

SIDDIQ ALAM

Dog-Catcher Mobile*

To make the beach more enjoyable for the tourists, the first plan the government came up with was to keep it free of stray dogs, the ones that roamed along the shore unhindered, their tails raised high, often even toying with and teasing the waves. But old Ramanujan Pillai was wiser than the government in this regard because his house was located right on the shore and this was the only place he considered good enough for his morning and evening strolls. This was also the place he had spent his whole childhood. Ever since he became aware of his surroundings, he'd been observing these dogs wandering along the coast, and he knew that no matter how fully they bore the stamp of the street, or how well their gashes had healed and their fur thinned, or how low their anuses drooped down because of syphilis, they did as much work cleaning up the filth left behind by the visitors to the shore as the street-sweepers. So much so that one day he even observed a dog chew on a condom filled with semen.

"The day these dogs and crows are no longer here, the city will become a pile of rubbish, the stench in the air will become permanent, and every one of us will be troubled by our noses," he said to his taciturn wife. Some twenty-five years ago Pillai had married Kochamma and brought her home from an educated village in the Kozhikode region, and now that his twin sons had both gone wandering about the Gulf States looking for work, she had become the entire universe for him. Kochamma was of course reserved, but not so much as to accept everything he said without question.

"The administration might be better informed about it than you," she opened her mouth and said. "After all, that's what they've been doing all their lives." Pillai smiled. Kochamma had proved to be a good counterweight to him and had created a balance in his life; otherwise, like a pendulum, he would have been battling his own limits all his life. For a

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moment he thought of casting this issue out of his mind, but the next day when he went out for a walk he noticed a dog-catcher's mobile parked in front of the water treatment plant. The driver, his back against its bonnet, stood staring at the ocean where the dog-catchers had gone. This was at a time when a whole crowd of tourists had been drawn to the shore, and the dogs, coming out of the alleys and streets of the city, followed behind them.

"Is this a dog-catching mobile?" Pillai asked, just to be sure.

"Yes, can't you see the picture of the dog on the banner over the cage?" the driver said, lifting his cap and scratching his head. His hair was thick and had tight curls like the blacks. "Old fellow, if you want to get rid of your dog, you can bring it here, or if you want to let us know about some stray dog, there's a phone number listed on the banner."

"No, no. I had no special reason to ask," Pillai said and moved on.

It was the winter season and the shore was full of tourists as far as the eye could see. Even though Pillai's thatched, red-tiled cottage was situated right on the shore, with its terrace built specially to face the ocean, the area where he lived wasn't meant for tourists so very few ever ventured there. When he went out for his walks, he'd often be the only person walking along the sand for a long time. He would stroll past a settlement of fishermen that had ancient palm trees and huts that were centuries old. It remained where it was, unaltered, despite being surrounded by beautiful houses built with money from the Gulf States. When all the fishermen's boats returned to the shore together like a flock, that particular corner of the seashore turned into a fish market. From that point on the shore began to widen so he might come across an occasional tourist or a wayfaring fisherman carrying a net or basket or cooking pot. After that, every step of the way, the crowd thickened, and from the road above to the filthy sand of the shore below a veritable bazaar would spring up with a multitude of hotels of all sizes, restaurants and stores. Normally, Pillai avoided this area, but today he was walking right into the middle of that crowd. Perhaps he was looking for the dog-catchers, but he didn't see them even after searching far and wide. On his way back, he noticed the dog-catchers' mobile was gone too. All along the way he saw dogs roaming freely, their tails lifted up, busy with their usual daily chores. Maybe the administration had no real plan, he thought. Perhaps like all their other projects, this was just a show, just another way of spreading some cash around.

"Kochamma . . . ?" She was setting a mug of coffee on the table for him when he lowered his newspaper, looked at her through his glasses and asked, "Have you ever seen a dog-catcher mobile?"

“Who knows what kind of stuff you keep seeing,” Kochamma said, dragging the plate of raw vegetables toward her. “I have more important things to look at.”

“So long as there are things in this world, they do come into view,” he answered indignantly. At times he would really get annoyed at Kochamma’s insensitivity. “Especially in a world whose ownership has been taken over by man.”

“No,” he continued adamantly, “everything is monopolized by man now. He’s made himself the owner of the animals, the plants and the air. Who bestowed this ownership on him? I sometimes wonder how it is that we’ve laid claim to everything. We’re nothing more than highwaymen who have forcibly taken hold of God’s earth and portioned things out among ourselves.”

Kochamma was absorbed in chopping the vegetables.

“You worry too much about trivial things,” she said to break the silence. “The world keeps turning anyway.”

Pillai didn’t think it necessary to prolong the dispute, but the next day he found the dog-catcher mobile parked in the same place. This time there were two emaciated, half-dead dogs standing quietly in the cage with their tails stuck between their legs. Seeing Pillai, one of them tried to bark, but the bark got stuck in its throat.

“What are you guys going to do with these two?” Pillai asked the driver, who was standing with his back against the bonnet of the mobile staring at the ocean just like yesterday.

“Send them on to the next world,” he answered, lifting his cap and scratching his head just like the day before. Perhaps lice had established a colony in his thick hair. “The perfect place for these buggers. Have you ever been bitten by one?”

“No,” said Pillai, “but what would that gain? Sooner or later we’ll be there too and we’re bound to meet them there.”

“Old man,” the driver said putting his cap back on, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re just doing our job.”

That was the day Pillai saw the two dog-catchers on the coast. They were walking quickly holding iron-clamps. The first man was tall and lanky with a shaven head that shone like an enormous egg. He was carrying a grungy bag on his right shoulder. The tip of his nose curved like a parrot’s and his long, horse-like teeth glinted when he opened his mouth. The other man was a huge, fleshy guy sporting a curly beard, skin the color of copper and the flabby body of a hippopotamus. Indeed, he resembled a hippopotamus. Wearing a pair of jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, he was busy chewing gum. As the two of them walked, they stopped a

short distance from Pillai. A dog passed in front of them, but they didn't make a move. Then they picked up their clamps and went up to the area where the hotels were located.

"The dog-catchers have arrived at the beach," he said that day as he was opening the newspaper. Kochamma was placing the cookie jar on the table for him

"Seems as if you're reading this news in the paper," Kochamma said jokingly, which Pillai didn't appreciate much. He put the paper in front of his face and Kochamma realized the slipup she'd made. She came near him and putting her hand on his shoulder said, "Then why don't you do something for them?"

"For whom?" he raised his head from the paper and asked.

"The dogs."

"You mean those stray dogs? Those dogs are illegal anyway. It's another matter that this law is man-made, not made by them."

"Then there's nothing left for you to do."

No, he thought, there was definitely something he could do. After finishing the paper he went out and began walking towards the dog-catcher mobile. It stood right there, in its usual spot, except the driver wasn't around. Pillai looked inside the vehicle; there were at least seven dogs in the cage, holding on to the net, growling and gnawing at each other.

"Perhaps that's all you guys are good for," Pillai thought. Then he looked around. When he was satisfied that no one was watching, he tried to locate the door of the cage. He found it easily enough since a tiny lock was hanging from it. He held the lock in his hand and tried using his full force to open it. The lock was small and cheap, but he soon found out that it wasn't possible to open it that way. He looked towards the ocean and then back at the road in front of the water treatment plant, where a bus crammed with passengers had just passed by raising the dust. He spotted some stones sticking out of the jagged edges of the road like broken teeth. He picked one up and was returning towards the mobile when he noticed the two dog-catchers with their clamps returning empty-handed. He threw down the stone. Before the two of them could reach the mobile, he saw the cap of the driver. He'd been watching the bear-show on the coast. Then all three of them got in and drove away. The dogs trapped inside the moving vehicle were looking at Pillai, as if sadly disappointed in him.

Pillai quietly stayed inside the house the rest of that day. A couple of times Kochamma tried to ask him the reason for his silence, but he evaded the issue. The next morning as he was going out for his walk

Kochamma noticed that he was carrying an iron tool.

“What are you going to do with this? Where did you get it from?”

“Got it specially made by Gomez, the ironsmith. It can easily break any kind of lock.”

Kochamma suddenly felt very afraid, “Watch out lest you get yourself into some trouble.” In her long married life, she had seen Pillai do many things whose beginnings she could never fathom, but which invariably ended frightfully. But who could make Pillai understand such things! He wasn't an ordinary mortal.

“You keep your mouth shut about this,” he told his wife.

The driver, his hand serving as a pillow, was lying on the bonnet snoring away in the autumn sun when Pillai inserted the instrument inside the lock and easily broke it open. As soon as he did that three barking dogs took to their heels. One of them even tried to bite Pillai but desisted after seeing the tool in his hands, and ran away with his tail between his legs.

The dog-catchers woke the driver. The parrot's beak waved the broken lock in his face and said, “All the dogs have escaped. Who could have done this?”

“How would I know?” the dazed driver kept staring at the empty cage. “Surprising that anyone would be interested in those half-dead dogs!”

“Be more careful in the future.” The hippopotamus threw his clamp inside the cage, spat out the piece of gum he was chewing and said, “Let's go back now. There aren't very many dogs along the shore. Maybe they've wised up.”

For the last three days Pillai had been feeling cheerful. During that time he had achieved success once more. Strolling along the terrace he was humming to himself. Today he had even helped Kochamma with her kitchen work and now, sitting on the cot, he was sorting the old, yellowed papers belonging to his household. These were his father's papers, an unknown Malayalam poet, and he was thinking of collating them.

“You look very happy today!”

“The dog-catcher mobile hasn't appeared for the past two days. Seems as if they've given up the whole operation.”

But this proved to be an illusion. The next day the dog-catcher mobile was standing solidly on its wheels in its place. Three dogs sat quietly inside the cage, and the driver, as always, stood with his back leaning against the bonnet. A heavy brass lock hung on the cage door now.

“What are you looking at, old fellow?” the driver asked him. “Watch the van for me for a while. I'm going for a pee. Twice before some son of

a bitch broke our lock.”

After the driver had left, Pillai stood quietly in front of the dogs. Today he hadn't brought his tool. Even if he had, he wouldn't have managed to do much; today he'd been asked to keep an eye on the dogs.

“Not much I can do!” he expressed his helplessness to the dogs, and seeing the driver returning, he moved toward the beach without waiting for him. Today was a holiday and there was quite a throng of visitors. It seemed as if the whole world had crowded onto the beach. He even saw many white people walking there avoiding the water. Perhaps they didn't like the filth in the ocean.

He spotted the dog-catchers but ignored them. Upon his return, he noticed a lot of commotion in the same place. People were shouting, running helter-skelter, laughing and hiding behind each other. Holding the mouth of his jute bag open, the parrot's beak was scampering after a three-legged dog that was running on the wet sand leaning to one side. As planned beforehand, the hippopotamus appeared from the other side, opened his clamp, threw it down on the dog's back and trapped it. The dog was so famished and frail that it was easily lifted into the air writhing and wriggling in the trap, throwing its head about and kicking its legs. It was screeching and wailing as old women do, and the people were gaping at this spectacle.

The next morning when Kochamma saw him going out with his tool, she blocked the way.

“Now, what hazard are you planning to risk at your age?”

“Don't worry, Kochamma,” he said. “I may have grown old, but I still have a lot of sense.”

That day there were more dogs than usual in the mobile. The parrot's beak, the hippopotamus and the driver all stood in front of it drinking cups of tea from a vendor who'd placed his brass pot down on the sand. Steam was coming from the spout as if from Aladdin's lamp. Seeing Pillai pass in front of the mobile, the three of them exchanged knowing looks among themselves. When Pillai was on his way back, he found the mobile standing unattended. Inside the dogs all lay skulking, and no one was outside. He scanned the seashore as far as he could see, but didn't spot anyone anywhere. Perhaps they had gone a long way off on their mission. He took out his tool and started applying it on the lock, but the lock was pretty solid and showed no signs of snapping off. The vehicle started rocking on its wheels and the dogs started making noise, falling over each other. He didn't even notice when the sound of human laughter joined the uproar of the dogs. It was already too late by the time he realized it. A short distance from the driver, the dog-catchers stood watching him with their hands on their hips. He stood there holding his

lock-breaking device, dumbfounded.

“So, this is the old devil. Imagine the thoughts we’ve had!” the parrot’s beak said, and all three of them started coming towards him.

“Stay away, stay away from me,” Pillai shook his instrument in the air. The driver moved forward and snatched it from his weak hands. The parrot’s beak, with the help of the driver, pushed him back toward the side of the mobile, and hippopotamus, using his clamp, quickly and adroitly tied him to the net. Pillai’s feet were shaking and the pressure of the clamp on his stomach was making it impossible for him to breathe. His eyes were boiling over behind his glasses.

“So, how does it feel now, you old baboon?” the parrot’s beak said in his ear. The three of them had surrounded him, holding the clamp on him as if he were another dog. Pillai’s eyes were filling with tears. The parrot’s beak bent down to lift up Pillai’s shirt, unbuttoned his trousers and slipped down the zipper.

“No, . . . no, . . . listen . . . stop . . . don’t do that,” Pillai tried to scream but the hippopotamus tightened the clamp even more, choking his voice in his throat. His trousers had fallen below his knees and parrot’s beak was sliding his underwear down.

“Dig up the mountain and what do you pull out? A mouse,” the driver guffawed. “Look at his balls; I bet the dogs would love these heavy ones.”

“Keep your mouth shut,” the parrot’s beak said. “First let’s check if they’re still worth anything,” and he started jerking Pillai off.

Pillai’s eyes were burning. He wanted to call for help, but he’d lost his voice. The whole scene seemed to be floating in water in front of his eyes. The only guy he could make out a little because of his bulk was the hippopotamus who stood holding the clamp firmly with both hands as he chewed on his gum. Pillai couldn’t remember how much time had elapsed. The dogs, their claws poking through the net, were scratching his back, licking his neck with their saliva-dripping tongues, and making noise. His trousers lay on the ground. Parrot’s beak was continuously squeezing his testicles and unbearable shooting pains were running through the veins in his stomach. He didn’t remember when he lost consciousness.

When he came to, some dirty children poking their fingers in their noses stood watching him a short distance away. The dog-catcher mobile had left. Pulling at the waist of his trousers with his hands, he saw the roiling ocean in the distance. His glasses, lying on the sand in front of him, were glittering.

Sitting on his terrace, Pillai was looking at the area where the sky and the ocean joined together. The fishermen’s skiffs were rolling like toys on top of the water. Dipping a towel in hot water, Kochamma was trying to

clean his body.

“You’ve been deep in thought since yesterday but don’t want to talk about it, hey?” she said.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Kochamma.” He hadn’t told her about the incident with the dog-catcher mobile yesterday, but he did want to show her the difference between a human being and a dog.

The next morning he asked her for five hundred rupees.

“For what?”

“You never asked before, Kochamma. Give me the money. I’ll tell you everything later.”

The crowd of strollers was still on the beach when the two dog-catchers appeared from either side. As always, they were after a lame dog. This one had his mouth inside a dirty, rotten coconut shell driven ashore by a wave and he was trying to devour a worm that was inside. Before the two could get near the dog, old Pillai, almost like a will-o-the-wisp, jumped up from somewhere, briskly put a collar around its neck and held it by the chain. The dog-catchers could do nothing but stare at him dumb-founded.

“This is my pet dog. Don’t touch it,” Pillai said imperiously. The dog wasn’t used to the collar so it was straining to free itself and run away, but Pillai held it steady. No one knew where he’d suddenly acquired the strength to do that. There were still another dozen or so collars like that one inside his bag.

People crowded around watching this unusual spectacle.

“Old fellow, if the dog bites you, you’ll have to get fourteen injections. And yes, you could even go mad.” The parrot’s beak pointed his clamp towards the dog and said, “Give it to us.”

“Never. And don’t you lecture me about dogs. Human beings are more poisonous than dogs,” Pillai said, dragging it away. “Someone bitten by a dog might be saved, but not someone bitten by a man.”

People stood quietly watching this man dragging a half-dead dog along on the sand. For some distance the dog protested, but finally it surrendered, walking along shaking its decapitated tail and munching on a cookie given to it by Pillai.

That day Pillai caught three more dogs, and when he arrived at his own gate with the four of them in tow, Kochamma lamented: “What are you going to do with them?”

“Keep them in the house.”

“Are you crazy? So many of them, and they’re all mangy and sick. They could die any time?”

“Well, they’ll die if they must. You don’t need to worry. But I’ll show them to the veterinarian. And, Kochamma, this is nothing! You’ll have to

get used to keeping dogs because there are many more still to come.”

Within a week Kochamma’s house was filled with dogs. The majority of them were suffering from scabies and had bodies full of sores, but some of them were healthy and they raised more of a hell by howling all night long. They were freedom-loving dogs and didn’t like this bondage.

Kochamma couldn’t figure out what to do. The number of dogs was increasing every day. The servants were all going nuts, threatening to quit, and the veterinarian had become a daily visitor. At last, fretting and fuming one day she said: “How long do you expect us to live with so many dogs? Even the neighbors have begun complaining now.”

“Don’t worry, Kochamma. Eventually, everything will be fine.”

Perhaps Pillai was right. The dog-catchers were getting their hands on fewer and fewer dogs now. Not because Pillai had become a partner in their enterprise—though, in comparison, he had indeed become more apt at dog catching thanks to his biscuits and his positive attitude—there was also another reason. The dogs had begun to recognize the mobile as well as the dog-catchers, and they disappeared as soon they spotted them. Finally, one day, the dog-catcher mobile stopped coming to the beach.

“For the past four days, the mobile hasn’t appeared,” Pillai said to Kochamma. “It seems as if they’re not going to show up anymore. I’ll watch for one more week and then free all these dogs. You must have noticed that for the past two days I haven’t brought even one dog into the house.”

“There isn’t room for any more in the house.”

“But there’s room for this dog,” Pillai said, taking Kochamma’s hand in his own.

“Are you really faithful like the dogs?” A smile spread over her face.

“Absolutely, except that I don’t have a tail to wag in order to show you.”

All the dogs were freed with the collars around their necks. Now when Ramanujan Pillai roams around on the beach, some of the dogs recognize him and start following him. He has even given names to some of them, which he mixes up sometimes. The dogs come up to him without hesitation and stand wagging their tails.

“Because of you guys the world is a beautiful place,” Pillai tells them as he strokes and rubs their necks. He goes to the shore every day for his walks. The waves keep leaping up and down. No dog-catching mobile comes that way now. □

—Translated by Faruq Hassan