

Heat

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Poomani

Translated from the Tamil by
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 juggernaut

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Contents

Heat	1
Afterword	237
Translator's Note	241

1

Chidambaram had only planned to hack off the man's right arm.

He was aiming for the shoulder, but instead the sickle had sliced through the upper arm, its sharp tip entering the ribs. The severed arm had dropped near his feet. He kicked it away, grabbed the sickle and fled. As he ran, he heard the man's scream rise and fade like the final cry of a goat in a butcher's yard.

Luckily, the street lights had been off the whole time. As he sprinted down the darkened main road, lit only by candles flickering in the shops, he turned back to see if anyone was following him.

He could sense a couple of men running towards him silently. Behind them, a bus had turned the corner. In the beam of its headlights, he saw the figures giving him chase.

He darted away from the light to the edge of the road. He wiped the sickle in the dirt and rubbed it clean. Dabbing the sweat off his forehead, he shoved the weapon into the sheath hanging at his waist. From a cloth bundle tucked into his waist, he took out a handmade bomb and held it ready, waiting for the bus to pass.

The shadows were drawing near. He stopped, took aim carefully and tossed the bomb. It exploded with a bang, filling the area with smoke. He began to run again with even more vigour.

No one would follow him now. As he approached a corner of the main road of the town, he dropped his speed, turned into the street that led to the cattle fairground and vanished into the dark.

His feet stumbled on heaps of garbage. He slowed down to a walk. After wrapping the two remaining bombs again in the cloth bundle, he tied it to his waist. He stopped to pee under a tree. He was no longer panting.

The bomb, which he had rigged with his own hands, had not failed him. It had exploded with the force of a jumbo firecracker. Had his aim been on target, his pursuers couldn't have returned home.

The lights were back on again. He walked through the unlit areas along the town's edge. He could hear

Heat

the rumble of trucks in the match factories moving contraband loads of matchboxes in the dark.

There was the usual clatter and noise from the ginning factory. Visitors to the weekly market passed down the road, talking among themselves. Lights twinkled in the neighbouring villages as if stars had sprung up from the ground. He arrived at the foothill on the edge of the town, where their street lay.

He didn't want to go home, but he had to see Ayya. His father would scold him: 'What a stupid thing you've done, just like a little boy!'

What could he do? The matter had gone too far. They should have made Vadakkuraan walk around with an arm missing, but it had ended this way instead. No man could have survived that deep stab in the ribs. No one could feel sorry for him now.

Chidambaram reached the public tank. Tamarind trees had spread a seamless darkness over the bank. There was no sign of anyone. He squatted low, listening with an alert ear, scanning his surroundings. Avoiding the usual paths, he found a secluded spot and climbed down to the tank. He removed the sickle from his waist and rinsed it clean, washed the sweat from his neck as well as his hands and legs, and wiped himself dry. The stench of blood was gone now.

As he climbed back on to the bank with a heavy

heart and headed towards his street, a jumble of thoughts raced through his mind.

He would find Mama first and tell him about the incident. Mama would in turn inform Ayya. On the hilltop, light from the temple lamp illuminated the surroundings. Men moved about in the shadows lining both sides of the street. He stopped to watch them. Suddenly the beam of a flashlight trained on him. He signalled back by waving his towel. A few minutes later, a figure appeared carrying a spear staff.

‘Who is it?’

‘One of ours.’

‘What do you mean, ours . . .? Ah, it’s the big shot. Come, come.’

His uncle looked happy. He put an arm around Chidambaram’s shoulder and led him away. A few more men stood under a neem tree. Chidambaram recognized each man.

‘Why are they here, Mama?’

‘We were all waiting for you – after what you’ve done.’

‘What have I done?’

‘Oh, you did nothing, eh? Then why are you sneaking around like this in the dark?’

Heat

'I had just gone out to shit.'

The men sniggered softly. Pretending to pat him on the back, Mama felt around Chidambaram's waist too. He found the sheath with the sickle inside.

'Why do you need this to shit?'

'Just for safety. Don't put your hand on that side. I have other goods too.'

'Your father was right. You do have a heart of stone, boy.'

'Where is Ayya?'

'Not here.'

'Where has he gone without you? Why are you standing here?'

'We heard that some men from Vadakkur village were coming this way. We have to see what it's about, don't we?'

'Who will dare to come here?'

'Yes, our boy has finished off the enemy. Who'll dare now?'

'Is he dead?'

'You don't know?'

'Who told you?'

'We know the whole story.'

'Does Ayya know?'

'Of course. You are his son, after all.'

Chidambaram was silent. Mama tousled his hair.

‘We are just a useless bunch. We should’ve wiped out Vadakkuraan’s entire family by now. Never happened. Instead, we drank arrack every day and loitered about. You’re not even fifteen yet, but you’ve made us look like wimps. Now your father won’t even look people in the eye; he slinks away with his head down.’

Chidambaram took hold of his uncle’s hand. The other men watched them in the dark.

‘Have the police turned up yet?’

‘How can they come so fast? They’ll wait till the wretched corpse is taken away. Let them come if they want to. We are ready.’

‘If the police find out about me, they are sure to come.’

‘How could they know who it was in that crowd?’

‘Yes, it was a really big crowd.’

‘He was cornered in a good spot.’

‘I tried to trap him in two or three other places; nothing worked. He sat leaning back in a chair at the barbershop. I went in as if to comb my hair and checked it out. The place wasn’t suitable. I could only strike him on the neck. The poor owner could lose his business. After the strike, it would be hard to get

away. The police station is nearby. Someone or the other would be standing at the entrance.'

'Doing it there would have been a mistake.'

'I then found him in a food stall. He stepped outside after eating and lingered there, belching. But he was folding betel leaves with both hands in front of him. I had decided on cutting his arm. If I struck his leg, he would lie around at home, unable to move around, right?

'So you got him at the temple junction, finally?'

'I thought it was a convenient spot. To escape, I could run south and disappear into the cattle fairground. He bought something in the sweets stall and stood where I could strike him easily. But he stepped back just as I raised the sickle. It went into the ribs. I had a hard time pulling it out.'

'You should have left it there and run away. Never strike at close range in a crowded place. There's no telling what might happen.'

'I first thought I'd throw a bomb and take off. But if the bomb didn't explode, it'd be a mess. My plan was only to chop off his right arm and make him a cripple. So I grabbed the sickle and ran, ready for anything.'

'You tossed a bomb too?'

'I was running in panic, and these men were after

me. They were asking for trouble. I guessed they were policemen because their footsteps weren't heavy or loud. I thought they'd give up at some point, but they didn't. It was then that I threw the bomb, thinking I had to finish them off too. They were out to catch me, right? The bomb went off like a clap of thunder. Had it struck them, they would've died. I didn't know what happened. I ran circling the town, washed up in the public tank and came here.'

'They survived the bomb. Tomorrow we'll find out who they were. Why didn't you say a word to me?'

'Why should I drag everyone into trouble, Mama? Maybe I should've told you. Whenever I stood behind you, sizing up your arm, I did think of telling you. Even so, I decided against it.'

'Oh, you did that, did you?'

'Just to get an idea. You are exactly as tall as that man.'

'Your father was watching while it happened. When it was over, he came running to us, saying our cub has killed a rabbit. I didn't understand what he meant. Then he told us the whole story.'

'All the lights went out as if it had been planned beforehand. I was walking fast, with the sickle hidden inside my dhoti, and suddenly it was dark. The sweets stall owner lit a candle and fixed it on the counter.'

Vadakkuraan put his hand out to collect the snack. One strike and that was it . . . Where's Ayya?'

'He said he was sending your mother away and he's asked to meet you.'

'Where is Aaththa going?'

'East. To your chiththi's village.'

'My sister?'

'Your mother is taking her along.'

'Our house?'

'We've moved the kitchen items and provisions to the headman's house; yours is now locked.'

'The dog?'

'It'll go with your father. I thought of keeping it, but it won't stay.'

'It won't stay with him either. I'll be off then.'

'Stay here tonight. I'll take care of you. You haven't eaten anything; how can you roam around hungry in the dark? Your aththai will shout at me. From the moment she heard what happened, she has been crying and asking for you.'

'I've had something to eat. Don't need anything now. Tell Aththai for me. I'll start right away.'

Meanwhile, Mama sent someone to bring Aththai.

Aththai's voice was worn out from crying. She begged him to eat. He just wanted water. She brought some from a neighbour's house. He drank the water

and started out. Mama and a few others walked with him up to the public tank and saw him off. They were carrying weapons. He recognized them in the dark: Ayyanar and Karupayya, along with Kaarmegam, who was holding a staff in his lone hand.

‘Do you want me to come along?’

‘No need, Mama. We need men in the street too.’

Leaning his staff on the shoulder, Kaarmegam folded his dhoti up to the knee with his one arm.

‘We are here. We’ll take care of everything.’

‘Let Mama stay back, though.’

Mama didn’t refuse.

‘You know the abandoned well beyond the north stream? That’s where you’ll find your father.’

‘I’ll get there. You go back.’

North of the public tank, he could make out the cart track from the ruts on the ground, but he chose not to take that route. He took the shortcut instead, through the shrubs and dead foliage. Before reaching the stream, he had twice stepped on thorns and pulled them out. A cluster of palm trees stood on the far bank. Ayya must be waiting there. He searched among the trees. He couldn’t find him. Then he heard a dog whining beyond the palm trees and moved cautiously in that direction.

Heat

A man was sitting on the stepping stone beside the abandoned well. He coughed gently and cleared his throat. When Chidambaram moved closer, the dog groaned and leapt up. Ayya stroked its back to quieten it. As soon as Chidambaram sat down on the stone directly opposite him, Ayya removed the towel wrapped around the dog's neck.

Chidambaram felt suddenly too shy to speak. He rubbed the dog's neck without looking up at his father. The dog climbed on to the stone and licked his face. Its wagging tail lashed his back.

Ayya pushed the plants at the back to one side to check for intruders.

'Who told you that I was here?'

Chidambaram kept his head bowed.

'Mama.'

'Where did you meet him?'

'On our street.'

'Nothing happened there, right?'

'No. Our people are ready and waiting.'

'Why did you go straight to our street?'

'I took the path from the public tank. They were waiting for me.'

'Never mind where they were waiting; going to our street was a mistake.'

‘I had to tell them what happened, didn’t I?’

‘Fine time to tell them, after it is all over. You should have thought of it first. You’re a big man now, it seems, and it’s *our* job to keep track of you. If something happened to you, what would we do? Your brother is already lost, killed in cold blood. We only have you. How can we stay alive after losing you? How shall we console Mama and Aththai? That woman will cry herself to death.’

The dog lay quiet in the kamalai¹ pit.²

‘Why would I have got caught?’

‘You’ll say that, won’t you? Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You would’ve stopped me.’

‘I waited for so long to kill him. You beat me to it.’

‘You tried for so many years.’

‘I am a coward, son. Anyway, how does it matter who did it? He killed my older boy, and now you’ve cut him down. And he fell writhing in front of the temple entrance like a slaughtered goat. We shouldn’t have spared him for so long. He did so many terrible things in the villages around here.’

‘I only wanted to see him missing an arm.’

¹kamalai: cattle-driven water-lift system for drawing water from wells for irrigation

²kamalai pit: downward sloping pit adjoining the well for the bulls to move to and fro for drawing and lifting water from the well

‘What good is that? This is the best way to settle accounts, once and for all. If he was just crippled he wouldn’t have kept quiet. He would have bribed the police with all his money to keep on troubling us. We wouldn’t have been able to live in peace.’

‘Were you there?’

The question seemed to sting Ayya.

‘I haven’t become that worthless, son. I was there, keeping an eye on everything that happened.’

Chidambaram didn’t speak. The dog was straining at the leash – it had smelled the field mice scurrying between the bushes around the abandoned well – and he was trying to hold it back. Ayya continued, ‘I knew something was up that day. You washed your clothes. Then you visited the temple. You came back with sacred ash smeared on your forehead. Then you carried your sister to the market and bought her all kinds of things.’

‘Just the usual.’

‘Don’t bluff. Why did you tell your mother to feed the dog early? She would have done it herself. While she was feeding the dog, you picked up a sickle and set out for the market. Something was bulging at your waist.’

‘I carry it always.’

‘Then why did your mother feel uneasy and tell me

about it? So I also picked up my sickle and followed you. You entered the barbershop. You lingered near the eatery. I followed, watching you. If I had passed in front of the sweets stall, it would have thwarted your plan, so I waited under the cover of the rest house. The light was bothering me. I couldn't think straight. So I ran to the transformer, fumbled around and pulled out the fuse. Your aim was on target, so I didn't join you. You ran south. I came home.'

'So it was you who put out the lights. I was surprised about the timing. I did feel nervous under the light. When everything went dark, I felt confident again.'

'I heard a bomb go off. Where did you get it from? Did Mama give it to you?'

'I put it together myself.'

'Did you? So that's why you were loitering behind the soda factory, picking up porcelain bits.'

'The other day, when you were rigging a few, I asked you for a couple of pieces. You refused.'

'From now on *I* should be asking you, it seems.'

Lights flashed on the cart track to the north. The men from Vadakkur were on their way. The light from their lanterns was advancing rapidly. He held the dog back, making sure that it stayed quiet. Ayya walked out, listened for sounds and came back.

'Are they from Vadakkur?'

Heat

‘Yes, the punks who shaved his private parts for a living. They’re going with the police to watch over his corpse.’

‘Do they think someone’s going to steal the corpse and gobble it up?’

‘They are running scared.’

‘What happens if the men from our street see these fellows and start a fight?’

‘Your uncle will take care of it.’

‘Waiting here is not a good idea.’

‘I came here for a reason. How can we kill a man and go our own way? If a fight breaks out in the street, everyone will be in danger. We had to come away. If the fellows from Vadakkur approach, we can alert our men and get them ready. If something happens, we can jump in.’

‘Who is going to fight for this fellow’s sake?’

‘Don’t say that. If there’s talk that we went over to their town and killed a man, there’ll be trouble. Who is going to worry about why it happened? He has taken all our land and left us with nothing but our bare hands and loincloth. But are they going to think about that?’

‘Let them come here if they want to.’

‘They won’t go back alive if they do.’

A lapwing called out two or three times. Inside

the abandoned well, the crickets had begun their loud chatter.

Both of them were sitting relaxed on the stepping stone with their legs stretched out in front of them.

‘Where have you dumped the sickle?’

‘I didn’t get rid of it. I washed it and tied it again to my waist. I also have two bombs.’

‘Will you give them to me? I’ll carry them for you.’

‘No, I’ll keep them.’

‘Any bloodstains on your clothes?’

‘Don’t see any.’

‘Get rid of them. Here, put these on.’

Ayya took out a dhoti and shirt from his bag and gave them to him. He wore them; then he secured the sickle and the bombs at his waist.

‘Did you bring a towel?’

‘Mama will bring the rest.’

‘Will Aaththa take my sister along?’

‘Why wouldn’t she? She will stay with Chiththi. She is very brave. She was born a woman, but she is more spirited than all of us.’

Light from the traffic flow on the road had decreased. Ayya was immersed in thought. Chidambaram ventured gently: ‘Shall I check if Mama is on his way?’

Ayya crouched below the stepping stone, lit his bidi, concealing the flame, and inhaled deeply, covering the lit end with both hands.

‘Go to the stream, wait behind the cover of a bush and look out for him.’

Chidambaram set out with the dog. Though he waited for a long time, there was no sign of his uncle. He returned to the well. He found Ayya and Mama chatting. Which route had Mama come by?

‘Did you take the roundabout way, Mama?’

‘I got here somehow.’

Mama pulled Chidambaram close and made the boy sit near him. Chidambaram listened eagerly to their conversation, keeping himself warm with Mama’s towel.

‘Feeling cold, are you?’

He watched them. First they came to a decision about money. Mama said bluntly, ‘Why are you so worried about money, machaan? It’s not like we can’t handle it. Let’s not talk about it any more.’

‘That’s not it, maapillai. You’ve faced trouble all your life because of us. Why should you continue to suffer?’

‘So you think I’ve suffered! Won’t I spend money if my boy does it? As if we can live happily after

sending our only boy to jail. Even if we set all our fields on fire, will it douse our anger? Why are you talking rubbish?’

Ayya fell silent. After a while, he clucked his tongue.

‘Maapillai, why should we leave our neighbourhood to go into hiding? Can’t we stay on, moving between hideouts?’

‘You may as well ask me why you can’t stay at home.’

‘Who is going to betray us?’

‘It’s not a good idea to be in the locality, machaan. Given our bad luck, someone will spot you. In all ways, staying out will be better. Do you want me to come with you?’

‘We are not scared. Me, I can hide for months together. But we must think of Chelambaram. Come what may, we are leaving.’

‘You don’t have to think of him. Do it for your own sake.’

‘Leave it, then. We won’t step into the village till you send for us.’

‘The dog won’t stay back.’

‘Shall we leave it with your sister?’

Chidambaram didn’t like the idea. Mama didn’t like it either.

‘How can we take the dog that far, machaan? You

can't keep it with you either. Let it stay back in my house. It will be difficult, but I'll manage.'

'If you are home, you'll be able to handle it. But you also have to go into hiding for some time.'

'I'll take care of that. Don't worry.'

Going into hiding didn't seem like a big challenge to Chidambaram. He slipped in a word hesitantly: 'Why, Mama? Why should Ayya come with me? Needless trouble, isn't it? If the dog is with me, I'll manage. You two can stay here and get things done.'

Mama looked at Ayya. Ayya was staring into the dark night.

'Have I become a useless old man? Look at the way he talks.'

'Don't mistake him, machaan. He is only trying to be helpful.'

Chidambaram was embarrassed. He didn't say anything.

Finally, it was decided that Mama would take the dog with him. Mama took Ayya aside and talked with him for a long time. Chidambaram had a difficult time calming the dog and sending him away. Before leaving, Mama asked Ayya, 'Machaan, do you have all the supplies you need, or have you missed something? Should I give you what I have?'

'See, you've started talking like your nephew.'

‘Fine, then. So long as you have everything you need. Take care and come back safe.’

Chidambaram stood watching till Mama, walking eastward and struggling to pull the dog along, faded into the darkness. Chidambaram had forgotten to give him the towel. Ayya picked up the bag that Mama had given them.

They did not return to that abandoned well again. It was late at night and the weather was turning cold. Both tied their towels tightly around the head like a turban, covering their ears.

The stream lay in the east like a squiggly black wick. Chidambaram walked behind his father.