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SINNING WITH ANNIE

Make no mistake about it, I, Arthur Viswalingam, was married in every sense of the word, and seldom during those first years did I have the slightest compunction. Acceptance is an Asiatic disease; you may consider me one of the afflicted many. I was precisely thirteen, still mottled with pimply blotches, pausing as I was on that unhealthy threshold between puberty and adolescence. Annie (Ananda) was a smooth eleven, as cool and unripe as the mango old Mrs Pushpam brings me each morning on a plate when I sit down to my writing. (Is it this green fruit before me now that makes me pause in my jolly memoir to take up this distressing subject, one that for so long has troubled my dreams and made my prayers pitiful with moans of penitential shame?) It was a long time before the eruptions of adolescence showed with any ludicrous certainty (I almost said absurtainty!) on Annie's face. I imagine it was around our third anniversary, the one we celebrated at the home of that oaf Ratnam, my cousin (his mother, another yahoo, unmercifully repeated a jape about our childlessness: 'Perhaps they are not doing it right!'). I cannot be sure exactly when Annie became a woman: she always seemed to be a small girl playing at being grown-up, worrying the cook and sweeper with her pouts, dressing in outlandish styles of sari, crying often and miserably – all of this, while we were married, an irritating interruption of my algebra homework.

At my present age I am certain of very little; I only know that I can no longer expect God to listen to my incessant wailing, and so I turn to my fellow man, not for indulgence but simply to give God a rest. This is the wet season in Delhi; the temple monkeys are drenched: they sit mournfully under the crassly painted arches, their fur sticking out in wet prickles, their pale blue flesh chilled with the monsoon, giving them the deathly look of the gibbons that turn up now and again, bloated and drowned in the open drains of this city. My pen spatters ink; I write slowly on unbleached foolscap with many half-starts and crossings-out. I can hear the wheezing of wind through the little midden of Asiatic rubbish that has accumulated in my lungs; I can feel my heart stretching and straining with each pump, like an old toad squatting in the basket of my ribs. To misquote the celebrated poet from Missouri, I am an old man in a wet month.

But imagine me, if you can, seventy years ago, standing on spindly legs (I thought all the world stood on spindly legs until I saw English shopgirls) – as I was saying, standing on spindly legs at the temple entrance, in my pint-sized turban, my hands clasped against my thirteen-year-old breast. All manner of hooting and shrieking from the street echoed in the temple: bargains being struck, coins and brown rupees exchanged for flesh and fruit. That was long ago; it has taken all this time for me to see the irony of those beastly hawkers.

Little imbecile that I was, I had no idea I was being swapped. I did not know that Annie's father had promised five thousand rupees to my father if the marriage transpired as arranged. Chits and promises had been exchanged; my parents had haggled while I played dawdling puddle games and kicked my football. And little did I know of my father's bankruptcy, my mother's idle, spendthrift ways; no, it pleased me that my father always seemed to be on holiday, my mother dressed richly in excellent shawls. How was I to know my father was lazy, my mother foolish; or, indeed, that I would have to pay for their sins with my chaste flesh?

We lived in princely fashion, with leisure and comfort that for all I know even a prince would envy: the lower class's idea of the voluptuous is always grander than the prince's, because it is unattainable. Their demons and gods, about which I shall speak presently, show them to be a very imaginative lot; coupled with their idleness this breeds a grotesquery all its own. My father's credit remained solid; had my father declared himself bankrupt very early on, or had my mother gone about in the market in tattered sari and worn sandals, a splintery wooden comb stuck in her hair instead of the ivory one she habitually wore, the final reckoning would have, I am convinced, come sooner. The people in our village were quite ignorant and easily gulled. Foolishness was a plague which descended on us early and stayed, not killing, but maiming: cripples abounded. In evidence of this, which I am sure my parents took careful note of, the villagers worshiped a whole zoo of beasts, a pseudospiritual menagerie: snakes, monkeys, elephants, goddesses with six arms and dreadful snouts, gods with elephantine ears, tusks and even wrinkled trunks. To be human was a crime against everyone; it was grotesque. Have I mentioned the cows? It pains me to recall the bovine benedictions I performed: I have stroked the hindquarters of a plaster cow until the paint flaked off and the stone itself was worn smooth – nay, made indentations in the plaster flanks with my praying fingers! I donged bells and keened, lit tapers, strewed petals. We Hindus have a curious faith that, in a manner of speaking, transforms a farmyard into a place of worship – a backward, rat-and snake-infested farmyard at that. The more dumb and stupid the idol, the more devoutly we pray. Mrs Pushpam, for example, is at this moment with a hundred other yelping women, beating her tambourine before a smudged mezzotint of Shiva in a squalid bazaar. It should surprise no one to learn that two of the dozen or so words which English takes from my language are goon and thug; I would not be amazed, further, if fanatic and dunderhead had Sanskrit roots.

Where was I? Yes, at the temple. I was there because my father's credit had run out at last. No one else knew this of course: the bluff was still working. I think of a card game, symbol of bluff. I have never seen a child's face on a pack of cards, though I have in my mind a special pack, my father's, the cards marked Foolishness, Pomp, Ego, Greed, Idleness, Boastfulness; there is a face card as well: the painted image of a sallow prince, dressed ludicrously in finery, the little demented face staring with big eyes. It was this card my father played in the spring of 1898 (it was a 'marrying year,'

as they say in my language) in the Laxshminarayan Temple, when he was released from his years of bluff, and I was bound up irrevocably with sin.

The Savior of the faith I embraced only this year similarly stood in a temple; he spoke wise words to his elders about Work, Duty and His Father's Business. The comparison with me is crude and unworthy, but it serves to throw my sin into bold relief. I too stood in an Eastern temple, but less confidently than the Nazarene; I stood with sweating elders and uttered inanities (God help me, I have already said something of my father's 'business'!), stroked for the umpteenth time the cow's behind, the monkey's flank, mooed and crowed, in a tongue I would very willingly now like to disremember, the shrill syllables of my pagan faith, trumpeted like Ganpati, the elephant god, chattered like Hanuman, and let myself be anointed (under the circumstances, a sacrilegious verb) with unguents, perfumes, juices, nectars, spots of dust, rare oils and essences and – it shames me to mention this, though I promised to be ingenuous – devoured a reeking pudding made up of the excrement, dung I should say, of all the above-mentioned animals. Meanwhile a medium went into a trance and, eyeballs rolled up, scraped his tongue with a rusty sword after which he wrote asinine charms on yellow slips of paper with the blood. Talk about barbarism! You have no idea.

My bride, the child Annie, was heavily veiled, clotted with blossoms, orchids, a paraphernalia of frangipani and jacaranda, anything the idlers who arranged the wedding could lay their hands on. She was so small she could have been a corsage; and she was as mobile as Birnam wood. None of it meant much to me, neither the incantations nor the odors, the clanging temple nor the avaricious side glances of my 'elders.' My attention was fixed elsewhere: in the corner of the temple a beggarly snake charmer on his haunches blew a swollen flute, coaxing a sleek, swaying cobra out of a basket.

Picture our wedding night: two children entering an empty house, a small boy with dripping sweets clasped in one hand and, in the other hand, a sequined turban crammed with stale flower petals and old rupees; a small girl, head down, follows closely behind, clutching flowers, shuffling in gilt slippers that clack on the stone floor. The children are moving cautiously: both are afraid of the dark.

Our house was an extension to my father's. Annie and I had six rooms, though for that first year we lived in one; as children, even though the house was ours, we felt we were not entitled to more than that. In every way except one did we behave as children: we needed our parents' permission to buy sweets; we were not allowed to go to plays or to music shows alone; all our clothes and all my schoolbooks were bought by my father (we had not one piece to call our own); Annie, though my wife, never cooked, sewed or scrubbed; there were times when we were not allowed to dress ourselves. I can remember several occasions when we were tucked into bed (consider the implications of that phrase!). Thrice I was birched by my father in the presence of

my wife.

Bear all this in mind as you read on. But before I begin, let me say that I have noticed in Western countries a certain evidence of urges before there is action on the part of the very young. Theirs, those gay souls, is a constant rehearsal of marital obligation long before the deed is done, a relatively harmless form of physical foolery, touching at private parts, playing Mommy and Daddy, dressing up like the oldsters do. This goes on manifesting itself in various forms up to the age of eighteen or twenty when, quite understandably, they are allowed the privacy and license to, as it were, get on with it.

In my savage country things are different, to say the least. While in the West you have, during this exploratory period, adults always within earshot, in our case (I should say village), for all practical purposes, we had none. Unlike the little chappies frolicking and dabbing at each other in English country gardens, our experience was painfully real and immediate, unrelieved by sport or jest. Sex, in marriage, loses much of its heartiness. I suppose our parents thought that one of the many semibeasts we went about worshiping would swoop down and rescue us at the crucial moment. To be frank, I haven't the slightest idea of what goes on in the Asian mind.

That first night was fairly typical of the ones that followed. There were so many. I led the way into the room; inside, Annie crept into a corner. Suspecting that I had lost her, I lighted a taper and slammed the door. She jumped, startled; I spied her crouching near a little altar. I wanted very much to talk to her, but could think of nothing to say except 'Where do you live?' and I refrained from asking that; her reply would have been a polite, 'Here, my husband.' I offered her a sweet, one of our large vulgar gulabjam, made of paste and broken milk and covered with sugary syrup. She took it and ate it noisily, licking her fingers with her cat's tongue.

There was a screen in the room, a wicker frame with silk stretched across it and decorated with clumsy flowers: more of our degraded culture. When my sweets were gone I stuffed my money-filled turban under my pillow and went behind the screen to change into my pajamas. This done, I blew out the candle and crept into bed, ignoring my wife. It was not until I rolled over and shut my eyes that I heard the rustle of Annie's clothes. I could tell what she was taking off from the sounds each garment made when it was fumbled with: there was first the flutter of the withered flower strands as they were lifted over her head, the lisp of silk unwinding, and the hush of her stepping out of her petticoat; the thump and tinkle as she pulled her slippers off, the heel click as they were placed side by side at the foot of the bed; a tiny noise, the slow zip of fingernails scraping on flesh, her thumbs in the waistband of her bloomers, pulling them down her legs. Then the fee, fee, fee of a comb being drawn through young and silky hair.

I find this description unbearably arousing! Was that really me in that bed? Alas, yes. I

must go on. There were no more noises, not even the padding of her little feet as she crossed to her side of the bed. She slipped under the sheet (I felt the cool breath of the sheet ballooning air past me). At my age I could not be expected to have any idea of female nakedness: even as I listened to Annie removing her clothes I could not imagine what she looked like and, believe me, lying next to her in bed hadn't the foggiest idea what would happen next. I thought we might go quietly to sleep: I had eaten a sufficiency of sweets, slurped yogurt, gorged myself on rice and dhal; my head rang from the powerful incense of the ceremony. I shut my eyes tightly and tried to sleep, but this seemed to give me a bad case of insomnia. I was trying too hard. And then it came, against my will: a little animal, a nasty little beast like the sort we worshiped, awoke in me and made me very warm. Annie seemed to have something to do with it. The image came to me then (it persists even now) of the small girl's circus act: she waves her hand over the slumbering puppy and, with only this gesture, makes him rise on his haunches, his forepaws up, his jaws apart, begging, his tongue sagging juicily through his teeth. This is the only perception I keep from my youth, that sinful score of years. I keep it like a little shell plucked from the shores of my childhood, never thrown away: the little girl dancing innocently in naked grace around the puppy, the puppy rising from haunches to hind legs and leaping up, nipping at the little girl with sharp teeth, snarling – not a puppy, but that more bestial word, dog – and knocking the girl over roughly. The dog is on all fours, standing on her frail little newly budded breasts and barking insistently in quivering jerks. They are not playing, they are beyond that, and no one is watching; there is something fierce about the whole thing. Fierce, fumbling and unsatisfying. It was thus with Annie and me.

The next morning, when I awoke, I found a string tied to the underpart of the bedstead. I followed it out of the room and down to my parents' parlor where there were chairs. The string ended in a small silver bell. Annie must have been making the bed or something as I stared at the bell, for it tinkled (was she patting the covers?), reminding me of my lack of success, ting-a-ling.

There was no shame, only a temporary sense of defeat. You would say I was not man enough. We have no equivalent phrase in our language. How could we? With small folk leaping into bed, fully married, at the age of eleven and thirteen, could we possibly have any sane concept of maturity? I am not a sociologist; I am a tired old man, an ashamed and angry tired old man, but I know that this is a different kettle of fish from what you are used to. You never saw anyone so young bunged into marriage as I was.

In a phrase you have it: a nation of children. It is cruel, but exceedingly accurate. If I was not a child, why should I leap on my bride of one day and bark like a dog, sniff her, butt her with my head, squeeze her until she cried out? Mind you, I squeezed her ankles, I squeezed her wrists: I did not know any better. Half my body had swollen in an unfamiliar manner and I was looking for a place to put it, to fit it in, a socket which I imagined was hidden somewhere on her pathetic little body. She lay; when I touched her roughly she squealed, but I must say that she did all she could. She tried her level

best. I nuzzled, bit, screwed up my face and whined piteously into her cheek, all to no avail. If I may say so, it made matters somewhat worse, for nothing is so inflammatory to lust as delay. I burned. I married and burned. This went on for many months.

At the same time I was at school, preoccupied with the trivia that besets the schoolboy. My education, in light of the bizarre circumstances of my private life, pained me as often as it gave me release. How I envied the simple lives of those characters we read about, Oliver Twist whose only problem was to find a way of coping with those rogues and ruffians, all the others oiling their cricket bats, having tea and buttered scones in well-appointed parlors, throwing their hats in the air at rugger matches. All so jolly next to what I had to face! Naturally I could explain none of this to my wife. Our marriage was now a year old (I was in Form Two), and we spent our time sitting dumbly in our house or picking flowers for festivals, always avoiding the subject that seemed to turn the sharp Indian sunlight into deep gloom. I cannot say I dreaded going to bed; I will say that I viewed the whole affair with some little apprehension. My desire to succeed befogged my mind and made me less capable of success.

Inevitably of course we did succeed; I will not trouble you with details which, in their entirety, do not make a very pretty parcel; my gift for expression begins to lurch some distance this side of stark nakedness. It would be an error to venture nearer than I have already. What intrigued me during this time was that once I had succeeded I could not understand why I had ever failed. This success marked the onset of school latenesses that very nearly ended in my expulsion, my failure to complete the most rudimentary homework or, in brief, any task that was performed outside the confines of our wretched little bedroom. I puffed and panted (we are not a hardy race, in spite of what the rabble of nationalists may assert when speaking with a rank foreigner: never trust an Asiatic); my lust knew no bounds, yet there was a limit to my competence, of that I am shamefully aware, doubly so as I write this.

I should now very much like to say a thing or two about my sin, namely lust. This sin is commonly, and not altogether mistakenly, classed with gluttony, envy and the other four deadly sins. Alcoholism, a manifestation of gluttony, may serve as a preliminary comparison: one sees drunken louts shambling about the streets searching for a drink shop. Their behavior is unseemly. But lust is worse; it is in a class all its own, for it afflicts man in a more acute way than does the craving for spirits. Besides being a most private degradation, gluttony for drink lacks a certain urgency which is essential to any definition of lust. Thirst, sometimes associated with lust, should not be at all; thirst is a sense of wasting, together with the slimy accumulation on the mouth, tongue and throat of a layer of bubbly but not juicy saliva that wants slaking. It comes in stages, the swelling tongue, the parching throat beginning to build up that slimy coat, and then the urge. Lust, on the other hand, is urge, a fullness that is in actual fact closer to anger than to gluttony: a fit of full feverish temper which puts the blood immediately on the boil, causes muscles to tense and harden with something

approaching criminal determination and starts a warm diabolical rosiness to effervesce throughout one's limbs, drenching the body in one's own sweat like a sputtering joint of basted beef. You readers who are not lustful but who may have quick tempers may usefully compare your tantrums with reechy passion; even the descriptive vocabulary remains somewhat constant: one is aroused quickly to both anger and lust; one grows excessively hot with both, loses one's reason and turns beefy red. The emotions of lust and anger proceed with equal speed, which is to say they are frantically brief when given the most liberty, and longest in duration (and more intense) when an attempt is made to curb or conceal them. The difference is this: one may take out one's wrath on the leg of a table, but lust is only satisfied by the leg of a strumpet. It is possible to allay one's angry feelings in private; lust involves other people and I believe because it does so, is the greater corruption. It takes two, as the saying has it, to do the tango. Having said that, I shall say no more about it.

Annie changed. No longer the hard coil of dark wires I had married, but indolent and alluring, and yet remarkably compact, like those bready sweets we in Asia addict ourselves to and canker our teeth with. Her cheeks grew plump, her budding breasts swelled into two tingling and pipped morsels of fruit, and indeed all her flesh took on a sleepy thickness which I took the devil's own delight in pinching in this wise: extending my claw, I would grasp a bit of her flesh between my thumb and forefinger and give a sharp tweak, pretending all the while that I had scooped a collop of meat from, say, her cheek or belly; and then I would pretend to eat it. I realize now that had she grown ugly I might have ceased sinning and taken my solemn vow of celibacy much sooner. But she grew ever more attractive, which goes to show that the devil may take many forms, even that of grace and beauty, provided that it is dark enough to conceal his cloven hoof: where lust is concerned, darkness is just around the corner. Far from being horrible, the object of our lust may appear virginal; the sin itself, to the wanton child with the corrupt parents, seems incredibly delicious on first taste.

Prying old Pushpam has returned from her fatuous orgy of monkey worship. I must be quick; the hag is snorting and fretting in the hallway, wondering which vegetables to stew. And just as well; I should say no more about sinning with Annie and its attendant sorrows. There were times when I wanted to be done with the whole business: my penitent trembling transformed me from hermit to nut case, and brutality welling within me sloshed up past my gizzard to splash at the back of my eyes. With my prayers wobbling every which way like bats in my closed room, and pleas squeaking past my numb lips, I felt the urge to punish: I was at the Delhi Gate when the British returned; I led them to the flea pots and flesh pits, the drink shops and temples and, in a bloody crusade, we crushed the life out of the verminous population. This accomplished, we peopled the country anew, cleanly, without mess, with colder holy folk from frozen places. Those times, had Annie walked through the door, as Mrs P. has just done, I would have put my pen down, risen and wrapped my still-nimble fingers around her neck to throttle the life out of her. Taking into account the extent of my sin and general misery, that action must seem to you totally justifiable. I cannot

say. Latterly, I get fewer and fewer of these brutal urges. No, I doubt that I would do that now, I very much doubt it. You will call me silly, but most likely I would fumble out of my chair and screech across the carpet, sleeves and cuffs billowing, sandals aflap; and, pity me deeply, I would fall before her and touch my lips to her instep as if she were the Queen of Heaven.