

SUNANDA had always known that she must leave home some day. Yet, a cloud fell on her mind and her eyes misted over when the bus was ready to depart. How she had longed to go away! Not in this way however. She had seen herself going off on a man's strong arm. And returning later just once in a while for the temple festival in November, strolling through the crowds, as carefree as a child, arm in arm with that person whose face remained hazy even today. And through the temple drums, he would whisper in her ear: "Wrap up well, Sunanda, or you will be down with a cold for a fortnight".

She could not hold back her sighs. Had anyone noticed? The bus was full of vendors on their way to the town with the morning's vegetables. In brimming crowds, as in utter solitude, no one pays attention to another.

They should have started earlier. They could then have found places by the windows. She could have looked back when the bus set off. The beauty of the hill and the lotus pond struck her only now that she was leaving them behind. They appeared on the left as the bus turned the corner, climbed the incline and approached the rocky face of the government offices. The hill side clothed with flowers and the lotus pond glinting like a teardrop through the woods were visible in the distance. She wondered if yesterday's lotus buds had bloomed today.

The pond would now be stretched out in abandon drawing the hills into its womb. After mol her drowned there, no one would bathe in it, even at mid-day. Except herself. That was a blessing. When she sat gazing at the dozing pond which held the hills in her womb, she hardly noticed the passage of time.

While doing her morning ablutions as she sat by the pond and

## SHORT STORY

# To The Ashram

**K.R. Viswanathan**

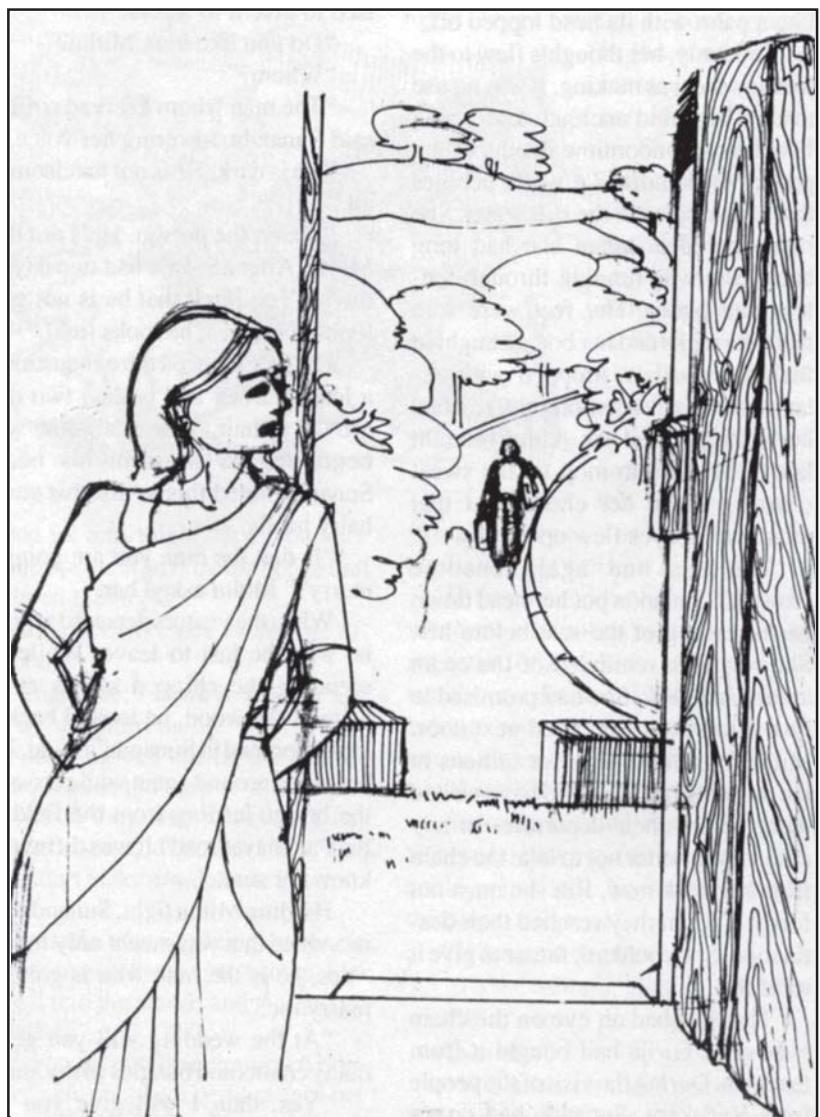
Translation from Malayalam by **Renuka Vishwanathan**

peered at her image, she had also seen little fish hanging shyly among the stones.....

The crowds thinned when they reached the town. Father called out to Sunanda from the rear of the bus. "I

am told there's a short halt there. Would you like to eat something?"

Sunanda shook her head. Father came up and she moved aside to make room for him. Sitting down beside her, he mumbled to nobody in particular:



"It's better not to eat anything. If you have a snack it will only make you sick."

She gazed at the gigantic hotel in the town. The galeman was resting, his foot on the closed gate and looking for someone in the crowd, smoking a bidi all the while. Had she not also hoped that someone would look out for her like this? She stared at the top of the building which loomed as high as the sky above her. She had heard that 800 steps must be climbed to get there; Girija, who worked at the match factory had told her so. Girija had gone to the top storey once. From there, the grimy flagstaff of the temple was just like a palm with its head lopped off.

Suddenly, her thoughts flew to the journey she was making. It was no use to keep her mind unclouded and calm like the clear noontime depths of the pond; her dreams like white pebbles threw up ripples in the still water. She remembered a dream she had long back. She was running through valleys and plains. Her feet were sore from the rocks and her body, caught in the thorn bushes, dropped with exhaustion. Just then a strong arm reached her and supported her. A man brought lips to her face to mop up the sweat coursing down her cheeks. At that moment her eyes flew open.

The bus had again become crowded. Sunanda put her head down on the railing of the seat before her. She was then reminded of the chain around her neck. She had promised to give it to Mithu who lived next door. Mithu must have gone for tuitions in the morning or she would have visited them before their departure. In any case, it was better not to take the chain from her neck now. But she must not forget it when they reached their destination. She could ask father to give it to Mithu.



That girl had an eye on the chain ever since Girija had bought it from the town. During the visit of the people from Vadakara, Sunanda had promised to give it to Mithu.

"Do you like him, Mithu?"

"Whom?"

"The man whom I served coffee," said Sunanda, lowering her voice.

"He is dark. He is not handsome at all."

"That's the person. He's not dark Mithu. After all, he's had two days of travel. You think that he is not good looking because he looks tired."

His face showed the exhaustion of a long journey and he had two days growth of hair. Traces of white were beginning to show in his beard. Sunanda noted this as also his strong hairy hands.

"Is that the man you are going to marry?" Mithu asked her.

When the visitors departed at noon, he was the last to leave. While descending the chipped stones at the edge of the wood, he looked back. A lotus bloomed in Sunanda's mind. Had he turned around again while crossing the bridge leading from the fields to the Panchayat road? It was difficult to know for sure.

Holding Mithu tight, Sunanda said in a voice that was meant only for her. "Yes, he is the man who is

going to marry me."

"At the wedding will you get as many chains and bangles as my aunt?"

"Yes, then I will give you this one." Sunanda held up Milhu's chin. "Will you pray for me, Mithu?"

That night after washing up, when she was stacking the dishes in the kitchen, father called out to her. Picking up the lantern she went to the door of the parlour. He lay on the cot in the dark. She leaned against the door-jamb.

"It looks like Achutli has cheated us, daughter."

Sunanda peered into the gloom of the parlour. Father rose, groped for a beedi under his pillow and struck a match. The flame flared out before she could see the look on his face.

"It was only when they got on the train that Achutti told me that this would be the boy's second marriage."

The gloom of the parlour enveloped Sunanda's mind. Had her bright dreams led only to this? She put down the lamp. Father must not see her face, she thought. He had not wanted to talk to her in the open. No wonder he had not lit the lamp in the parlour.

She looked into the room. The beedi glowed on father's lips like ember. She was about to return to the

kitchen when she heard him.

"There's no harm even if it's a second marriage. They're a well to do family, that's what Achulti says. If he's the loving sort, this could be a blessing." *She understood* everything clearly now. Achulti must have told father this long back. Now he was just trying to gauge her feelings. Sunanda gazed in silence at the glowworms sparkling on the palm leaves in the orchard.

"Marriage is a lottery, daughter. What's lost, even if it is for the second time?" Father was silent for a moment inhaling the smoke of his beedi." Who's there except for me to tell you this? Your mother left us so soon." His voice trembled.

He drew at the smoke. It was difficult to see his face in the gloom. His beard had also grown long enough to hide his expression.

"The elder Nambudiri at the big house who died long back had foreseen this several times. He had predicted that you would only become somebody's second wife and that too when you are quite old. At that time, I thought that he was just talking nonsense.

The gloom and the silence mingled and thickened between father and daughter. Tears poured down Sunanda's cheeks as she leaned on the doorjamb. It seemed as if her father's voice, emerging from the darkness, was coming from very far away.

"Who will know in the village here that he is making a second marriage? We must not tell anyone about it. Who'll go to Vadakara to seek it all out??"

The lampwick started blackening.

They must go to bed before it burnt down. She walked back to the kitchen. The kitchen and the lotus pond were her only refuge. If she burst out weeping there, no one would know about it. Once again she had her father's voice behind her. "Achulti said that the marriage would be settled if you are willing. These are folks who don't set much store by money."

She had expected this. Dowry



would not be a problem with them. What happened on all the other occasions did not take place this time. Before, Achulti and father used to conduct negotiations under the sprouting palm to the south of the house. At the end, it was father who usually gave up. "Achulti, you know that we have only this bit of land."

The people from Vadakara had left promising to send them a reply. They waited for a fortnight. Not even once did the postman pass by the hedge that bordered the fields.

Only Achulti came along one afternoon.

"This time, I think it was her age that went against us."

Father moved out of (he parlour and squatted in the yard.

"When they left, it was only her age that seemed to bother them. But they didn't make any definite commitment."

Sunanda was applying henna to her hair to turn the grey to brown. She flung it into the woods and washed up the vessel.

Fahter went out and returned only at dusk. He could not perhaps face her after this. At night she heard him groaning in the parlour.

"What should I do now, Guruvayurappa? Can there be any-thing more for the community to gos-sip about?"

It was Lakshmiamma, who lived to the north, who suggested that Sunanda join the ashram. But even she could not directly broach the subject to her. She brought it up at last, squirm ing and mumbling. Apparently, there were many girls like Sunanda at the ashram. Their ex-penses were all met by the management.

At that place you did not have to suffer the stares and questions of the public. You could lie in contentment. In the next birth at least.... Sunanda only listened to it all. She undrestood everything. Father was advising her through Lakshm-iamma to accept *sanyasa*. She was a terrible burden on him. The weight had made him as weary as a draught bullock. Even he knew that at this age the appropriate *ashram* for her was not *grahastha* but *sanyasa*.

Father moved further into the corner. Sunanda looked up. He was making room for an old man. As soon as he sat down, she heard the new-comer say: (or perhaps it was in response to one of father's ques-tions.) "I am Kunjikrishnan Nair." Sunanda became restless. Father was only looking for company. He could not sit still. Now where would the

discussion tend?

"Where are you going?" "To the ashram," Father replied. "Who's this? Your daughter?" "Mmmm"

"You must get there before noon. You can meet the swami only after the morning's meditation. There are big crowds to see him these days."

"Yes, I have fixed it up through somebody."

"Then you are lucky. The darshan will be over quickly."

Sunanda leaned back again and closed her eyes. Let them think that she was dozing off. The conversation between father and Nair continued. About how the rains had failed, how sowing had been delayed, about the beginning and the end of *Kaliyug*. She was relieved. The conversation was not getting out of hand. But some time in the course of the talk, a question posed by Nair during a pause pierced her mind like an arrow. Sunanda knew what her father's reply would be.

"Is she a fourfooted beast to be driven out with nothing? We had started looking for a husband when she turned eighteen. The girl had only one response to any eligible bachelor— 'No, No.' I tried my best to bring her around. It was only much later that she announced her wish to become a nun. What was the point?" Father showed annoyance.

Laughter welled up in her. If she raised her head and looked up at him now in the rear view mirror, father would be as ashamed as a schoolboy who had wetted his pants.

"God is great. It's a blessing if a girl can feel this way even in *Kaliyug*."

Father agreed but kept an eye on Sunanda. "It's an insistent inner call to become a nun. When that happens, nobody can stop you. It can't come to everyone. It's the fruit of the good deeds of her previous birth."

Nair's voice rose a little. Father

looked around nervously. Had Sunanda heard anything? Had she only shut her eyes? As if making amends father said: "Then.... in today's conditions, can one just ask her to go away? Don't people demand lakhs and jewellery all over the body?"

"This counting of lakhs will only go on in our lifetime, friend. It will soon go up to crores."



Neither had said anything for quite a while. It was as if a torrent had rushed past. Sunanda opened her eyes slowly and looked out.

"Are you feeling giddy?" Father asked her. "If you feel ill, take a whiff of your hair and don't look out."

She leaned back and shut her eyes. She thought: Sunanda! What a nice name! Something like a frisson ran over her when she imagined that what was hidden in those three syllables was she herself, with a few grey hairs and slender arms. A strange

peace stole over her as she silently mouthed the name repeatedly. Who could have found such a lovely name for her? It could not have originated in the deranged mind of her mother. Father must have come across it during his countryside travels in search of a shelter.

"The ashram gate is at the spot where the bus comes to a halt after the next stop." She heard Kunjikrishnan Nair's voice.

She straightened up and rearranged her sari. When her fingers got entangled in the chain, she remembered her promise to Mithu. I must not forget to give it to father when we reach the ashram, she thought. The swami must not become suspicious and wonder why she, who was repelled by the pleasures of this world, should adorn herself with a bright pearl-necklace. Nair himself might wonder about it. She pulled up the end of the sari and wrapped herself in it.

Nair put his legs together decorously in deference to her. Sunanda imagined the expression on his face. His eyes must be fixed reverentially on the girl who had done good deeds in her previous birth and was repelled by the materialism of her present existence.

They heard bells ringing as they got down at the ashram gate. Sunanda wondered if the ashram was welcoming her with this peal of bells.

Father looked around hurriedly. He was searching for Velukutty who had promised to wait for them at the entrance. Velukutty emerged from the soft drink kiosk nearby.

"I hope you didn't get bored by the slight delay." Father greeted him as if seeking pardon for their tardiness.

"No, No. I was afraid you folks would have to wait for me. I had a visitor just as I was about to leave for the ashram this morning. He

wanted to meet the Collector at He had brought a vehicle along so I accompanied him." Velukutty laughed once again.

"Was the trip comfortable, Sunanda?"

"It was not as long as all that." Sunanda felt too discomfited to look at Velukutty.

Father and Velukutty went ahead. Sunanda looked at the ashram garden. Flowers thrust their heads through the fence and waved them about smiling. A calf bellowed in the distance, followed by a cow. They must belong to the ashram.

When they crossed the threshold, the peal of bells rang out again. Velukutty hurried along.

"Let's walk a little faster. It's becoming very crowded. I have arrangements to meet the Swamiji."

Sunanda walked up the gravel path, like a child, fixing her gaze solely on her father's footsteps. His feet were all cracked. She thought they must be hurting him when he stepped on the gravel.

Velukutty hurried into the main building, leaving Sunanda and her father in the shade of a tree. The old man squatted and opened his pan box. Suddenly, as if reminded of something, he returned the pouch to his waistband. Sunanda looked around. To the north of the garden there was a shrub covered as richly with blooms as the village hillock. Squirrels waved their tails and chirruped in the trees. Somewhere a cuckoo sang. Dew drops still clung like tears to the bushes. A calf gambolled up to Sunanda, but it shied away as soon as she reached out to touch it. Stopping at a distance, it looked back at her once. Then it frisked out of sight with lifted tail. Rabbits sniffed at her legs and wrinkled up their noses. Not too far away in the woods, a bird flew away twittering. Another followed, its mate perhaps.

From time to time women with covered heads appeared like light rays playing hide and seek through shards of glass when a breeze blows. The face of the woman, who was watering the bushes in the garden was hidden. Is she younger or older than me, Sunanda wondered.

A peal of bells and the booming of the conch were heard from within. After a while people started emerging in a file. They looked like worshippers at the ashram temple. Sunanda stayed closed to the tree.

Velukutty beckoned them from afar. When they went up to him he pointed out: "Sunanda, that chain....."

Oh, she had forgotten it! She care-fully took the chain off without letting it get entangled in her long hair and offered it to father. "I had promised Mithu that I would give it to her.

I had forgotten about it." The old man looked at Sunanda's bare neck. A tear clung to his eyes. Father stood still for a moment watching the chain hanging like a rosary on Sunanda's fingers. Then he took it and put it a closed door, studded with little bells. Although she knew that everybody's eyes were riveted on her, she remained impassive. Let my eyes not overflow and my heart weep, she prayed.

The door opened to a peal of bells. It was as if an indefinable aroma had wafted into the open. Suddenly, there was fear on father's face. Velukutty went in first with folded hands. As father entered, Sunanda clutched at his arm. He looked back. Her lips trembled. In a moment, perspiration broke out on her face.

"What should I say, father, If the swamiji asks me something?"

## To My Daughter

*You too will learn to smile,  
and use the flat surfaces of  
the daily world; your  
longings furled in cool  
depths, finger-fronds tranquil  
in the grace of their  
memories.*

*And when they move,  
remembering...  
A shivering on the waters.  
Another way of seeing.*

**Anjum Katyal**

"Eh?"

If he asks me why I feel this way."

Father stood still in indecision for a moment. He took back the foot he had put inside the door. Then he managed to utter hastily in a quivering voice.

"Say just what that Nair said in the bus."

"That it was an inner call, an inner call" she repeated it mechanically.

When they emerged after the darshan, Sunanda cowered in the cool shade of the trees like an animal of the ashram.

"Guruvayurappa, this is all His mercy. I had promised to perform a special pooja to Him, if this works out." Father consoled himself.

Sunanda looked up. The sky was not visible because of the trees. Velukutty looked proudly at her and laughed.

"Now the Swamiji will look after everything. Just consider this your home."

Father, who had been standing around helplessly, nodded. Sunanda tried to pull herself together.

"The bus by which you came will soon be returning. It is better to catch it. Else there is a bus only in the evening."\*

Father looked at Sunanda.

"Are you leaving already?"

"I will come again when I get the opportunity." Father consoled her.

A bell shuddered three times from within. Sunanda saw the women in the garden climbing into the main building.

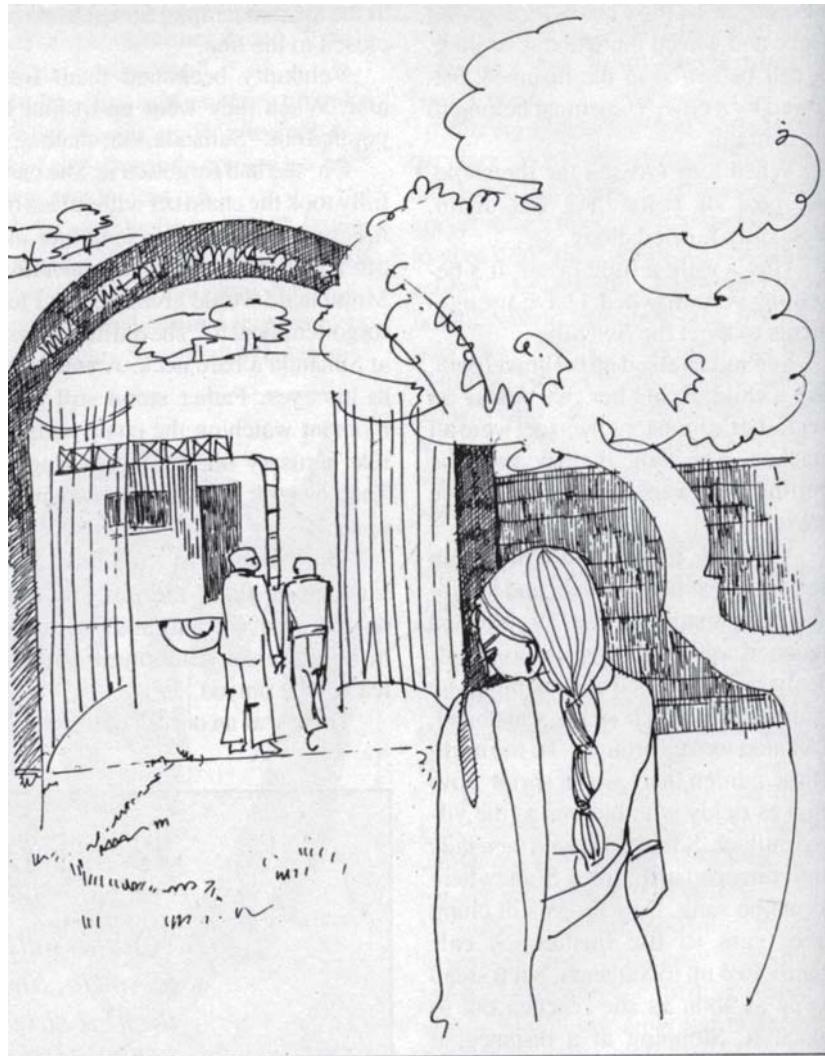
"That's the bell for assembly," Velukutty said. "Go along, Sunanda."

"I'll be going then." As he took leave of her in a trembling voice, Father's eyes became moist. He put his shaking hand on her shoulder. The hand kept palling her.

As he prepared to leave, she pulled out two sweaty notes from her blouse.

"Let them be with you daughter. If you need anything...."

"Swamiji is there to look after all



my needs."

She wanted to say something, but the words got entangled in her vocal chords. She put the rupees in her father's hands.

"I think that's the rumble of the bus." Velukutty was in a hurry.

The father bid goodbye to his daughter once again. She stood looking at him walking away. As he drew away she felt the thread of their relationship stretched to breaking. When he crossed the portals of the ashram that thread would also shatter.

Midway, father looked back as if she had called him. Sunanda stood like a graven image in the shade of the tree. When he turned to leave, her lips mouthed the word 'father'.

He stopped. She went up to him slowly. "What the old Nambudiri of the big house had said....." she stopped.

This was perhaps her last chance, she thought. She did not think that father would come again to the ashram seeking his daughter. She could ask him now without concealment.

"Are you going straight back home, father?"

He slowly shook his head.

She fixed her eyes on his feet and whispered as if in a prayer. "If you go away in future, please ask Lakshmiamma to inform me if there is a letter from Vadakar." Then she quickly walked into the ashram. □