VISHAL MARKANDEY

A BIG MAN SOMEDAY

ON SUNDAYS, when Mother was off from work, I tried to teach her the English alphabet. I had myself only just learned it at school—late for my age the teachers said—and was eager to show off my new knowledge.

I would hold her hand to trace the letters, and she would laugh: "My boy is teaching me English." But then she got the letters all wrong when she tried to write them herself. She mixed up her M's and W's, her C's and her G's; her I's couldn't stand up straight and leaned as if about to fall; her O's skewed wildly, ready to roll off the page.

Finally, she gave up and said she was too old to learn.

"If only I had gone to school when I was a child," she often said. "But the one in my village was only for boys. My father tried to teach me at home, but even that came to nothing."

"Why? What happened?" I would ask, although I knew the story.

"He died of a heart attack; I was only six. I had been learning the Hindi and Telugu alphabet, but now there was no one to teach me. I soon forgot what I had learned."

And then she would add: "I don't want you to end up illiterate like me. If you do well at school, you'll be a big man someday. With your own house. Your own car."

"A big house like the landlady's?"

"Even bigger."

But she wouldn't come to my school. Not even on special days of award ceremonies, or student plays and dramas, when parents were invited. "We must be careful," she said. "I don't want them to know about me at your school."

Still, some boys at school found out about her. They said certain things about her. I came home from school that day with bruised knuckles and scraped knees, my school shirt torn at the front and three buttons missing.

I told Mother I had fallen during a game of cricket.

WE LIVED THEN in one of those little houses with corrugated tin roofs, that huddled near the bend of the Musi in the old quarter of

Hyderabad. The houses are still there, I've heard, still rented by women who work in the area.

Even the landlady's house—where she lived with her grown son—still stands, I am told. Abandoned now, and falling apart. It was an old place even then, with crumbling yellow walls, grimy windows, a long front balcony that sagged at one end.

When you entered our house, the first thing you saw was a thick wooden beam in the middle of the front room. The only furniture in the room, an old white cane sofa with faded green cushions, was mostly hidden behind the beam. The beam was there to support the ceiling, Mother said, and not to be touched. I always went wide around it, to get to the sleeping room at the back.

The roof of the sleeping room leaked when it rained. But it was not too bad. The water only came down in drops and almost never fell on the beds. We would place the red plastic bucket below the leak and listen to the slow *tup…tup…tup…tup* as we went to sleep.

I asked Mother once what clients may think of a leaking roof, a bucket on the floor. She said I shouldn't worry. Her business was thriving in those early days. Plenty of men came to visit. Some came for a few hours, some left within an hour, some even stayed overnight. I was banished from home when Mother had a visitor.

One of the visitors, a short, elderly man with stooping shoulders and a mostly bald head, came at least once a week. He usually came on Saturdays, in a long black car, and always stayed the night. His driver would drop him off in the evening and return the next morning to pick him up.

Mother prepared anxiously for his visits, making sure the house was clean, the beds freshly made, the red bucket put away. In the mirror she repeatedly checked her lipstick, her hair, her face.

I asked her one day who he was.

"A senior officer at the Secunderabad municipal office," she replied.

"Have you known him for long?"

"Too long," she said, a faint smile at the corner of her lips. "But he's always been helpful and I'm grateful for that. Your school admission—I couldn't have done it myself and no one else would help. But one call from him to the school principal took care of it."

MOTHER WORE bright-red lipstick and dressed her long dark hair with white jasmine flowers when a client was expected. She lined her

eyes with black *kajal* and wore her best sari—a light purple one that swirled around her, silver peacocks dancing on the border. Before the man came she would cry "Hide! Hide!" and I would scurry to a patch of land beside our house.

Perhaps this land had once been a garden. Now there was nothing but dry grass gone to seed, a spreading old mango tree, tall shrubs of oleander with pale-pink flowers. The flowers had a smell that was soft and sweet, with just a hint of bitterness.

I would hide behind the mango tree, digging my fingernails into its rough bark, watching for the visitor. If he stayed late into the night, or overnight, I was sent to sleep in the storage room at the back of the landlady's house. Mother had to pay the landlady extra for that.

The storage room, where I spent so many nights, was long and narrow, with a low ceiling and a concrete floor. There were no windows; it stayed dark even during daytime. The room was empty except for three tall gray metal cans standing in a row to one side. They held kerosene for the landlady's cooking stoves.

Mother had made a mattress for me, stuffed with old clothes that were cut and torn and turned into rags: her worn saris, parts of a water-stained bedsheet, even an old school shirt of mine. The mattress was rather thin, and when I lay on it in the storage room at night I could feel the hard floor beneath. Rats scurried around the room in the dark and I imagined them crawling over me. Sometimes I jolted awake, convinced they were nibbling my toes, jerking my legs to drive them away.

The smell of rats, pungent and musty, was often strong in the room. And always in the room there was the smell of kerosene. My head often ached after spending the night.

Adjacent to the storage room were the landlady's bathroom and latrine. I was forbidden from using those facilities, so I only used them when no one was there to see me. Yadamma had seen me there sometimes when she came to clean the bathroom, but I didn't think she would tell the landlady.

MORNINGS, YADAMMA worked at the landlady's house. By the time she came to sweep and mop our floors, wash our dishes and clothes, it was late afternoon and I was already home from school. After she had finished her work for the day, I often sat with her beneath the mango tree. Those were hot days of summer but the evenings were cool and sometimes there was even a light breeze.

She would sit on the ground, leaning her head back against the tree, while I sat nearby on a sturdy low branch. She would tell me about the latest films she had seen—she went to the cinema almost every week. I would tell her about life at school, the friends I had, the cricket matches we played—often exaggerating how well I played the sport, even hinting falsely that I was to be made captain of the junior cricket team.

I didn't know what it was, but more and more those days I found myself looking at her, my eyes drawn to her with a will of their own. Only now I noticed how small and thin she was, with big dark wide-apart eyes. She must have been about twenty then but looked much younger. Her black hair, gleaming red where sunlight glanced from it, would get loose from its braid and fall on either side of her face. The way it dangled free left me breathless.

But I didn't say anything to her. She would only have laughed at me. After all I was just a boy. I couldn't compare to her men friends, to Nagesh the milkman, or to Ramiah, who came in the evenings to sell jasmine flowers and gave her some for free. I couldn't compare to others I didn't even know. I saw how she was with those men, how she laughed with her head thrown back, looking at them out of the corner of her eye and then looking quickly away.

Sometimes in the evenings, one of the men would come and wait outside our house, and she would leave with him when her work was done.

"We're going to the cinema tonight," she would tell Mother.

"Cinema again? Be careful of these men or you'll get in trouble," Mother would say.

"Yes, yes, I know."

THERE WAS the time Mother asked Yadamma when she might get married. I was in the sleeping room, supposedly studying but really listening to them talk as Yadamma washed utensils in the kitchen.

"I've already been married," she said. "But I left my husband."

"Why?" asked Mother.

"His moods! One moment he was happy, deliriously happy, singing tunelessly to me, lifting me up and whirling me around. But then for the smallest reasons he would get angry—if there wasn't enough salt in the dal I had made, if the bedsheets were still wrinkled after I had made the bed."

"What would he do?"

"He never lifted a hand on me . . . but he would slap his forehead over and over with his palm. He would shout that his life was ruined the day he married me. That hard slapping sound. I used to hide away from it, my heart fluttering, like a bird in a trap. I can still hear that slapping sometimes."

I lightly slapped my forehead with my palm, curious to hear the sound. Where would she hide herself, I wondered, and did she still feel afraid when she heard that sound?

"Did you tell your parents?" asked Mother.

"They were glad just to be rid of me. They still had to marry off my two younger sisters."

Mother made a small sound. Perhaps she was clearing her throat.

"I stayed on for months," said Yadamma "Hoping life would get better. I never knew which side of him I'd have to face—the overly happy one or the wildly angry one. One day I felt I couldn't live like that anymore. I packed a few things in a suitcase and took the evening bus home."

"What did your parents say?"

"They wouldn't let me in the house," said Yadamma, her voice rising. "They said, 'What will people think if you leave your husband? No one will marry your sisters.' They told me to go back to him. I stood outside calling out to them but they wouldn't answer."

"Your sisters?"

"What could they do? And it was getting dark. I went back to the bus station, took the first bus that was leaving. I wasn't going back to that man."

"So where did you go?"

"The bus took me across the Tank Bund, all the way to Charminar. Soon after that I met the landlady and started working here. She had a different suggestion . . . But I couldn't."

USUALLY YADAMMA gave Mother the day's gossip as she went about her work—about goings on at the landlady's house, about other ladies, about her men friends. But today she was silent.

I was supposed to be studying in the sleeping room but was wondering why she had not said anything. She and Mother were in the front room now, and there was only the swishing sound of the jhadu broom as Yadamma swept the floor.

Suddenly, she said, "I may have a baby."

"I told you to be careful," said Mother in a low voice.

"I don't know what to do."

"You know."

"But I always wanted to be a mother."

"Do you know where to go?" asked Mother.

"I've heard of someone."

"A doctor?"

"I don't know. I hear it is expensive—I'll have to take a loan."

The next day Mother gave her a month's salary in advance, but Yadamma still had to get a loan for the rest of the payment. Then she was gone.

Gone to have her baby, I thought, and asked Mother: "When is Yadamma having her baby?"

"Where did you hear this?"

"I heard you talking to her."

"You shouldn't be listening to us. And she's not having a baby."

"Then why is she gone?"

"That's enough. Don't talk about her."

When Yadamma returned a week later, Mother wouldn't let her lift heavy objects. I had to carry the red bucket, full of freshly washed clothes, to the line at the back of our house where they hung to dry in the sun.

Was anything different about Yadamma? Perhaps she moved a little slowly, perhaps a little carefully. Or maybe it was just my imagination.

Her laugh was gone.

THE DAY Yadamma returned, I slept restlessly at night, often coming half-awake, dreaming of her laughing, of rain falling and water dripping into the red bucket. Then I woke up, the sound of rain still in my ears.

It was still dark and it was raining. Overnight, the monsoon had arrived. I lay in bed listening to the rain, to water falling into the bucket—Mother had placed it below the leak sometime during the night.

In the morning the rain stopped, the sun emerging tentatively from behind gray clouds that still hung low in the sky. I went to sail a paper boat on a large puddle—I called it our pond—that had formed near the mango tree.

The landlady was taking her morning walk around her properties, lifting the lower hem of her red and gold sari to keep it from getting wet. She was a tall woman, taller than mother, her dark-brown hair

gathered in a large bun at the back of her head. A ropelike gold necklace hung almost to her waist, swinging and glittering with every step. Her large diamond earrings were catching fire in the sun, flashing red and blue, yellow and white.

Recently she had expelled one of our neighbors for missing a rent payment. It must have happened while I was at school; I had not seen the eviction, had only heard Mother and Yadamma discussing it. But now my heart beat fast and I bent my gaze to my boat, to avoid the landlady's eyes.

It wasn't long after that, perhaps just a few days later, when we learned that the landlady was getting a car. Yadamma came to work at our house that afternoon, and I opened the front door for her. She was standing outside, hands on her hips.

"Have you heard?" she asked, looking at me with bright eyes. "The landlady bought a car. I can't wait to see it."

"Did you know she was buying a car?" I asked.

"No, she was keeping it quiet. I would love to ride in a car. Like a queen."

"Is it here?"

"They've gone to get it now. The woman has everything. That necklace. Those earrings—if only I could wear them just once. And now a car."

After she finished the day's work at our house, I went with Yadamma to look for the car. We found it parked in front of the landlady's house, in the shadow of the balcony.

It was a small yellow car. It looked old and tired. The front door on the passenger side was a darker shade than the rest of the car. The landlady's son, Mohan Babu, was taking its pictures with a little plastic camera. He was almost a full-grown man, with short legs, a long torso, and a thick dark moustache.

"I've never been in a car," said Yadamma, smiling at Mohan Babu.

"Never?" he said. "Let me take you for a drive."

He didn't offer to take me along. Only gave me a wink as he opened the front passenger door for her, and Yadamma lowered her head to climb slowly inside.

When she returned from the ride, her eyes were shining and she wouldn't stop smiling.

"What is it like to be in a car?" I asked.

"It was like heaven. It moves so smoothly."

It didn't move smoothly. I had seen it bumping and grunting along the road.

Then she began to laugh. "But I didn't know how to open the door to get out. I was fumbling with it, and Mohan Babu leaned across from the driver side to push it open."

"Leaned across you?"

She was still laughing. "I was in a car."

My stomach tightened as I watched her laugh. I looked again at the car standing smugly nearby and wanted to give her something special too. But I had nothing to give.

That night I stole Mother's lipstick.

All through the next day the lipstick stayed in my pocket. It rained all day, had only now stopped as night approached. Yadamma and I lingered beneath the mango tree, savoring the faint smell of earth in the air.

I gave her the lipstick then, my mouth suddenly dry as I watched her face.

"For you," was all I could say.

"Why?" she asked, holding the lipstick in her hand. "Where am I going to wear this?"

I didn't know what to say.

"It is your mother's, isn't it?"

Again, I had no answer.

Suddenly she began to laugh: "You! What am I to do with you?"

Before she went home for the night, she gave the lipstick to Mother, saying she had found it under the beds while sweeping the floor.

As she was leaving, she looked back at me and started laughing again.

THE NEXT MORNING, having spent the night in the storage room, I stopped at the landlady's bathroom. There on a small ledge, near an open soap dish, lay her diamond earrings winking at me.

Quickly I snatched them up, stuffed them in my pocket, and ran home. I don't know why I took them. It was just an impulse. Only after I got home, did I think of giving them to Yadamma.

But even before I could give them to her, the landlady accused Yadamma of stealing. She began to shout at Yadamma, calling her a thief. Mother and I ran to see what the commotion was. Other ladies came running. Soon there was a small crowd in front of the landlady's house.

The landlady stood in the middle of the crowd, her feet wide apart.

"I took off my earrings during my bath and forgot them," she cried. "I just went to the bathroom to look. They're gone."

I slipped a hand in my pocket, ran a fingertip over the hard earrings. I was about to take them out to give them to the landlady. But then I imagined the look on Mother's face and my hand went still.

"Yadamma was supposed to clean the bathroom. I'm sure she took them. Search her," cried the landlady.

No one moved.

"Was it to pay for dropping your baby?" shouted the landlady, glaring at Yadamma. "Is that why you took my earrings?"

"What baby?" someone in the crowd asked.

"She came to me for a loan," the landlady said. "To drop her baby. Of course I said no."

Several ladies turned to look at Yadamma, but Yadamma was looking at the ground.

Mohan Babu was not in the crowd. His car stood nearby and sunlight was bouncing from its windshield into my eyes. I wanted to jump on the hood of the car. To shout that I had taken the earrings. To fling them at the landlady.

But then I thought she would surely evict us. My throat went dry, and I didn't say anything.

"I'm calling the police," said the landlady, moving toward her house.

"Don't call the police here," some of the ladies pleaded.

The landlady didn't call the police, but she dismissed Yadamma from service. She had Mother dismiss Yadamma. She said she never wanted that thief to set foot on her property.

Yadamma stood silent, and it seemed she was looking at me. I thought she might say something. But when the landlady told her to leave, she went away without a word.

I was watching her leave and she turned back toward me, raised her hands to her ears, and let them fall to her sides. I looked at Mother and the other ladies, but none of them had noticed Yadamma's quick movement.

THAT NIGHT I couldn't sleep. I lay in bed, calling myself a coward, a miserable coward, for having said nothing, for letting Yadamma take the blame. Sometime during the night, it began to rain. I got up and placed the red bucket below the leak. But we found in the morning that the leak had widened, and the bucket had overflowed.

As Mother mopped the sleeping room floor with a rag, I asked if she knew where Yadamma lived.

"Why?" she asked.

"We should go to her. See if she's all right after what happened."

"She'll be fine. She'll find some work."

"It's not about the work."

"What else is it about?"

"Why didn't you say something when the landlady accused her?"

"And bring her anger on myself?" she asked. "Where would we go if she turned us out?"

I lifted the red bucket full of murky brown water and carried it to the kitchen to empty it in the drain. Mother followed behind, wet rag in hand.

"Yadamma turned out to be a thief," she said with a sigh. "I thought I knew her."

"She's not a thief, Mother."

"Foolish girl, they're not even real diamonds. She won't get anything for them."

"How do you know they're not real?"

"The way they sparkle."

As it grew dark that evening, I went to the mango tree. The earrings were still in my pocket. I could almost see Yadamma, a vague presence, sitting on the ground leaning her head back against the tree. I stayed close, seated on my low branch, till it was almost fully dark. Then I dug a shallow hole in the ground, at the place where she used to sit. I buried the earrings there, patting the soil flat and scattering fallen leaves over the spot.

FOR DAYS after that, whenever there was a knock on our door, I would run to open it with a lurching heart, hoping to find Yadamma standing there.

But the days passed and weeks passed and she didn't return. The rains ended; winter came; the New Year came. Still Yadamma didn't come.

By the time it was summer, I had grown taller than Mother. She had begun to age. Lines appeared on her forehead, fanned out from the corners of her eyes, ran from the sides of her mouth down to her chin. Her shoulders slumped as if they had lost a long battle.

The visits from clients grew less and less frequent, although her special client, the municipal officer, still came at least once a week.

Now I no longer hid behind the mango tree like a child when a visitor

came. I had fled blindly one day when a client was expected, run without looking, till I reached Musi's bank, and I had walked there, back and forth, wishing the current would carry me away. From that day, whenever Mother had a visitor, and there were not many now, I went to the river to walk by its side.

Mother worried about running short of money, as fewer visitors came. She stopped dressing her hair with fresh jasmine flowers, wouldn't wear lipstick even when a client was expected, often wore the same sari for days.

As the days went by she grew increasingly subdued, sitting for hours on the sofa in the front room with downcast eyes and pursed lips. Finally, one day, she said we didn't have money for house rent.

She went to the landlady to ask for more time to pay rent. She was gone for almost an hour, and when she returned she wouldn't say anything. She sank heavily on the sofa, staring at the beam. I asked several times what the matter was before she said the landlady had given us eviction notice.

"Here, read it yourself," she said, handing me a sheet of paper, folded several times over into a little square, that she untied from a knot at the loose end of her sari.

The notice gave us a month to vacate the house.

I had been standing near Mother as I read the notice. I reached out for her and lowered myself beside her on the sofa.

"That municipal officer . . . could he help?" I asked.

"I won't beg for money."

"He helped with my school admission."

"That wasn't about money."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," she said, placing a hand across her mouth.

WITHOUT TELLING MOTHER, the next day I went to the municipal office in Secunderabad, where her client worked. The office was in a wide five-story building of pale-red stone, a long flight of steps leading up to its entrance. From every floor, rows of tall dark windows stared at me as I went up the steps to the guard sitting on a stool at the building entrance.

I meant to ask where I could find the client. But then I remembered I didn't even know his name or what he did. I went into the building anyway and looked around, hoping to find him.

But it was no use. The building was full of endless stone corridors and offices with closed doors. I didn't know where to look for the client or if he was even in the building. I walked those corridors for hours, going up and down stairs from floor to floor, hoping that I might see him. Toward the end of the day, when the office workers began to leave, I decided to wait outside the front of the building.

I sat at the base of the steps that ran up to the building entrance as daylight faded and a cold wind began to blow. Doubts came then: I won't find him like this; why would he even talk to me. What a fool I was to come here. But as I was thinking of leaving, his familiar long black car drew up in front of the building.

More time passed; it was almost dark now. Finally he emerged from the building, carrying a briefcase. As he was making his way down the steps, I went up to him.

"Forgive me, sir," I said. "May I ask you for a favor?"

"Do I know you?" he asked, raising bushy white eyebrows and peering at me in the dim light.

"I'm the son of the lady you visit."

"What lady? You've mistaken me for someone else."

We stood on the steps looking at each other. The wind was turning colder.

He gave a long sigh. "So. You're the son."

"I need a job, sir. Mother's business isn't doing well. We don't even have enough money to pay rent."

"She hasn't said anything to me," he said, moving down the steps toward his car.

I rushed after him. "The landlady just gave eviction notice. We only have a month."

He stopped and turned toward me. "Aren't you still in school?"

"I can't worry about school now. I have to do something. She won't ask you herself . . ."

He looked at me for a long moment. "Let me see what I can do. Come back in a week."

WHEN I WENT back the next week, he said there was a watchman job at a government office in Narayanguda. I thanked him and said I would apply for it right away.

"They won't just give you the job," he said. "But I could talk to the right people."

Almost three months passed. Several times I went to the office in Narayanguda to ask about the job, but no one would even talk to me. I thought of going back to Mother's client but didn't want to ask him again.

And then one day, the enquiries clerk at the Narayanguda office directed me to another clerk who, without even glancing at me, handed me a sheet of paper. It simply said I was to start work in two weeks.

"Mother, I found a job," I cried when I got home.

"How? What kind of work?"

"A government job. What a miracle, isn't it?"

I didn't mention that her client had helped.

"But what job is it?"

"A watchman job . . . it's a start."

"You haven't finished school yet."

"School! I've studied enough, Mother."

"You only had a few months to finish."

She didn't say anything more, but a sadness came into her eyes that I had not seen before.

NOW THAT I was to start working, I asked Mother to close her business.

"I've been looking forward to this day," she said. "Perhaps I could even learn to read now—I may not be too old for that."

There was no one to tell that she had closed her business except the municipal officer. Before he came to visit for the last time, I left the house for my walk by the river. I was at the riverbank for only about half an hour when I saw Mother come walking slowly toward me.

She came and stood beside me and in silence we watched the river. A paper boat went slowly by, but perhaps I had only imagined it. She didn't say anything about her client, and I didn't ask.

"Come," she finally said, taking me by the arm. "Let us go home."

All the way back she held my arm with a fierce grip, letting go only when we got home.

We prepared to move to Narayanguda, close to the office where I was to work. No one would know of us there.

Before we left, I went to the land beside our house. I went past the oleander shrubs. They stood tall, the sweet-bitter smell of their flowers in the air. I went to my old friend the mango tree and sat on its branch as I had done so often. The spot where I had buried the earrings was at

my feet. Grass had grown and withered there, and it was now no different from the rest of the land.

SHE WAS LEARNING the English alphabet. Was now writing some of the letters on her own, without me holding her hand. We were even working on words; she hoped to read the newspaper someday.

That morning I was getting ready for work while she looked at the paper—she wore reading glasses now, round ones with black plastic frames, her eyes magnified behind them.

"Here's an *at*," she said, pointing at the paper, "and here's a *the*. But what are these big words? Will you read them out to me?"

"I'll be late for work, Mother," I said, glancing at the wristwatch I had recently bought for myself. "I'll read them to you in the evening."

I was busy at work all day and didn't even think of what she had asked. But in the evening, when I came home and knocked at the door, she didn't come to open it. I called out to her again and again, and finally asked a neighbor to help push on the door till the inside latch broke. The door sagged inward and we stumbled in after it.

How long had she lain on the floor, clutching the newspaper, eyeglasses fallen beside her? The neighbor rushed out to call a doctor, but I knew it was too late. I picked her up and laid her down on the white cane sofa.

A heart attack, the doctor said, when she finally examined her. I remembered then that her father too had died of a heart attack—when she was only six—and was grateful that she had stayed with me a little longer.

I see her in dreams sometimes. She still tells me I'll be a big man someday. And sometimes Yadamma appears too, under the mango tree, laughing in the rain. I reach out for her but she walks away, turning back to look at me, holding her hands up to her ears.