

Four Strokes of Luck

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 juggernaut

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Bypass Road

The incident occurred on Kumaresan's fifth day at his new part-time job in a shack by the side of the bypass road. The light from the dim bulb encroached meekly into the dark of its surrounds. He had to stay there all night, by himself. If a 'party' made its untimely arrival, he was to call Mechanic Valavan right away, on his mobile phone. This was his brief.

It had all begun like this: one night the previous week, Kumaresan hadn't been able to sleep. He'd lost track of time as he read a novel by the light of the street lamp. Valavan had made his obstreperous entry into the street and braked suddenly by his side.

He'd yelled over the noise his bike emitted, 'What is this, mapillai? You're reading so late into the night, eh?'

He woke most people who had been sleeping on the street before he left.

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A couple of days later, Valavan had said, ‘You’re just faffing about reading books, aren’t you? I have an idea. Read your novels in my shack. If you feel sleepy, sleep away. If some party lands up, call me. You’ll have some pocket money for your troubles.’

This was how he’d landed the job.

Valavan had erected a wooden frame by the side of the road, hung a tyre from it and fixed a little red electric bulb inside. A makeshift roof had been fashioned from asbestos sheets. Inside this improvised hut were the tools Valavan would need to fix punctures.

Outside the hut was a cot. Valavan had left a little lamp, and one could lie down on the cot and hold a book so that the light fell on the page.

The only disturbance came from the nocturnal insects that clustered around the light. If one were inclined to sleep, one could push the cot away into the surrounding darkness. It took Kumaresan only four days to get used to this routine. He had yet to accustom himself to the noise of the vehicles that zoomed past his post at odd hours. Each vehicle that whooshed into the ether with a screech made him wake up in panic.

He could discern a couple of houses in the

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distance. He wasn't afraid to be alone. A book would stave off the boredom. He decided he would read a novel a day.

On that fifth day, the book he'd chosen failed to keep him engrossed. It *was* a novel. But the chapters that narrated the story were punctuated by others in which the author expounded his personal philosophical beliefs. Kumaresan's heart wasn't in it.

Setting it aside, he lay on his back and stared at the sky for a while.

Then, he sat by the road to watch the vehicles.

Then, he put one foot in front of the other and walked along the narrow ridge of the rainwater canal for some distance.

During the intermissions between the passing of vehicles, he felt himself surrounded by a wall of darkness. Some moonlight would have been pleasant. There was nothing of interest at all on the road. It felt strange to walk all alone along the ridge. Eventually, he went back to the cot and lay facedown. The cot with its sagging ropes felt like a cradle. He pushed it into the darkness and fell asleep.

He didn't know what time it was. He woke

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with a start when he felt someone touching him.

‘Saar, saar,’ the darkness called.

The shape of a person loomed over him.

He struggled to sit up.

This was the first ‘party’ he had encountered at work. The man looked thirty, perhaps thirty-five, years old. He wore unremarkable clothes, a faded shirt and worn trousers, rubber slippers on his feet. But one couldn’t draw any conclusions about the people of this area based on their apparel. They were expert at carrying the appearance of penniless paupers while having crores of rupees to their names.

As evidence of his visit to some temple, the party had holy ash and vermilion smeared on his forehead and neck.

His bike had had a puncture on the way home, he explained. He had left it back where it had given way, and walked to the shack. He must have hurried. His face and neck were bathed in sweat. He thought Kumaresan was the mechanic and said, ‘Come, let’s go.’ He was in such haste that he appeared ready to drag him to the spot where the vehicle had stalled.

Kumaresan called Valavan on his mobile. It

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rang for a while. He tried twice, to no avail. The party waited impatiently.

‘Can we go?’ he asked.

‘We need a guy,’ Kumaresan replied, and indicated a block of stone. ‘Sit down.’

Before he could try again, Valavan called him back. As soon as he explained what had happened, Valavan said, ‘I’ll be there,’ and disconnected abruptly.

The party would not sit.

‘When will the guy arrive?’ he asked, several times, in various ways.

Kumaresan tried to make conversation, but he would not engage. He must be anxious about having left his vehicle unguarded, Kumaresan thought.

Valavan didn’t take long. He arrived within the tenth minute of their conversation. The road was a couple of miles from the village. He must have hopped on to his bike even as he disconnected the call. His appearance indicated he’d been interrupted during sex.

He looked at the party, and asked, ‘Which bike is it?’

The party gave him the details.

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It was of a sturdy, heavy make.

‘Where is it?’ asked Valavan.

He wasn’t able to answer accurately. Not far, he said.

‘Which wheel?’

‘Back wheel.’

Valavan fetched a broken chair from inside the hut, set it up on the pavement and lowered himself into it.

‘Saar, let’s go, saar,’ pleaded the party.

‘Go and do what? Tell me. The back wheel cannot be removed and brought here. There will be no light for me to fix the puncture there. Even if I were to fix it, I cannot fill the tyre with air. Tell me, what can we do, eh?’ Valavan asked, laughing.

The party had no answers.

‘Saar, tell me what we can do,’ he finally said.

Valavan looked at Kumaresan, who was sitting on the cot, and mumbled, ‘What shall we do, mapillai?’ He made as if he was in deep thought for a while.

‘Mama,’ Kumaresan began, ‘couldn’t we take your bike and fetch the wheel?’ There must be some way to help the poor man.

‘It would be easy if it were the front wheel,’

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said Valavan, thoughtfully. 'But we'd kill ourselves trying to remove the back wheel. That's the problem with this particular make. We'll need a proper workshop to do the job.'

'Saar, please do something, saar,' begged the party, coming close to Valavan. 'The vehicle is unguarded.'

'Did you leave it right on the road?' Valavan asked.

'No, saar, I parked it some distance from the road, in the darkness. But I'm worried all the same.'

'Hmmm. I *do* feel sorry for you. What will you do, all by yourself, eh, with that vehicle? Why don't you wheel it slowly and bring it here? I'll fix it.'

'I couldn't push it, saar. It's too far.'

'Well, then there's only one option. We'll have to get a Minidor and load the bike on it. Then we can fix it here.'

'Will we get one at this time of night, saar?'

'Let's see. There's two-three boys in our town who have a Minidor. But they must have drunk themselves to sleep by now. I doubt they'll pick up the phone. Shall we try? But it will cost money. Do you have cash on you?'

'Yes, saar, I can pay. Call them, saar.'

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The man's words tumbled over each other. He'd probably sign away all his property just as long as the job was done, Kumaresan surmised. Valavan handed his phone to Kumaresan.

'Call Seelan,' he said.

Kumaresan called. Seelan did not answer.

'Call Santhan,' he said.

Kumaresan called. Santhan did not answer.

He tried four, perhaps five, numbers. No one picked up. Kumaresan began to feel anxious. If only someone would pick up, they could fix the puncture right away.

Mechanic Valavan scratched his beard. 'Hmmm. There's a guy in the next town. He's a good sort. He'll come if I call. But then it will cost some more. Should we try?'

'Please call him, saar. The vehicle is unguarded.' The party came close enough to Valavan to hold his hand.

Valavan took his phone back from Kumaresan, appeared to search for a number and eventually dialled. The man picked up on the second try.

'Chinnava, you home?... Will you bring your vehicle?... There's a party here, one feels sorry for him...yes, I ought not to have called you in the

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middle of the night, but poor man...come, we'll ask him, no problem...with you, there'll be four of us, and we can lift the bike on to the Minidor... the money won't be a problem, come along...ada! Come for my sake, pa.'

Disconnecting the phone, Valavan grunted. 'He'll land up. If he doesn't turn up when I call him for a job, how will I call him again, eh?'

'Saar, the vehicle is unguarded, all by itself. Please ask him to hurry.'

'Hold on, pa. I've woken up a guy from sleep. He'll have to wash his face-vace, won't he? Come, sit down here.' He snorted. 'Vehicles zoom along this bypass road all the time. But not one will stop. This is an orphaned stretch, don't worry. No one's going to steal your bike. Is it a new bike? Or is this your first time riding a bike? You're in such frenzy?'

Valavan was in a chatty mood. The party sat as if he'd been punished, his head in his hands. He wiped his eyes one after the other. Kumaresan felt sorry for him.

'What happened, anna, are you crying? Don't worry, nothing will happen to your bike. If you want I'll come along. Shall we go and stand guard there? Mama, will you follow us later?' Kumaresan

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turned to Valavan after trying to comfort the party.

‘Who the hell are you, the clown in the koothu? How far are you going to walk? The Minidor will be here any time now, keep your gob shut,’ snapped Valavan.

Kumaresan thought: ‘Aa haa, this must be the regular stage setting. The party and I are the new characters in the play.’ Valavan must have seen many, many panicked parties. He must have fixed many, many punctures in the wee hours. He must have got used to the drama. Once the thought occurred to him, Kumaresan was intrigued about how the rest of the night would play out.

Even before Valavan could complete his next sentence, the lights of the Minidor approached. Chinnavan pulled up by the shack, jumped off the vehicle, and lit a cigarette as he walked.

‘Where did this guy come from?’ he asked, blowing smoke at Kumaresan.

‘Oh, mapillai sleeps here to get parties. He’s nuts about books. So I told him to sit here and read, and call me if a party turns up. You know the old proverb about the boy who goes to graze his goat in another village so he can steal a look at a prospective bride for his brother? It’s like that,’ grinned Valavan.

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The party stood up and said, 'Saar, the vehicle is unguarded. Let's go, shall we?' He made for the Minidor.

'Hold on, pa, where's the bike parked, how far? I don't want a song and dance about the money after the job's done,' Chinnavan said.

The party understood that it was all out of his hands.

'A couple of kilometres from here. Perhaps two, two and a half. I'll pay you whatever you ask, the vehicle's unguarded, saar, let's go saar,' he said, flustered.

Stamping out his cigarette, Chinnavan said, 'Look here, I charge five hundred rupees for five kilometres. Then it's hundred rupees for every additional kilometre. Three of us to load the bike, at two hundred a head, so that's six hundred rupees. All right? Do you have the money? Once the job is done, don't whinge about having only so much money. We won't let the bike go. We'll hold on to it right here till you go and fetch any money you owe, all right?'

The party lifted his shirt, reached into the pocket of his trousers, pulled out his wallet and opened the flap under the light from the bulb.

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'I'll give you what you ask, saar, let's go, the vehicle is unguarded,' he said. The purse bulged with notes of various colours.

Pleased, Valavan said, 'Right, let's go.' With a smirk, he added, 'You're acting as if you've left your new bride unguarded, not a bike.'

Chinnavan and Valavan sat up front. Kumaresan got into the back with the party. It was open to the sky, with only a low safety door.

'Look here, I'll have to drive for a kilometre before I can make a U-turn,' Chinnavan called. 'So that's one kilometre until the turn and another kilometre to get back to point zero. There's no other way. That's already two kilometres. And if your vehicle's not parked within three kilometres, you'll have to pay according to the rates I quoted. Do you remember where you parked the bike? Did you mark the spot with some reference? I don't want you dithering.'

The party nodded along to everything he said. He must have understood he had little choice.

As they drove through the bypass road at night, the 'sarrrrr' of passing vehicles and their blinding headlights made Kumaresan dizzy. He wasn't sure how familiar the party was with this road. As

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Chinnavan had said, the Minidor made a U-turn after a kilometre. When they drove past the shack, Kumaresan said, 'This is where we started.'

The party bent to the window and stared across the road carefully as they sped along. He must have marked the spot. But he did not speak. Suddenly, he called out in a fretful tone, 'Stop! Stop!' Kumaresan spoke into the driver's flap and said, 'Mama, stop.'

The vehicle stopped.

The party jumped out of the Minidor even as it was slowing down, and ran across the street.

'Careful! Watch out!' called Kumaresan.

Vehicles that appeared far away would knock you down in seconds on the highway. The party disappeared into the darkness. He was back within five minutes.

'It's not here, we need to go a bit further,' he said.

'Yov, why do you wake us in the middle of the night and then give us the runaround?' grumbled Valavan. 'Look carefully before you decide. It's already been four kilometres.'

'Drive a bit slower, I'll keep looking,' the man said.

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‘Yeah, right. If I dawdle on the bypass road, someone will knock us down, understand?’ said Chinnavan, speeding up.

The party kept his eyes peeled on the road.

‘Anna, do you have some marker? Tell me, I’ll look too,’ Kumaresan offered to help.

He must have inspired some trust in the man. ‘There’s a paalai tree, with a little temple under it. You keep hearing the sound of the temple bells. It’s to the west.’

Kumaresan knew the road and the town well. But the bypass road had confused everyone. The familiar had turned unfamiliar. Thousands of tamarind trees lining the streets had been felled during the construction. There was only one consistent feature: tar.

Kumaresan closed his eyes and thought hard. The paalai tree, the little temple, the sound of the bells, west, he thought. A picture began to form in his mind.

‘Was there a tall fence by it?’ he asked.

The party did not seem to have noticed. Even so, Kumaresan was fairly sure he knew where the bike was parked. He considered calling out to Valavan and telling him at once. But then, Valavan

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might be annoyed and tell him off later. Clearly, they intended to give the party the runaround.

Kumaresan too kept his eyes on the road. When they neared the place he had in mind, he nudged him. ‘This is it.’

Then he leaned towards the driver’s window and shouted, ‘Stop, stop!’

But the vehicle only stopped when he shouted into the flap.

The man ran out into the darkness, jumping over the safety door. He was gone for a while.

‘Where the hell did he go?’ Chinnavan looked out, irritated.

He returned after five minutes. They had the right place.

‘There’s no U-turn here,’ said Chinnavan. ‘I’ll have to drive a kilometre at least before I can come round. It’s already been over five kilometres. You remember the rate I quoted?’

‘I’ll stay here. You make the U-turn. I’ll wait,’ the party said.

But Valavan and Chinnavan didn’t trust him. They asked Kumaresan to get down and keep an eye on him. The party ran across the road even as vehicles approached. Kumaresan crossed carefully.

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The little temple was in the forest, about fifty feet off the road. Even before Kumaresan had reached the other side of the road, the man had wheeled the vehicle from its hiding spot to the road.

As he had said, the little gongs of the temple bells swung against each other in the breeze. Their musical tinkling carried far in the silence of the night.

The vehicle wasn't new. It must have been bought some years ago. Why had he been in such a panic about someone stealing it, Kumaresan wondered, rather annoyed now. He pulled the bike up to the ridge of the road and sat by it.

As Kumaresan waited, the party hurried back towards the temple and disappeared into the darkness. His fear and anxiety must have given him a stomach upset.

Kumaresan had no idea how long the Minidor would take to arrive. The U-turn was not far off. But Valavan and Chinnavan would stop the vehicle for a while so they could take their time to get here and claim they had travelled a greater distance. Valavan had a workshop in the little town nearby. Kumaresan supposed that fetched him some additional income. He must be paying

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someone off to be allowed to set up the shack where he had. And the bulb that was perpetually on would cost him something too.

Every vehicle that approached made Kumaresan sit up. Could it be Chinnavan's Minidor? All of a sudden, for some reason, a Goundamani comedy scene came to his mind. In a film, Goundamani takes his wife to a movie. She insists on going to the late show. He has hidden from her that he suffers from night blindness, and decides to wing it. He nearly drives his bike head-on into an approaching lorry. As the driver yells at him, he cries, 'I thought it was two bikes, and I could slip between them.' The memory made Kumaresan laugh. It was somehow comforting to think of himself as a madman, laughing to himself in the witching hour.

Finally, the Minidor did pull up by him. The party had not yet returned. Chinnavan opened the bolts to the back door.

The party emerged from the dark, and began to pull his bike towards the Minidor.

'Look how deserted the road is...what foolishness to ride a bike at *this* time on *this* road...one ought not to be biking down this road even at daytime... What emergency brought you

here in the middle of the night?’ Valavan kept up a stream of sanctimonious rebuke.

Chinnavan mounted the back of the Minidor. Valavan lifted the front wheel of the bike on to the plank of the door. Chinnavan took hold of the front wheel, while the other three men pushed from behind. The bike was lifted on to the Minidor without fuss.

‘Get in,’ said Chinnavan, making as if to bolt the door.

‘Hold on,’ said the party, and ran back towards the temple.

He reappeared, this time accompanied by a woman. She kept her head bent.

‘He went on wailing that his vehicle was unguarded, was this the vehicle?’ laughed Valavan.

‘Is it a new one? You’re the mechanic, you should know,’ Chinnavan nudged him.

As the couple approached, the woman drew the pallu of her sari around her head to cover her face. She was slightly built. Her brocade sari made her appear fuller. Kumaresan wished he could see her face.

‘Yov, what the hell, you picked up a chick?’ asked Valavan, angrily.

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‘No, saar. She’s my wife,’ he said at once. ‘We’d gone to a function. We have some urgent work in the morning. That’s why we had to leave as soon as possible. We didn’t expect the puncture.’ His tone was beseeching.

‘Well, all right. But you give us the name of your home town. No, your exact address. We don’t want any trouble,’ said Chinnavan.

He gave them details of his home town, the names of his relatives and several other identifiers. But there was no way they could verify what he had said, since his town and relatives’ towns were all at least ten miles away.

The woman kept her face hidden. It appeared every word he spoke was true. But Valavan and Chinnavan looked askance at him and made a show of not believing him. Could she be *that* sort of woman, Kumaresan wondered. And if she was, would Valavan and Chinnavan strike a bargain with her? If they did, what was he to do?

‘Since this bypass came, all sorts of *activities* have been going on,’ sighed Chinnavan. ‘Can’t trust a soul. Well, all right, get her on to the vehicle. And include the *ticket* in your expenses.’

‘My wife, saar,’ he said, almost in tears.

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He gave her his hand to help her into the Minidor. She was so silent Kumaresan could not hear her breathe. She slipped into the shadows behind the man, as if to hide from them. Valavan, who had closed the door and was about to go to the passenger seat up front, suddenly hopped across the low door and joined them in the back.

‘What is this, anna, I thought you were going to sit in front, and you’ve got on to the back?’ Chinnavan called.

‘I’m tired of riding in front all the time, man,’ said Valavan. ‘I thought I’d give the back a try.’

The two of them roared with laughter. Kumaresan felt nervous, even scared. He searched his memory for occurrences of such incidents in the books he’d read. He wasn’t sure what to do. He wasn’t even sure where his allegiances lay.

The vehicle started. The man and his wife stood by the bike. Valavan and Kumaresan were by the left corner of the Minidor. The ride to the workshop would take only five minutes. But Valavan could not keep his mouth shut. He began to say all sorts of things. The gusty night air stole most of his words away, and no one could make them out clearly.

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‘What did you say, mama? What was that, mama?’ Kumaresan kept asking loudly. Yet, he couldn’t hear much. But it was clear that he was smirking, that his exchange with Chinnavan was loaded with snide humour.

The Minidor drew up to the workshop. The party held out his hand to his wife. She got down and disappeared behind the vehicle to adjust her sari. The men got the bike out of the Minidor.

‘I thought it was a *new* vehicle. Has it been ridden often?’ asked Valavan.

‘No, saar, it’s an old bike. I bought it second-hand a year ago,’ the party said obsequiously.

‘You were this anxious about a used bike, huh? Once the puncture is fixed, I’ll give it a test ride to ascertain the condition,’ said Chinnavan, with a strange smile.

Valavan went inside the shack to fetch his tools.

‘You get your money and leave,’ he said to Chinnavan. ‘I’ll take care.’

‘I’ll leave, I’ll leave. What’s the hurry? Why don’t I give the vehicle a test ride before I go, just to see what its condition is, eh?’ Chinnavan grinned.

‘When have you ever been able to resist riding any vehicle? Even when it’s a pain, you do mount

it, don't you?' Valavan said, laughing. 'Fine, as you wish. Stay on. Will be good company for me. Mapillai is new, isn't he? Look, his legs have begun to tremble at the very sight of the *vehicle*.'

The man joined his wife behind the Minidor.

'You, come and sit here, pa. Don't you want to see what we're doing to your vehicle?' Valavan called out to him.

They could barely contain their mirth.

Turning to Kumaresan, Chinnavan grinned and said, 'Have you plugged punctures, eh?'

'No, anna, I don't know,' said Kumaresan, determined not to be drawn into the repartee.

'I believe he doesn't know how to plug punctures, da,' said Chinnavan, and Valavan and he laughed till they had tears in their eyes.

Valavan removed the tyre and took out the tube. Feeling it with his hands, he called towards the Minidor, 'Hey, man, the tube's gone.' He added, 'You must have given the vehicle a rough ride.'

The man peeped out from behind the Minidor. 'Fix it somehow, anna,' he said. 'It only has to last till we reach home. I'll see to it in the morning.' There was a tremor in his voice.

'There's no way to fix the tube, man,' Valavan

said. 'You should have stopped where there was a puncture. If you go on riding it after it's given out, the tube goes for a toss.'

'Tell us once and for all. Are you going to be able to fix it?' asked Chinnavan.

'Why don't you give it a feel-up and tell me?'

Valavan said.

It struck Kumaresan that there was no word in the language that didn't lend itself to double entendres.

Well, let me tell you up front that what transpired wasn't as Kumaresan expected, and summarize the rest for you. Valavan said they would have to go to the shopkeeper's house, wake him up and buy a new tube to fix the bike. He asked the party to accompany Chinnavan to the shopkeeper's. The man refused. He would not leave his wife's side. So Valavan and Chinnavan went to buy the tube. They fitted the new tube into the wheel.

Quoting the rent for the Minidor, labour charges for mounting and dismounting the bike, the price of the new tube, fees for the mechanic's job and various miscellaneous costs, they asked for an exorbitant sum. The party did not attempt to

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bargain. He handed over the money and hurried to his bike. The woman, who rode pillion, kept her face hidden all through.

Valavan and Chinnavan, who then engaged in a debate over whether she was really his wife or not, eventually left too. Before leaving, Valavan gave Kumaresan a five-hundred-rupee note. But Kumaresan felt somehow cheated. His heart told him the money had been sinfully obtained. He wondered what he ought to do with it.

Should he give it away to a beggar? He had always believed one shouldn't encourage begging.

Should he donate it to an orphanage? But was it fair to involve another party in the sin?

Perhaps it would be a good deed to put the money in the temple hundi. But he wasn't really a believer.

After giving it much thought, he finally decided to spend the money on a book he had wanted to buy for a long time.