unable to keep his eyes from straying again to the hat.

'Tell me, big brother,' said Mutthu, leaning back against the door and letting the Goldflake smoke swirl away from him, 'how long have you lived here, since you left your village?'

The dog started throwing itself against the door in a frenzy of fury. Mani leaned back also, and said, 'Ha, twenty years now, or more. Came with dreams in my eyes. . .'

'To be in the movies.'

'Yes. Not all of us get there, of course. But it has been a good life. I have three autographs from Sathya sir, and one from PKB that I have framed and hung next to the Lord Murugan. From his very last film, mind.'

Mutthu sat up with surprise. 'Did you speak to him? Touch him? Did you act in the film?'

'Oh yes,' said Mani, waving a depreciative hand in front of him. 'I was in two crowd scenes. The glory days.'

'The glory days, indeed. No one talks of him nowadays, eh?' Mutthu looked like a man with something on his chest. 'There is only one great leader,' he said. He looked around as if fearing to be overheard, although they were alone except for the mad dog. 'It is all about the leaderess now, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Mani, cautiously.

'She doesn't even mention him in speeches anymore.'

'Yes,' said Mani, nodding. It was true.

'Have you noticed the posters?'

'Yes.'

'And the cut-outs?'

'Yes.'

‘No more PKB. Just the leaderess, all on her own, and the two leaves symbol. These big big cut-outs.’

‘To be fair,’ said Mani, ‘it is the ministers that are soaping her by putting up the cut-outs. Look how big their names are in the corner. All so she will know who built it when she passes by.’ One thought tailed into another. He would buy soap that evening.

‘Yes, but she can see them for what they are, can’t she? She should feel, shouldn’t she, that it is a bit much, and tell them to control themselves. She is surrounded with jugs and lids that clang at her every utterance.’

‘Who can tell what she thinks?’

‘With all the noise these jaalras are making, she is not hearing the pulse of the common people.’

‘Well,’ said Mani, ‘that is enough politics for one day. Come. The boss wants to see the head in place by the end of the day.’

‘Say,’ said Mutthu as they got to their feet. ‘What would you ask for one of your autographs?’

‘The hat,’ said Mani instantly.

‘PKB’s autograph for this hat?’ said Mutthu, his eyes enormous pools of joy.

‘No, no. I wouldn’t exchange my life for PKB’s autograph.’ Reverence for the great, dead man coursed through him.

‘Oh.’

‘But I will give you one of Sathya’s.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Mutthu, and placed his hat on his head, flicked its brim, and pushed the chin strap in place.

Before climbing back up on the poles, Mani gave the door a good kick, and the dog started up again.

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