

**PAPERWEIGHTS AND A SENIOR BELL**

---

It started with a low rumbling in the remote reaches of his gastro-intestinal tract. Upon arising that morning he initially thought the nausea and gurgling had abated, but within fifteen minutes, after he padded from the luxurious hotel bed to the luxurious bathroom and with barely a chance to glance in the mirror, the rumbling had started again and Thomas Tibbitts soon found himself wedged once more into the seat of the toilet.

His second floor room in the historic Connemara Hotel had two telephones, one on the desk next to the bed and one in the bathroom within arm's reach of the toilet. Now he knew why.

"Dr. Tibbitts?" Mr. Balakrishnan asked two hours later that morning, stooping slightly to examine Thomas more closely.

Thomas snapped back to the present, pulling in his stomach to ease the bolts of pain shooting through his stomato-intestinal organs. "Yes," he responded soberly. "Yes the office is, well...it is a fine office."

He gazed around the long, narrow room, shaped like an elongated tear-drop. The paint on the walls had long ago begun to flake and curl up in the withering heat. Dull morning light glowed through the window on the far end, whose dust had accumulated unchecked since the colonial period. While the room was quite extensive in one direction, it was so narrow the other way as to allow only the massive desk and one row of chairs facing it.

He smiled at his new colleagues, saying to himself: "I'll suffocate in here within a week."

"Please become seated," urged Mr. Sivanandan waving his arm toward the grand desk. As Thomas settled in, the gigantic leather chair squealed its protest, and pitched violently to the starboard. Apparently one or two of the casters had seized up in the eternal humidity so the chair wobbled from side to side as he tried to plant himself into it. His stomach heaved as the rebellious chair lurched and then settled into a sullen posture, leaning at a precarious angle and daring him to move a muscle.

"It is a fine chair," declared Mr. Sivanandan, Assistant Director (Additional) of the State Pollution Control Department.

"It is a fine office," affirmed Mr. Balakrishnan. One of the top engineers of Advanced Technology Partners of South India Private Limited, he was a pleasant, mild-mannered man with a thin, well-trimmed moustache and thick horn-rimmed glasses. He stood with his spine in sigmoid curve, which was extended further by his arm and the palm of his hand resting under his chin in a sort of thinker's pose, revealing a man who took much care with his words.

Thomas surveyed the great desk, stroking the surface. The reflection of the sun revealed glazed arcs on the crazed layer of varnish, indicating it had recently been cleaned.

"As new project manager you are having many important papers," added Mr. Sivanandan.

"There is one question," he stammered.

"Oh, of course the paperweights and the bells," Mr. Sivanandan said, waving his arm toward the left corner of the desk at what resembled a pile of hockey pucks of red, green, blue and yellow. Each one sat atop a pile of paper fluttering beneath the perilously wobbling fan that spun and squealed overhead, trailing wisps of spider webs in its wake. That was the thing about southern India, nothing was straight and everything wobbled.

"Paperweights," explained Mr. Sivanandan. "And a large bell. A senior bell."

"Junior officials get only small bell," Balakrishnan reminded everyone, directing his attention back to the shiny silver object.

Thomas' gaze darted along the wire feeding into the device, which resembled for all the world the bell on his old bicycle of elementary school days. The wire looped across the desk, underneath the edge, reappeared several feet away and turned into a black button.

"You may try it out," urged Mr. Nagendran, a tall, young and well built man. He would have appeared as an athlete but he was all hands and feet and gangly despite his size. On his first day in India, when Thomas had squeezed beside Nagendran into the rear seat of the tiny Ambassador car it needed several attempts to wedge the door closed.

Not waiting for the new project manager now installed in the great chair, the giant pressed the button.

It rang, much like the very same bicycle bell and from somewhere else there came another ringing, except it was a semitone higher in pitch. The noise of both the junior and senior bells produced a shrill vibration that caused his insides to churn.

"You see?" noted Balakrishnan. "Very distinct sounds."

Thomas nodded cautiously.

"You may just press it," Nagendran counselled, indicating the black button.

"I'd love to," he responded, squirming in his new chair so none in the room could possibly be blind to his inner turmoil. "But I have another question..."

"Just press it," counselled Balakrishnan. "It is quite user-friendly...and also effortless."

Sighing, Thomas put his finger on the black button. The senior bell rang out with all the authority of a school bell announcing the end of class.

"And this would be used for...what, exactly?" he asked.

Without replying, his three new colleagues stood, grinning and rocking their heads.

Seconds later the door creaked open.

"This is the sweeper," announced Mr. Sivanandan.

A tiny, gray-haired woman in a faded sari entered the room. She couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds.

Thomas stood up and squeezed between the desk and the wall, to greet her.

"I am glad to meet you," he enunciated, managing a grin and extending his hand with cooperation and friendship.

The woman stared at him as if he were mad. She peered at the others in the room. She wrung her hands. They bowed their heads.

"What is your name?" asked Thomas.

This led to an intense discussion among the others. How could they speak whatever language that was without injuring their vocal organs?

Finally, Sivanandan spoke a few words to her.

The sweeper looked at Thomas then back at the others, then began laughing. Sivanandan frowned, and spoke some more.

"Rama," she finally replied, staring at the floor.

"And your job is?" Thomas continued, finally retracting his hand.

Sivanandan and Balakrishnan stared at him. "She is a sweeper," Balakrishnan advised.

"A sweeper?" he echoed. "Where does she do her sweeping?"

The officials briefly exchanged glances. Sivanandan cleared his throat. "She could be told to bring tea," he suggested. Balakrishnan and Nagendran all bowed their heads in agreement.

"She could bring lunch," Balakrishnan volunteered.

"You might even prefer a cool drink," smiled Nagendran. "which she can happily bring."

"Ah," Thomas replied, trying to appear as if he understood. "But what is her overall purpose?"

"Her overall purpose?" asked Sivanandan.

"Well yes," stuttered Thomas, already wishing he hadn't raised the issue. "Her general purpose."

The three men conferred for half a minute. Then they faced Sivanandan. "Her general purpose is to be a sweeper," he announced.

Balakrishnan and Nagendran rocked their heads in agreement, and the woman dissolved from the room. The three officials exchanged a few words, nodding towards Thomas..

"Ah," agreed Sivanandan. "Come this way, sir."

Thomas lurched out from behind the grand desk and followed them to the far end of the room and along a narrow passageway. Both Sivanandan and Balakrishnan smiled and stared into a small, dark room. Apparently no explanation was necessary.

The walls of the tiny room were even more cracked and paint-peeled than those in the office. There was no furniture. The room was empty. But as Thomas's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw a small hole in the center of the floor. Thomas looked back at Sivanandan and his warm smile.

Sivanandan and Balakrishnan exchanged a few words. Sivanandan pointed at the hole, then at Thomas. Nagendran joined in the mounting argument. Their words were flying so fast now that Thomas didn't even recognize the topic they were debating.

After a minute the argument just stopped. "Yes, yes, this can be done," Sivanandan concluded. Beckoning Thomas to follow, he led them briskly along another dark and claustrophobic hallway, turned a corner and marched up a set of stairs.

With Thomas hobbling behind, the troop entered what appeared to be a conference room. Still gasping from the climb and the mid-March heat, Thomas squinted at stacks of computers and tangled wires nearly filling the entire room. He noted in passing that the computers all possessed the same red dots that adorned the foreheads of his three hosts.

Sivanandan strode to the corner of the room where there was a door armed with a padlock. He selected a large key from at least fifty others crammed around the enormous key ring he wrenched out of his pocket.

While Sivanandan was straining with the keys, Balakrishnan approached Thomas, holding his palms together in front of his chest. "This is the greeting when addressing a woman," he explained. Thomas put his palms face to face and held them in front of his chest, prayer-like. "A small bit lower," suggested Balakrishnan. "And never, never touching the woman. Yes, just like that!"

After trying at least a dozen keys on the ring, Sivanandan found one that fit. Rattling it about for a minute, he creaked open the door. The intestinal tract of the new Canadian project manager squirmed, now entirely beyond his control. Sweat poured down every crevice of his body inside a newly acquired polyester summer suit.

"This is used especially for visitors," smiled Balakrishnan.

"Foreign visitors," Sivanandan clarified.

"Ah!" gasped Thomas. He gazed fondly at the gleaming white statue, the ceramic goddess that was a toilet. In his entire life, he'd never thought the sight of a toilet, a flushing toilet with a moveable lid, seat and flush-handle, would appear so glorious.

"Ah," observed Sivanandan.

Balakrishnan wobbled his head, smiling once again.

"I'll catch up with you," Thomas suggested, already struggling with his belt buckle.

Rocking their heads in comprehension, his hosts scurried out into the hallway to wait.

"I am most grateful," Thomas cried as the door closed, giving his head ever so slight a wobble as he aimed himself toward the apparatus in the now complete darkness. "I'll meet you back in the office...after some time."

He would be alright once he conquered this gastro-intestinal malady, Thomas reflected in the darkness and silence. Despite this temporary discomfort, he was in the right place and poised for much more career advancement. While he'd achieved many awards for academic excellence during his graduate and post-doctoral studies, and then climbed to the level of Associate Professor, life in academe had been a financial challenge. Roslyn had expensive tastes and even with her salary as a junior professor they required more cash flow before they could afford things like a home, two cars in the garage, and who knows, maybe even marriage. So with few regrets he left the vine-cloaked walls of the university. Now still only in his mid-thirties, with his qualifications, he could go anywhere. This was 1984, the business world was booming, and the potential rewards were staggering compared to his parsimonious life in academe.

This project to clean up a heavily polluted waterway in southern India was right up his alley. Rather simple, really. He'd been astonished by the lavish budget his new employer, Consolidated Technologies International Corporation Inc., had managed to wangle. He would be in India for three weeks, four at most, and then he would go home filled with success and take on the next important project. His boss Harold had intimated Thomas was already being weighed for a senior management position. And he'd been at CTIC Inc. for only a couple of months.

As he and Balakrishnan and Nagendran pulled away from the office building in the tiny Ambassador car with a driver named Rajeesh, Thomas asked: "When you were talking to Mr. Sivanandan, what language were you speaking? Hindi? Tamil?"

"No," replied Balakrishnan, staring over at him for a moment. "English."

