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The Vendor of Sweets

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TO MY GREAT FRIEND
LYLE BLAIR
(OF MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS)
a remarkable Australian
who resides in the heart of Malgudi

Chapter One

"Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self," said Jagan to his listener, who asked, "Why conquer the self?" Jagan said, "I do not know, but all our sages advise us so."

The listener lost interest in the question; his aim was only to stimulate conversation, while he occupied a low wooden stool next to Jagan's chair. Jagan sat under the framed picture of the goddess Lakshmi hanging on the wall, and offered prayers first thing in the day by reverently placing a string of jasmine on top of the frame; he also lit an incense stick and stuck it in a crevice in the wall. The air was charged with the scent of jasmine and incense, which imperceptibly blended with the fragrance of sweetmeats frying in ghee in the kitchen across the hall.

The listener was a cousin, though how he came to be called so could not be explained, since he claimed cousinhood with many others in the town (total incompatibles, at times), but if challenged he could always overwhelm the sceptic with genealogy. He was a man-about-town and visited many places and houses from morning till night, and invariably every day at about four-thirty he arrived, threw a brief glance and a nod at Jagan, passed straight into the

kitchen, and came out ten minutes later wiping his mouth with the end of a towel on his shoulder, commenting, "The sugar situation may need watching. I hear that the government are going to raise the price. Wheat flour is all right today. I gave that supplier a bit of my mind yesterday when I passed Godown Street. Don't ask me what took me there. I have friends and relations all over this city and everyone wants me to attend to this or that. I do not grudge serving others. What is life worth unless we serve and help each other?"

Jagan asked, "Did you try the new sweet the cook experimented with today?"

"Yes, of course; it is tasty."

"Oh, but I think it is only an old recipe in a new shape. All sweetmeats, after all, are the same. Don't you agree?"

"No, sir," said the cousin, "I still see a lot of difference between one sweet and another. I hope I shall not become a yogi and lose the taste for all."

It was then that Jagan pronounced his philosophy, "Conquer taste and you will have conquered the self." They palavered thus for half an hour more, and then Jagan asked, "Do you know what I eat nowadays?"

"Anything new?" asked the cousin.

"I have given up salt since this morning," Jagan said with a glow of triumph. He noted with satisfaction the effect produced by this announcement and expanded his theory. "One must eat only natural salt."

"What is natural salt?" asked the cousin, and added, "the salt that dries up on one's back when one has run a mile in the sun?"

Jagan made a wry face at the coarse reference. He had the outlook of a disembodied soul floating above the grime of this earth. At fifty-five his appearance was slight and elfish, his brown skin was translucent, his brow receded gently

into a walnut shade of baldness, and beyond the fringe his hair fell in a couple of speckled waves on his nape. His chin was covered with whitening bristles, as he shaved only at certain intervals, feeling that to view oneself daily in a mirror was an intolerable European habit. He wore a loose jibba over his dhoti, both made of material spun with his own hand; every day he spun for an hour, retained enough yarn for his sartorial requirements (he never possessed more than two sets of clothes at a time), and delivered all the excess in neat bundles to the local hand-loom committee in exchange for cash. Although the cash he thus earned was less than five rupees a month, he felt a sentimental thrill in receiving it, as he had begun the habit when Gandhi visited the town over twenty years ago, and he had been commended for it. He wore a narrow almond-shaped pair of glasses set in a yellowish frame, and peeped at the world over their pale rims. He draped his shoulders in a khaddar shawl with gaudy yellow patterns on it and shod his feet with thick sandals made out of the leather of an animal which had died of old age. Being a follower of Gandhi, he explained, "I do not like to think that a living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet," and this occasionally involved him in excursions to remote villages where a cow or calf was reported to be dying. When he secured the hide he soaked it in some solution and then turned it over to an old cobbler he knew, who had his little repair-shop under a tree at the Albert Mission compound.

When his son was six years old he was a happy supporter of Jagan's tanning activities in the back veranda of the house, but as he grew older he began to complain of the stench whenever his father brought home leather. Jagan's wife proved even less tolerant, shutting herself in a room and refusing to come out until the tanning ended. Since it was a prolonged process, carried on over several days, one

can understand the dislocation into which the household was thrown whenever Jagan attempted to renew his footwear. It was a difficult and hazardous operation. The presence of the leather at home threatened to blast his domestic life; he had to preserve it, in the early stages of tanning, out of his wife's reach in the fuel shed, where there was danger of rats' nibbling it. When she lay dying, she summoned Jagan to come close to her and mumbled something. He could not make out her words, but was harrowed by the thought that probably she was saying, "Throw away the leather." In deference to what was possibly her last wish, he did give to a mission the last bit of leather at home, and felt happy that he was enabling someone else to take to non-violent footwear. Afterwards he just trusted the cobbler at the Albert Mission to supply his rather complicated footwear.

Now his cousin's reference to natural salt upset his delicate balance and he reddened in the face. The cousin, satisfied with the effect he had produced, tried to restore his mood with a pleasing remark, "You have simplified your life so completely, and made yourself absolutely self-dependent, as I was saying to the Cooperative Registrar the other day . . ." This had the desired effect, and Jagan said, "I have discontinued sugar as you know. I find twenty drops of honey in hot water quite adequate, and that is the natural way of taking in the sugar we need."

"You have perfected the art of living on nothing," said the cousin.

Encouraged, Jagan added, "I have given up rice too. I cook a little stone-ground wheat and take it with honey and greens."

"And yet," said the cousin, "I cannot understand why you go on working and earning, taking all this trouble!" He waved his hands in the direction of the sweets displayed on trays at the window, but stopped short of asking why Jagan

should expect others to eat sweets and keep him flourishing. He felt he had said enough, and stirred in his seat. Jagan's counting hour was approaching, and the cousin knew that he should move as Jagan did not like his cash to be watched. The time was six, the peak sales were over, and the front-stall boy would be bringing in the collection for the day. At this moment Jagan almost fancied himself a monarch on a throne surveying his people (consisting of the four cooks in the kitchen and the front-stall boy) and accepting their tributes. The throne was a flat-bottomed wooden chair covered with a thin cushion, hoisted on a platform, strategically placed so that he could keep an eye on all sides of his world of confections. The chair was nearly a century old, with shining brass strips on the arms and back and carved legs, especially made by his father when he built his house behind the Lawley Statue. Normally he would not have bothered to design a piece of furniture, as the family always sat on the polished floor, but he had frequent visits from one Mr. Noble, an Englishman, the District Collector, who came for lessons in astrology and found it painful to sit on the floor, and found it even more painful to extricate himself from the sitting posture at the end of the lessons. A signed portrait ripening yellow with time was among the prized possessions dumped in the loft, but at some point in the history of the family the photograph was brought down, the children played with it for a while, and then substituted in its glassed frame the picture of a God and hung it up, while the photograph in the bare mount was tossed about as the children gazed on Mr. Noble's side whiskers and giggled all afternoon. They fanned themselves with it, too, when the summer became too hot; finally it disappeared back to the loft amidst old account books and such other obscure family junk.

Sitting there, Jagan was filled with a sense of fulfilment.

On one side he could hear, see, and smell whatever was happening in the kitchen, whence a constant traffic of trays laden with colourful sweetmeats passed on to the front counter. As long as the frying and sizzling noise in the kitchen continued and the trays passed, Jagan noticed nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the Sanskrit lines in a red-bound copy of the Bhagavad Gita, but if there was the slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out, without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, "What is happening?" The head cook would give a routine reply, "Nothing," and that would quieten Jagan's mind and enable it to return to the Lord's sayings until again some slackness was noticed at the front stall and he would shout, "Captain! That little girl in the yellow skirt, ask her what she wants. She has been standing there so long!" His shout would alert the counter attendant as well as the watchman at the door, an ex-army man in khaki, who had a tendency to doze off on his deal-wood seat. Or Jagan would cry, "Captain, that beggar should not be seen here except on Fridays. This is not a charity home."

The surroundings were hushed when the master counted his earnings for the day. Although the boy at the front stall received all the cash, he was not supposed to know the total. He just dropped every paisa he received into a long-necked bronze jug and brought it in at six o'clock, returned to his seat, and brought in another instalment in a smaller container at seven, when the shutters were drawn. Jagan would not count the cash yet but continued to read the Lord's sayings. Without looking up he was aware that the frying had stopped; he noticed the hissing of the oven when the fire died out, the clinking of pans and ladles being washed, and then the footsteps approaching him, four pairs of feet from the kitchen, and one pair from the front stall as trays of leftovers were brought in as the last act for the day. Then when

he knew that all of them were assembled at his desk, he addressed in a general way a routine question, "How much is left over?"

"Not much."

"Be exact."

"Two seers of Mysore Pak."

"That we can sell tomorrow."

"Jilebi half a seer."

"Won't be so good tomorrow. All right, go."

The front-stall boy carried in the leftover trays and unobtrusively made his exit. The cooks still awaited his permission to leave. Jagan asked, "Are all the windows shut?"

"Yes."

Jagan now addressed himself to the head cook. "Tomorrow no jilebi? What is wrong with it?" It bothered him to think of the leftovers. They rankled in his mind as if he had a splinter under his skull. He loved to see clean shining trays return to the kitchen at the end of a day. A babble of argument followed. Jagan asked, "What do we do with the leftovers?"

The head cook said soothingly as usual, "We will try a new sweet tomorrow, if you will let me do it. There will be no problem of leftovers. We can always pulp everything back and fry them afresh in a new shape."

Jagan said philosophically, "After all, everything consists of flour, sugar, and flavours. . . ."—trying to come to a decision which he had been resisting all along; after all, one had to take a practical view, with the price of foodstuff going up.

When his staff was gone he put away his scripture book and pulled out his table drawer, which was padded with a folded towel in order to muffle the sound of coin being emptied from the bronze jug. His fingers quickly sorted out the denominations, the fives, tens, and quarters,

with the flourish of a virtuoso running his fingers over a keyboard; his eyes swept the collection at a glance and arrived at the final count within fifteen minutes. He made an entry in a small notebook, and then more elaborate entries in a ledger which could be inspected by anyone. In his small notebook he entered only the cash that came in after six o'clock, out of the smaller jug. This cash was in an independent category; he viewed it as free cash, whatever that might mean, a sort of immaculate conception, self-generated, arising out of itself and entitled to survive without reference to any tax. It was converted into crisp currency at the earliest moment, tied into a bundle, and put away to keep company with the portrait of Mr. Noble in the loft at home.

Jagan gave a final look at the cash in the drawer, locked it carefully, tugged the handle four times, and pushed his chair back with a lot of noise. He put a huge brass lock on the door, turned the key and put it in his pocket, and said, "Captain! See if the lock is all right." The captain seized the lock in a martial grip as if it were a hand-grenade and gave it a final jerk. "This is a very strong lock, sir, can't get it nowadays. I know about locks; this must have been made in a village foundry." He expatiated on the world of locks and locksmiths. Jagan cut him short with, "Well, be watchful." The captain gave him a military salute, and that was the end of the day.

Chapter Two

A lull had fallen on Market Road when he walked back home at a little past seven-thirty. An enormous shaft of blue light fell on the road from the Krishna Dispensary. He noticed Dr. Krishna at his table peering at the throat of a patient. A street dog lay snoring on a heap of stone on the roadside, kept there since the first municipal body was elected in Free India in 1947 and meant for paying the road. A light was still seen under the door of Truth Printing although it was shut in deference to the Shopping Hours Act. Jagan knew that if he knocked Nataraj would open the door, and he could always have the excuse of asking if the book was ready. The book had been in the press for years out of count, his *magnum opus* on Nature Cure and Natural Diet. Jagan knew that Nataraj would say again that he was waiting for types, but he could always sit down in one of his chairs and discuss politics. He overcame the temptation and passed on. "Must be home, the boy will be lonely. Not today." He fell into a brooding and introspective state as he walked on the edge of the road and was alone with himself. Jutkas drove past him, the drivers urging their horses with shrill cries, and then a few cycles, a scooter, and a couple of cars loudly honking their horns.

The traffic thinned and disappeared and he knew that he had come past Kabir Lane, as no more light fell in the street from the shops. At the junction of Market Road and Lawley Extension there was a short parapet over a culvert. As usual the vagrant was sitting on it staring at passers-by and spitting into the gutter, and the donkey stood beside the wall as if it were offering itself for target practice. Jagan knew what the vagrant was waiting for: for the dining leaves to be cast out of the homes in Kabir Lane: he would collect them, scour them with his hands, and fill his belly with any vegetables and rice that might be left on them. "The remedy would be for our nation to change its habits, for people to eat off plates and not use leaves for the purpose: the plates could be washed and kept—unlike the leaves, which are thrown out after dinner for vagrants to pick," Jagan reflected. He was for a moment racked with the problem of national improvement in various directions. "If everyone gave up dining leaves, those engaged in the leaf trade would be thrown out of their profession and an alternative engagement would have to be found for them. But first statistics should be taken of the percentage of the population eating off leaves (and those eating off plates, what kind of plate? Silver, aluminium, or what metal?). How many were engaged in gathering the dry leaves from the forests of Mempri and stitching them with little splinters, and how many in cultivating special banana leaves used for dining? Till all this was done on a national scale this vagrant would continue to remain here." Late in the night he emerged from this culvert and went down the streets crying at every door, "Oh good mother, give a handful of rice for this hungry one. . . ." He had a deep voice which penetrated the door and reached the kitchen beyond; his tone also quietened troublesome children as he was described to be a man with three eyes. "He is

a disgrace to the nation," Jagan commented within himself, and by the time he reached the statue of Lawley, a furlong off, his head throbbed with several national and human problems and their ramifications. Sir Frederick Lawley faced the city, and his back was supposed to be the back of beyond at one time, the limit of the city's expansion; but this prophecy was confounded when Lawley Extension, South Extension, and the New Extension all stretched out beyond the statue, and Jagan's ancestral home, which had been the last house outskirting the city, became the first one for all the newer colonies.

As Jagan approached the statue he felt a thrill, not at the spectacle of the enormous gentleman, standing in a Napoleonic attitude, benignly surveying the history and fortunes of Malgudi in a grand sweep (Jagan had ceased to notice the statue for over forty years now), but because he anticipated a glimpse of his son Mali on the other side of the statue. The pedestal had broad steps all around, which served as a park bench for the young and the old of the neighbourhood. Pensioners, idlers, tired workmen, sickly citizens advised by their doctors to inhale fresh air, sat facing east, west, north, and south on the steps. Students leaning on their cycles formed a group on the southern steps, all dressed in tight trousers and colourful shirts, hotly discussing film stars and cricket and fashions in dress and deportment. Jagan passed the statue on its north side so that he might not embarrass his son, but he liked to make sure that he was there; with a swift glance at the group, he spotted Mali by the deep yellow of his shirt, and the brief glimpse filled him with joy. He tiptoed away looking elsewhere, muttering to himself irrelevantly, "Poor boy, poor boy, let him be." He was very proud of his son's height, weight, and growth. "There are others, but he stands out from among them. Wonder what

God has in store for him," he reflected; "must give him more time." He reached home, his thoughts still hovering about his son.

He let himself into his house, switched on the light in the front room, took off his upper cloth and hung it on a nail in the wall, took off his jibba and thrust it into a basket for tomorrow's wash. He passed through the ancient house, through its triple series of open courtyards and corridors, and reached the back door, lifted the cross bar, and let it down gently. He stood for a moment gazing at the stars, enthralled at the spectacle of the firmament. "One still wonders," he told himself, "but the problem remains. Who lives in those? We are probably glimpsing the real Heaven and don't know it. Probably all our ancient sages are looking down at us. What are those constellations?" He couldn't be clear about them. His astronomy was limited to the location of the Pole Star from Orion's Belt or Sword or some such point, for which knowledge he had been awarded a second-class badge many years ago when he was a Boy Scout. For all the million stellar bodies sparkling, as far as Jagan was concerned, they might not be more than the two he had been taught to identify. In addition to Orion and the Pole Star he often noticed an extraordinarily lively firework in the sky, which sometimes stood poised over the earth in the westerly direction. He called it sometimes Venus, sometimes Jupiter, never being sure, but admiring it unreservedly and feeling proud that he was also a part of the same creation. All this was a habitual second of contemplation whenever he passed into the bathroom in the back yard.

The bathroom was a shack, roofed with corrugated sheets; beaten-out tin was fixed anyhow to a wooden frame to serve as a door on rusty hinges; the wooden frame was warped and the door never shut flush but always left a gap through which one obtained a partial glimpse of anyone bathing. But

it had been a house practice, for generations, for its members not to look through. This bathroom remained very much what it had been in the days of his father, who had resisted all suggestions for improvement. "After all," he declared, "no one is expected to live in a bathroom; one had better come out of it soon so that the rest may have a chance of tidying themselves." A very tall coconut tree loomed over the bath, shedding enormous withered fronds and other horticultural odds and ends on the corrugated roof with a resounding thud. Everything in this home had the sanctity of usage, which was the reason why no improvement was possible. Jagan's father, as everyone knew, had lived at first in a thatched hut at the very back of this ground. Jagan remembered playing in a sand heap outside the hut; the floor of the hut was paved with cool clay, and one could put one's cheek to it on a warm day and feel heavenly. His father had also trained up a beanstalk onto the thatch and watched its development with anxiety. When he found some money, he put up the walls of the bathroom, laying the bricks with his own hands, and that became practically the starting point of the house. They fetched water from a well across the road and stored it in old kerosene tins and drums. His father expanded the house from the back yard to the front. As a child, Jagan had no notion how his father's fortune improved—although he heard vague words such as "appeal," "lawyers," "lower court," and "upper court." By the time he became an adult, capable of understanding these affairs, they were over and he never could explain what the litigations were about and against whom. There came a time when the hut was finally pulled down; its thatches were used for heating a cauldron of water for a bath, and the cool mud floor was torn up and dug into pits for planting coconut seedlings. His father spent a whole week in these operations. Jagan and his brothers carried off baskets of shovelled

earth, screaming with delight, "Let us build a mountain." Father had his theories of coconut-rearing and filled the pits with great quantities of salt. "Salt is the only thing that can make a coconut tree grow," he remarked every day. "Show me the man who can grow a coconut tree properly and I will show you one with a practical head on his shoulders."

Regularly at five in the morning Jagan got up from bed, broke a twig from a margosa tree in the back yard, chewed its tip, and brushed his teeth. He was opposed to the use of a toothbrush. "The bristles are made of the hair from the pig's tail," he declared. "It's unthinkable that anyone should bite a pig's tail first thing in the morning." It was impossible to disentangle the sources of his theories and say what he owed to Mahatmaji and how much he had imbibed from his father, who had also spent a lifetime perfecting his theories of sound living and trying them on himself, his coconut trees, children, and wife. Even after the advent of nylon bristles Jagan never changed his views, maintaining that nylon had an adverse effect on the enamel. "You disbelieve me. Remember my father who died at ninety without a single tooth loose in his jaw." Jagan had immense faith in the properties of margosa, and in spite of its bitterness, he called it "Amrita," the ambrosia which kept the Gods alive; and sometimes he called it "Sanjeevini," the rare herb mentioned in the epics which, held at the nostrils, could bring the dead to life. He never ceased to feel grateful to his father for planting a seedling in his time and providing him with a perennial source of twigs—enough for his generation and the next, considering the dimensions of the tree. He chewed its bitter leaves once a month, as it destroyed all bacteria in the system, and he felt elated when the breeze blew—the air passing through the margosa boughs became an antityphoid agent, and during the summer rains

the place became fragrant as the little yellow flowers drifted down like floss. He collected them, fried them in ghee, and consumed the ambrosia for all his worth once a week. His wife refused to associate herself with any of his health-giving activities. She hated his theories and lived her own life. Their first clash occurred when he forbade her to swallow aspirin and suggested that she should fry a little margosa flower in ghee and swallow it for relief from headache. Seated beside the ancient pillar in their courtyard, she had knotted a towel around her temples and swayed madly back and forth, desperately begging for aspirin. Jagan was very sympathetic, no doubt, but was convinced that aspirin would do her no good. She had just looked up at him and said, "Oh, this headache is not half as unbearable as your talk. You would sooner see me dead, I suppose."

"Your headache has made you crazy," he said, his temper rising. He hated her appearance with that silly towel knotted around her head and her dishevelled hair. She looked ghoulish and no wonder she suffered inexplicable headaches! He suddenly realized the trend of his thinking and suppressed it with a deliberate effort. "You may do what you like. Only don't suffer."

"Leave me alone," she had said in reply.

Jagan wanted to ask, "Why are you disgusted with me?" but passed on into Mali's room. Mali had insisted upon having a room of his own, and in that vast house it was not difficult to find him one. Mali got a long hall without a ventilator or window, known as the "cool room" in those days, which had a stone-topped round table at the centre and a stool, and Mali seemed delighted to be assigned this room, as it was near the kitchen and the main hall and he could enjoy privacy without losing sight of all the goings on in the house—such as the arguments between his father and mother or their conversation with visitors. He had a