The Cafeday Incident

A love story in twenty-six cups

NILA VARADHAN

CHAPTER 1

The Arithmetic of Eight-Forty

There is a particular arithmetic to being unemployed in a city that assumes you are not.

Aravind Selvan had worked it out over eleven weeks. A bus from Ramanathapuram to Kamaraj Road cost fourteen rupees. A second bus home in the evening, another fourteen. That left him, on the budget he had set himself, with exactly seventy-two rupees a day for everything else, and a filter coffee at Cafeday cost forty.

Forty rupees bought him a table for three hours. Nobody had ever told him this. It was simply true, the way it is true that if you sit still long enough in a place, the place stops noticing you.

He left the house at eight-fifteen every weekday with his laptop bag on his shoulder and his shirt ironed the night before, because his mother watched from the veranda until he turned the corner. Vasanthi Selvan had watched her son leave for work for six years. She did not know that the firm he left for — Kalyan Structural Consultants, third floor, above a tyre showroom — had shut its doors on the twelfth of June and that the accountant had wept while handing out the last cheques.

Aravind had not told her. He had meant to, the first evening. Then she had made *paal payasam* because it was a Friday, and the moment had gone past like a bus he had not raised his hand for, and after that every day made the telling slightly more impossible, until the not-telling became its own full-time occupation.

So: eight-fifteen. The 47C to Kamaraj Road. And at eight-forty, the glass door of Cafeday, which stuck slightly on its bottom hinge and had to be lifted as you pushed.

He had learned to lift it without thinking.

* * *

Cafeday sat in the wrong half of a good street. To the north, past the signal, the road ran up towards the new IT park where young men in lanyards ate seventy-rupee sandwiches without looking at the price. To the south lay the old Venkatesa Mills compound, shuttered since 2009, its gate chained, its name still painted on the wall in letters four feet high and slowly surrendering to rain.

Cafeday was seventy metres south of the signal. Seventy metres was the entire difference between a business and a slow, dignified failure.

The story continues.

Twenty-six chapters and an epilogue. 136 pages.

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