

ANATOLIA

and Other Stories

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For Mehnaaz

Who Makes It All Possible

DUBAI

After thirty-five years of living in Dubai as a guest worker, Ram Pillai, prone more often now to a weariness of the bones, if not yet an ache of the heart, is leaving Dubai. He must bid good-bye, before the end of the week, to his greatest benefactors. Some of them have died, and others wouldn't remember him. But most are still around. The former Bedu might have lost all visible traces of estrangement from the city of lights and arguments, the once-green Emirati with an eagerness to spout off knowledge of "the way the British used to manage things" might no longer show such insecurity, and the abaya-wearing native women might walk with a little more pep in their step and a little more stiffness, but you can't tell Ram that in all the ways that matter, Dubai isn't still a shy bride, a virginal flower, a shadow in search of itself, and that only coaxing and coquetry work, force of any kind the banned substance in this most seductive of the Emirates.

His decision is somewhat sudden, as his friends in the labor camps have already claimed, but wasn't it always inevitable? It isn't as simple, nor as complicated, as the conviction of impending mortality. He's only fifty-five, even if the strong Gulf sun has sapped the strength out of his body and soul. His years of hard labor were few and long ago. Still, how real is his

good health? He doesn't know. He also doesn't know where he'll go back to in India. His devout father and mother, in the Kerala village he came from, are long dead. Over the decades, he's had news that his small fishing community, off the Malabar Coast, has nearly emptied; the young people have gravitated to the larger towns, much as he, in 1972, packed his belongings in a small bundle to leave for Trivandrum, resolved to quickly earn the money to pay a recruiting agent the necessary fee to secure a coveted place on the shiploads of people embarking then for the wealthy Emirates. Something tells him he must leave Dubai before he's made to; why, after decades of never having had the slightest run-in with the authorities, he should fear this, he doesn't know.

The mistakes of judgment Ram made in his youth, added to the complications of having overstayed his original two-year work permit, have long ago ceased to bother him. He has justified his silent bargain to his own satisfaction. Law and justice are abstract constructions, generalities which concrete facts usually make a mockery of. At the public library, which Ram has begun to frequent in recent years, he's become fond of Santayana. He has a difficult time understanding such philosophers, even in accessible translation, but he is more than ever convinced that self-sacrifice is not the Holy Grail orthodox belief makes it out to be. Still, Ram's past is beginning to rear its monstrous head when he least expected it, as his heart becomes less supple and his body a less wieldy instrument. If only he could tell someone! If only there were someone to unburden with! But he hasn't whispered a word of his secret to his most trusted friends. They know Ram has some leverage whereby he can remain in Dubai unmolested, in an "illegal" status, for a lifetime, but out of respect for his apparent sadness, they've observed limits in inquiring what advantage he's acquired.

Not even Friday makes Dubai really slow down; still, the traffic on Khaleej Road, heading into Al-Hamriya Port, is thinner than it is the rest of the week. Instead of taking a bus, Ram is driving today his old brown Datsun; it's rare for a worker living in the camps to own a car of any kind, but Ram has been discreet enough not to have bought a newer model, although he has enough savings to easily afford one. This way, fewer questions will be asked. Also, having a car of some kind allows him to occasionally park along the main shopping boulevards, without too many probing glances; his actual status, as a laborer of long residence, should be self-evident: he's not trying to pass himself off as one of the Indian professionals, welcome for their limitless credit cards at the shopping plazas, received by the salespeople almost as well as European and American shoppers. Also today Ram has taken a long bath, wondering if in India water will be as plentiful. The camp he lives in is so close to the city that it's almost not outside it anymore, and because it acquired water and electricity as early as two decades ago, it's debatable if it can even be called a camp. Rumors that Ram's camp will be demolished for the city's expansion needs have been rife for years; Ram has never paid attention. Workers he knows from the real camps, farther out and without any real facilities, where eight or ten to a room is common, have always kidded him about his "privileged status"; he's tried to take it in a tolerant, grandfatherly spirit.

Already, well before noon, the most devout among the Emirati worshippers are making their way to the Grand Mosque, their flowing white dishdashas starched and sparkling, their headscarves tightly tied by the black aghal. It used to be, at one of Ram's first jobs, at a construction site on Sheikh Zayed Road, near the present Golf Club, that he would sometimes accompany Muslim workers to the mosque, despite his own

Hindu origins; Islam, like Hinduism, has had little attraction for him, but it was either that or, instead of the hourlong Friday prayer break from the dusty screaming site, taking only twenty minutes for lunch at one of the hot roadside tandoors set up for Indian laborers. The mosque is the only place in Dubai where national and foreigner, citizen and guest, rich and poor, stand side by side, see each other's faces without feint or filter. In the mosque, all faces are empty of demand.

Al-Maktoum Bridge takes him to Al-Rasheed Road, off which he takes crowded side streets to get to his old friend Krishan's fabric shop in the ancient Deira district. Notices to tear down the ramshackle twenties building which Krishan's shop fronts have been issued since the time the tallest building in Dubai was a few stories high, not even easily visible from the wharves. Krishan deals with a Muslim middleman whose job it is to pay off the busybody civil servants with nothing better to do than harass honest businessmen with vain threats.

In the early years there used to be mounds of spices outdoors—ah, pungent red chilies six inches long, bright as a new bride's smile, stacked impossibly high!—but the newest and poorest of Asians now prefer to buy indoors, in the spice emporiums. Other than the occasional Western tourist, there are few resident white faces in traditional shopping districts like Deira. Over the years, the brazenness of Western visitors in such neighborhoods has visibly declined; now they act apologetically, as if they owe their presence to the sufferance of their kind hosts, speaking politely with the Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Indonesians, and Filipinos who're otherwise treated as invisible actors in fashionable Dubai.

"Memsahib," Ram says, tipping his cap, to a middle-aged European woman in a long pink dress, bargaining with a street vendor over "pearl" jewelry.

The fondness of the Westerner for expensive junk is limitless. These are the same people who patronize the Emirates' many museums, which have risen rapidly to mummify the extinction of the pearling industry, the Bedouin habitat, the obligations of kinship, as fast as these old ways of life are becoming dated. These are the type of people who spend entire days in the "heritage villages" in the Emirati hinterland, observing the feeding and milking of camels by the stern Bedu, and who can't tell that the many "forts" constructed along the Arabian Gulf, from Abu Dhabi to Ra's al Khaimah, are actually of recent construction, made to look like antiquities.

But Ram's forgiveness knows no bounds today. He is, after all, bidding farewell to the fond familiar sights. He expects whatever town he relocates to in India, perhaps after he's taken a young wife, to immerse him soon in its vastly reduced level of energy. And this isn't something entirely to regret. One gets old.

"Is brother Krishan here?" Ram asks Krishan's older son, Ganesh, inside the shop, crammed with cotton and silk fabrics in every available cranny. Ganesh seems to be trying to fix the broken cash register.

Now thirty-six, for some inexplicable reason Ganesh has always resented Ram. Krishan never brought over his wife from India, although technically, once the shop took off, and especially after Krishan set up branches in Sharjah, an easy drive to the northeast, and then in Abu Dhabi, another short drive to the southwest, his income level was high enough to qualify him to bring over family. Krishan's two sons, who came from India on work permits when they were old enough, could have had a chance to bring over Indian wives had they petitioned the government, since they do run a business; but they've chosen to remain bachelors too. Why they've done so, has never been

entirely clear to Ram, and he tries not to wonder about the unsavory possibilities, including homosexuality, which, as he understands it, is rife in the labor camps too.

“Not here today,” Ganesh says peremptorily. “In Sharjah. Fridays, always dedicated to Sharjah. Mondays and Tuesdays, Abu Dhabi. Wednesdays, he goes over to Fujairah—maybe to set up a new shop there. If you need to talk to him about anything related to the business here, he won’t know.” Ganesh stretches his chest, sturdy as a block of bricks. “Ask me. Ask me anything.”

The years of schooling in India have left little impact on Ganesh, as rough and crude as ever. Ram physically backs off. There is a smell coming from Ganesh, as of a raw animalism, that frightens Ram. He feels weak and vulnerable. “What would I ask you?”

Ganesh smiles monstrously. “I don’t have to ask *you* anything. I know you’re jumping ship. I heard already. From Mustafa, your old buddy. And Jivan. And Patel. All the Patels. Everyone knows you’re abandoning Dubai. I wonder why. Why would a man still in his prime—” Ganesh shushes Ram’s protest—“still able to earn at least a thousand dirhams a month, and no expenses, mind you, no family to support in India—why would such a man want to go to a home that isn’t a home, where there’s nothing to return to? What did India ever do for you? The future is here, man.”

“I’ve lived here long enough, haven’t I?” Ram is edgy, lost, defensive. “I was here when you weren’t yet born. I’ve seen this city grow and grow, until it’s—it’s something I hardly even understand.” Ganesh snickers, which makes Ram even more apologetic. “I’m not anybody who matters. I’ve paid for my little share of this crazy development, this gigantic construction—with blood, sweat, and tears. Do I not have the right to retire?”

“Retirement?” Ganesh spits to the side. “Is that what you’re after? I doubt it, man. What’s the real reason you’re leaving?” He becomes meditative, dismissing with a gruff wave of his hairy hand one of the shop assistants who is trying to get his attention at the door. “Everyone knows you never returned to India to renew your work permit. Not once. And you don’t have a business, like we do, to keep renewing it here. Then how have you been allowed to stay? Wave after wave of deportation drives. I’d say at least a dozen major ones since you’ve been here. There’s some mystery here, and it creates problems for me—for the community. We don’t like people who distrust others.”

“Your father trusts me well enough.”

Ganesh spits to the side again. “My father’s an old man who doesn’t know anything.”

“He’s taken good enough care of you. He owns three shops now.”

“And one more on the way. I know.” Ganesh laughs viciously. “It’s like having children...Look, I have a busy day ahead. Very busy. Come again tomorrow, if you’re still in Dubai. My father will be here to check the accounts.”

Ram’s head feels hot and heavy when he steps outside amidst the bustle of pedestrians. What a rude son! Ram’s own lack of family has never caused him to be so frustrated and angry. Perhaps it is the nature of the younger generation not to show respect as a matter of principle. Perhaps there is no real reason for Ganesh’s animosity. But what a rude young man! In all his life, Ram has never spit like a village illiterate.

He no longer feels enthusiastic about his plan to fill up all of Friday with farewell visits, to Al-Khabeesi, Al-Baraha, Umm Hureir, Karama, adjoining downtown commercial districts where his old friends, who were good to him in the difficult years, prosper as merchants. In Hor Al Anz is a shop

owned by the Lebanese Christian brothers, the Frangiehs, who welcome Ram and discuss, with all the gusto of harmed insiders, Sheikh Mo's—the ruler, Sheikh Muhammad's—follies in awarding contracts to large construction firms. The Palms, the World, Ski Dubai, Burj Dubai, these and other projects are discussed over mint tea as if the Frangiehs had a real stake in all this. Ram takes their idle resentment in good spirit, but why should he care about the devious strategies of rich builders? In Mankhool, the Naseris, Iranians, sell girls' dresses, and imagine their smart nephew, now being educated in Britain, returning to Dubai to start a joint venture in Dubai Internet City. And there are others, none of whom ever talks about leaving Dubai, for any reason. Even the worst-off among the labor camp residents, inclined to strike and riot in recent years, only want their living conditions to be improved.

The Friday prayer is in full swing. The city is on hold—as silent as it is possible for Dubai to be, although the non-Muslim workers at the innumerable construction locales are busy orchestrating their staccato clanging and banging to remind the worshipers what Dubai is all about. Ram decides to go home. His belongings after all these years are very few—mostly his spotless clothes, especially white shirts, bought at steep discounts from the better stores along Sheikh Zayed Road, after the end of the annual January Shopping Festival. His one persistent memory of India is of a secondary school teacher inviting him home for snacks and beverages to discuss ignored Malayalam writers. That afternoon it rained so hard even the boisterous children glad of the drenching went back inside their homes after a while. In the old teacher's courtyard, the leafy banana trees bent back in the lash of the rain, like old people sustaining crooked bones.

Ram stops at one of the disappearing traditional snack vendors by the Clock Tower on Abu Baker Siddique Road.

He buys a plate of fried plantains, then orders another to take home to his roommate, a Sri Lankan Buddhist who speaks only when absolutely necessary. Ram sits on the edge of the long wooden bench outside, watching the morose traffic. The desert compels human beings to keep reverting time and again to naturally slow rhythms, give up their robotic wind-up doll mannerisms. Ram feels in his pants pocket the one-way ticket to Trivandrum he's already bought. It is so silent unwanted memories return to him.

What happened was, a Sheikh ran over an old man, and Ram saw it.

He was the only one to witness the accident. At a building site which was then far from the center of the city, Ram was taking a break from operating the concrete mixing equipment. His back was giving him trouble. He'd thought his body was indestructible—hadn't he been the most athletic among his schoolmates? Was there a tree he hadn't swung from, a creek he hadn't swum in? The late afternoon prayers had been called, and workers—even Hindus and Christians—were reluctant to resume work. Just before evening prayers were called, the builder, a North Indian man who'd picked up fluent Arabic, would show up to inspect the day's work, and needlessly grill the workers about wasting materials. The hammering and buzzing were beating a nightmarish track in Ram's head. He walked a good few blocks away from the work zone, abruptly coming up against the beginnings of the endless desert. If he kept walking south, in the same direction, eventually he would collapse and die. A lonely desert death seemed at that moment a most noble one.

He heard the screech of the car—a sickening sound—and the slam of the brakes, followed by the thud of the falling body, lifted off the ground and thrown far away. He bent double, as if he were next in the line of fire. A Toyota had

whizzed past him on the dirt track— what passed for the road leading into the desert—and slammed right into the old man Ram had noticed in the periphery of his vision. Soon a Sheikh was bent over the old man, whose body lay crumpled and twisted, a sack of disjointed bones. The man lying prostrate was a Bedouin, his leathery face testament to endless years of willful soaking of the sun. He must have tended sheep, goats, camels with the gentleness of the honest caretaker, known the difference between benign and malignant nighttime desert sounds, never lived in fear of stolen property or the taxpayer's intrusion. Now he was dead. A trickle of deep red blood squirted out of the left side of his mouth. Ram found himself bending over the old man, many feet from the edge of the road. Ram's warm breath was blanketing the deep wrinkles of the man's peaceful white-haired face. The Sheikh was crouched over the dead man too.

"It is my fault," the Sheikh said in Arabic, distraught. "I admit it."

Ram looked closely at the Sheikh's face, never to forget the least of its contours for the rest of his life. He was young. The light in his eyes suggested ambition, and even the horror of the moment hadn't been able to quite extinguish it. His lips were thick, and the trace of a wart on his right cheek only lent his handsome face more character. It seemed as if time slowed down —came to a stop—as the two of them cradled the dead man's body.

"It is my fault," the Sheikh repeated.

Was he sensing his young life go up in smoke? Did he have a wife, children? He wasn't one of the princes, that was clear. If he were, he wouldn't have been so afraid. Nor was he a Bedouin, he showed too much refinement for that. He was from the intermediate merchant class, who were the real energy in the Emirates, while the princes gave the orders

and the people at the bottom performed the grunt work. Ram tried to recall how fast the car was going. It couldn't have been going too fast. The road didn't make that possible. Yet how could the Sheikh not have seen the old man? Perhaps the declining sun had blinded his eyes.

"It is no one's fault," Ram said in halting English. "His time had come. Look how old he was. It is no one's fault."

The Sheikh stared at Ram for a while, as if wondering whether to take Ram seriously. Then, with huge reluctance written over his face, he agreed, "It is no one's fault. It is Allah's will."

"Yes, Allah—Ram, God...he was a very old man."

There was no shade to move the old man under, no tree, no cover. Everything that was done from then on was bound to be disrespectful. If Ram reported the incident, whether or not the authorities pursued the truth of it, Ram would surely be thrown out of the country. To leave the dead man there was sacrilege, countenanced by no religion or code of honor. And yet what could be done with him? The Sheikh could hardly dump him in his car and bury him somewhere else. If they left him there, the vultures would devour him before morning. He deserved a decent burial—his family, if he had one, around him. If Ram didn't report it, and if it came to light that he'd wandered off for a considerable time at the same hour, he'd be in much worse trouble than mere deportation. If only there were a grove of trees, some shade, to let the dead man lie in peace, and the police notified anonymously. Yes, that was it! Someone—perhaps the Sheikh himself—could make an anonymous report in a couple of hours, when the construction workers had quit. Ram wasn't stopping to think about the morality of escape. He didn't exactly know how the blood-for-blood principle worked among the Arabs in case of accidental slaughter, but it couldn't have been good for the young Sheikh.