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## INDRA SOUNDAR RAJAN

Indra Soundar Rajan draws his inspiration from the panoply of local deities of Tamil Nadu, the strange legends that surround them, and the complex histories of the various kingdoms that have existed here. He has woven stories around these themes to produce not only hundreds of novels, but also a large body of writing for television, including the wildly popular serial *Marma Desam* (“Land of Mystery”) and the newly launched *Yamirukka Bayamein* (“Why Fear When I Am Here”).

*The Palace of Kottaipuram*, one of his all-time bestselling novels, was originally serialized in weekly installments in *Anantha Vikatan*, with suspenseful endings to make sure the reader picked up the next issue. The chapter breaks here reflect the original divisions.

## THE PALACE OF KOTTAIPURAM

கோட்டைப்புரத்து வீடு (1990)

✎ 1 ✎

THE PLANE SWOOPED DOWN like a huge metal bird. What a sight! It landed on the runway, turned its sharp beak, sped down the tarmac, and came to a smooth halt about fifty metres from the control tower of the tiny Madurai Airport.

Of the passengers coming down the stepladder, one stood out: Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathan, known to his friends as Visu.

The regal characteristics of the whole Kottaipuram clan were evident in his clothes, his colour, the way he carried himself. Watching him stride through the foyer holding his gray briefcase, Karwar Karunakaran, his clerk, brimmed with pride. He welcomed Visu warmly as he stepped out of the airport.

“*Namaskaram*, oh Raja!”

In return, Visu merely nodded distractedly, as his eyes scanned the parking lot, searching for someone. Disappointed, he turned back to the karwar.

“Are you looking for someone, Raja?”

“Karunakaran, my name is Visu,” he snapped, irritated. “You’re more than twice my age! Why do you insist on using these pompous titles? Please call me by my name.”

“But that would be disrespectful, sir! The grandeur of Kottaipuram lies in the way your family has retained the esteem of its subjects. Whatever you may say, you are a member of the royalty, and I am a mere karwar, a clerk, forever loyal to you. Why, when even Thirumeni Devar, the eldest man in the *samasthanam*, calls you ‘Raja,’ how can I afford to be presumptuous?” Karunakaran guided him towards the parking lot. Mallaya, the driver, gave a low bow and took Visu’s briefcase.

In the parking lot, amidst several Marutis and Ambassadors, was a Vauxhall bearing the bright yellow flag of the princely state of Kottaipuram. Even as the driver held the rear door open, Visu climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Please, Raja,” Karunakaran begged him. “If your grandmother the maharani comes to know that I let you drive, I’ll lose my job. I can already hear her shouting at me. ‘How many times do I have to tell you?’ she’ll yell. ‘Don’t you have any brains?’”

“Karunakaran,” Visu cut in sternly, “as long as you are in this car with me, I don’t want to hear another word from you. In fact, if you do say another word, I’ll speak to my mother and make *sure* you lose your job. Also, try to learn to call me Visu. If you really can’t manage that, at least call me *Thambi*.”

He sounded genuinely angry, and Karunakaran and Mallaya got into the back seat without another peep. Visu started the car.

Just as he turned onto the main road, a moped, as if it had been waiting for the car, sped right up to them, touched the bumper, and came to a halt.

On the moped, clad in tight jeans and a T-shirt, her hair in a ponytail and a slim gold chain with a locket around her neck, sat a young girl, about twenty—her figure like a sandalwood statue.

Visu cut the engine at once and called out excitedly, “Hi Archana!”

“Sorry I’m late, Visu,” said Archana, getting off the moped. “I had some trouble with my vehicle.”

Visu was already out of the car. “I was hoping to see you the second I got off the plane.”

She replied with a gleeful giggle. Her lightly polished lips and the neat row of shining pearly whites behind them captivated Visu’s attention. Her elegant looks reflected a high-class upbringing.

In the car, Karunakaran was looking concerned. Mallaya had already broken into a sweat. “What’s happening, sir? There seems to be something going on between him and this girl...” the driver whispered softly to the karwar. The karwar silently pushed him aside, and they went back to listening in on the exchange.

Archana’s bout of laughter ended with a jiggle of her firm breasts. “So how was the Bangalore trip? Was it a success?” she asked, throwing her arm around Visu’s shoulder in a manner that confirmed the karwar’s and the driver’s suspicions.

Visu gave an elaborate nod to indicate that it had, indeed, been a success.

*This is a deep love; they’re as close as copulating serpents,* thought the karwar. His initial shock that Visu had somehow managed to get involved with a girl—in spite of the tight watch they kept over him—now gave way to panic.

Visu had completed his engineering degree just a month ago. His exam results were yet to be announced. He had already started a small industrial tool manufacturing business in Madurai, and had made the trip to Bangalore to purchase machinery.

The Samasthanam of Kottaipuram was a princely state situated forty miles south of Madurai. Visu was the younger son of the late Ramanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathan, the sixth raja of Kottaipuram. Gajendran Rupasekaran Kottaipurathan, the elder son and seventh raja, took care of the estate.

The two sons had little in common. The elder brother had never stepped outside the boundaries of Kottaipuram, and remained tied to his traditional roots, while Visu, the younger brother, loved to travel and had a scientific, rational outlook.

“Visu, I have happy news for you,” chirped Archana.

“What?”

“My father is coming to your samasthanam. He wants to tell your mother and grandmother about our relationship. Finally, after four years, no more secrets!” Not noticing as Visu’s face turned pale, she went on, “Why aren’t you saying anything? You asked me to come to the airport because you had something important to discuss. What is it, Visu?”

Visu gave her a dark look. His throat was rapidly drying up.

“What is it?” Archana asked again, gently nudging him.

“Archana...” Visu began hesitantly. “How much do you love me?”

“Right up to the sky,” was the prompt reply.

“Suppose you came to know that not long after our marriage, I would die... Would you still...?”

She did not wait for Visu to finish. She reacted as though he had just jabbed sharp needles into her ears. “What are you talking about?” she demanded, choked with tears.

“I’m sorry, Archana. I had to know how deep your love is. I had to ask you this,” consoled Visu. Archana lifted her teary face up to him.

“I don’t care if we never get married, Visu. You’ll always be my husband anyway. Don’t you know that?”

“Thank you, Arch...” he said, kissing both her hands.

Archana looked at the sky. “Visu, it’s getting late. You haven’t yet told me what you wanted to discuss,” she reminded him.

“Tomorrow,” replied Visu.

Archana realized that nagging him would be useless. “Fine!” she said, and halfheartedly kickstarted her moped. The Vauxhall followed her down the main road.

They drove in the same direction for some distance, Archana often turning back to wave at Visu. At a fork, she took the road going into the city, and Visu turned onto the one leading to Aruppukkottai.

In the back seat, both the karwar and the driver sat quiet and tense. After some time, the karwar said to Visu, “Thambi, please don’t mistake me, but do you think what you are doing is right?”

“What?”

“Being in love with that girl...”

“Who said that being in love is a crime? Archana’s not just some girl I picked up off the street, Karwar. She’s the daughter of a *crorepathi*.”

“Maybe so, Thambi! Indeed, she looks like a freshly bloomed flower. And shouldn’t she be blessed with flowers all her life, to wear in her hair as a happily married woman, with a *thali* around her neck and a *pottu* mark on her forehead?”

Visu brought the car to a sudden halt and turned around in his seat.

“Karwar... Do you really believe, like everyone else in the samasthanam seems to believe, that I will die when I turn thirty?”

“My beliefs are well founded on past events, aren’t they? Has any man in your family survived past his thirtieth birthday?”

At this, Visu fell fearfully quiet.

The karwar cut into the silence. “I’m not saying this because I oppose your love—only because I want the best for you, and for that girl.”

Hearing the concern in the karwar’s words, Visu looked up at him.

“Karwar, can this curse actually be real?” he asked in a hushed tone. “I can’t fully comprehend it. We’re living in a modern age when a determined man can achieve anything he wishes for. This isn’t Dvapara Yuga or Tretha Yuga anymore, when magical curses had power!”

He put the car into gear again, as the karwar stared at him unwaveringly.

“Whatever age we live in, Thambi, there are always things beyond a man’s capacity for understanding. The day when people stop believing in curses and the repercussions of their sins, this whole world will become a cremation ground. Of course, it’s unfortunate that *you* will have to pay the price for the sins committed by your forefathers...”

“You know, no one has ever even told me what this curse is all about.”

“You will come to know when the time is right. It’s bad enough that no male member of your family makes it past thirty. What’s even worse

is that your family will never have a girl child. And there is something else I must tell you, Thambi...”

“What, Karwar?”

“If God wills it, this curse could be lifted today. Then you would be free to marry Archana without any misgivings!”

“Is that right? And how might that be done, Karwar?”

“Today your elder brother, Gajendran Rupasekaran Kottaipurathan, the ruling prince of the samasthanam, turns thirty. Thirumeni Devar has been responsible for watching over him closely ever since he turned twenty-nine—you’re aware of that. Your elder brother owes Devar his life. If only he can make it through today! Then all the pujas that have been performed, all the alms that have been given this year will have served their purpose. Right now, your mother and your sister-in-law, Valaiyambikai, are in the temple of your family deity, Vengai Ponni Amman. They made the unanimous decision to spend these last few tense hours in the presence of the idol. Vengai Ponni Amman is a very powerful goddess. Perhaps the curse will lose its potency in Her presence...”

Engrossed in Karunakaran’s words, Visu drove on autopilot, the nerves in his forehead taut. The tamarind trees along the roadside gave way to lush green fields on either side. Goats and cows grazed on the few drier patches.

“The maharani sent me to the airport to bring you straight to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple,” said the karwar. “Otherwise, Mallaya would have come alone.”

Visu looked at Karunakaran thoughtfully. It was already half past five. As if acknowledging the hour, the sun was setting in the west.

The ancient temple *gopuram* rose out of the dense forest. Birds flew in and out of its every crevice. The old bronze *kalasam* at the top of the gopuram reflected the magic light of the setting sun, looking like something from an alchemist’s dream. Nearby, under the thick beech trees, were the hutments of the samasthanam’s tribal population, the Noorukudi. Their clothes spoke of their hard toil in the fields. For centuries, they had worked on the thousands of acres around the temple, planting seeds,

rearing the saplings into giant trees, and converting the whole area into a semi-woodland, while living in their tiny thatched huts and watching over the idol of the goddess Amman. Their loyalty to the history and traditions of the princely state was etched in deep lines on their faces.

In front of the small *garbagraham*—the sanctum sanctorum of the temple—was the hundred-pillared *mandap*, in the centre of which was the *darbar*. There were three women seated there on the silk carpet. First was Pandiammal, the maharani, grandmother of Visu and Gajendran. Next was Divyamangalam, Pandiammal's daughter-in-law and the rajas' mother. Last was Valaiyambikai, Gajendran's consort, who was full-term pregnant. Though all three were decked in nearly enough jewellery to fracture their dainty necks, they were also steeped in sorrow.

Opposite them was Raja Gajendran, seated on a chair, dressed in a silk *veshti*, a shirt, and a gold chain, his chest soaked in sweat, the fear of impending death lurking behind his eyes. At his side stood the doctor, Sampathkumar, ready to protect Gajendran from any ailment—but would he be able to protect him from fate?

On the other side of the raja stood Pandikutti, one of the Noorukudi. The sinews of his shoulders and chest shone as if he had molded them from iron. Even his little finger was strong enough to lift a brick, hot from the kiln, and hurl it into the air.

*“Thirumeni... My son Gajendran must never be taken from me!”* The words had been spoken exactly a year ago, on Gajendran's twenty-ninth birthday, by his mother Divyamangalam to Thirumeni Devar, the old guru of the samasthanam. *“He must be saved at any cost! My lineage must survive for many centuries, and flourish. We have to challenge the curse. I have faith in Vengai Ponnai Amman, whom I worship every day. You are the only one with whom I can entrust this responsibility. You will do this for me, won't you?”*

And that was why the ancient Devar had planted both the doctor and Pandikutti right beside the raja. They watched over Gajendran constantly, alert as whip snakes, not allowing him out of their sight. If he had to leave the palace for any reason, they went along with him.

Television, video, every form of entertainment was provided to him in his room; he even had a food-taster. He lived the cloistered life of a royal prisoner. He hated it—but tolerated it, for he wanted to live!

The line of his ancestors who had not made it past the age of thirty flashed before his eyes.

*One slipped on the staircase and cracked his skull. Another fell from a horse which ran amok. Yet another hanged himself for no apparent reason. One was killed when a heavy tree branch inexplicably broke from a tree and fell on his head. The next suffered a sudden heart attack. Not one of them made it through the whole three hundred and sixty-five days of their twenty-ninth year! Here I am... I have lasted this long. I have just a few more hours to go. Will I be the first in the family to beat the curse?*

At the exact moment that these thoughts were racing through Gajendran's mind, a cobra was crawling stealthily into the stone drain that led to the garbagraham...



The serpent was almost seven feet long. It slunk into a dark corner of the garbagraham, raised its head a foot above the ground, and spread its hood. The two tall *kuthuvillaku* lamps at Vengai Ponni Amman's foot were lit, their ten points shining.

The goddess was dressed in splendour, seated majestically on an open-mouthed stone tiger.

In front of the idol were silver plates with betel leaves, areca nuts, flowers, fruits, silk skirts, and garlands of ylang-ylang flowers. The snake eyed all this, unblinking, and then coiled up in its corner. Ponnambalam, the priest, stood outside the garbagraham, dressed in a green silk turban and a red silk veshti, as per the tradition of the samasthanam, ready to conduct the puja.

Next to the priest was Thirumeni Devar, the state elder. Though nearly a hundred years old, he looked no more than seventy. Only the slack, fleshy jowls, like those of a turkey, signaled his true age. His red eyes; his sharp, hooked nose; the large round *kumkum* pottu on his forehead, and the black dot below it; his bare chest; his red veshti, worn in a