Man eater of Malgudi – R K Narayan

I could have profitably rented out the little room in front of my press. On Market Road, with a view of the fountain, it was coveted by every would-be shopkeeper in our town; I was considered a fool for not getting my money's worth out of it, while all the space I needed for my press and its personnel was at the back, beyond the blue curtain. I could not explain myself to sordid calculating folk. I hung a framed picture of Goddess Laxmi poised on her lotus and holding aloft the bounties of earth in her four hands, and through her grace I did not do too badly. My son, little Babu, went to Albert Mission School and felt adequately supplied with toys, books, sweets, and other odds and ends that he fancied from time to time. My wife gave herself a new silk sari, glittering with lace, every Deepavali, not to mention the ones acquired for no particular reason at other times. She kept the pantry well stocked and our kitchen fire aglow, continuing the traditions of our ancient home in Kabir Street.

I had furnished my parlor with a high-backed chair made of teakwood, Queen Anne style as claimed by the auctioneer who had sold it to my grandfather, a roll-top desk supported on bow legs with ivy vine carved on them, and four other seats of varying heights and shapes.

Anyone whose feet ached while passing Market Road was welcome to rest in my parlor, filling any seat that happened to be vacant at the time. Resting there, people got ideas and allowed me to print their bill forms, visiting cards, or wedding invitations. But there also came in a lot of others whose visit did not mean a paisa to me. Among my constant companions was a poet who was writing the life of God Krishna in monosyllabic verse. His ambition was to compose a grand epic, and he came almost every day to recite to me his latest lines. My admiration for him was unbounded. I felt thrilled to hear clear lines such as "Girls with girls did dance in trance," and I felt equally thrilled when I had to infer the meaning of certain lines, as when he totally failed to find a monosyllable but achieved his end by ruthlessly carving up a polysyllabic word. On such occasions even the most familiar term took on the mysterious quality of a private code language. Invariably, in deference to his literary attainments, I let him occupy the Queen Anne chair. I sat perched on the edge of my roll-top desk. In the other best seat, a deep basket in cane, you would find Sen the journalist, who came to read the newspaper on my table and held forth on the mistakes Nehru was making. These two men and a few others remained in their seats even at six in the evening when the press was silenced. It was not necessary that I should be present or attend to them in any manner. They were also good enough, without being told, to vacate their chairs and disappear when anyone came to discuss business.

Between my parlor and the press hung a blue curtain. No one tried to peer through it. When I shouted for the foreman, compositor, office boy, binder, or accountant, people imagined a lot of men on the other side, although

if it came to a challenge I should have had to go in and play the ventriloquist. But my neighbor, the Star Press, had all the staff one might dream of, and if any customer of mine insisted on seeing machinery, I led him not past my curtain but right next door to Star, whose original Heidelberg I displayed to everyone with pride, and whose double cylinder I made out to be a real acquisition (although in my personal view that man made a mistake in buying it, as its groans could be heard beyond the railway yard when forms were being printed).

The owner of the Star was a nice man, a good friend, but he hardly ever got customers. How could he, when all the time they were crowding my parlor, even though I could offer them nothing more than an assortment of chairs and a word of welcome? But few ever having stepped beyond the blue curtain, everyone imagined me equipped for big tasks, which I certainly attempted with the help of my well-wisher (I dare not call him staff) Sastri, the old man who set up type, printed the forms four pages at a time on the treadle, sewed the sheets, and carried them for ruling or binding to Kandan four streets off. I lent him a hand in all departments whenever he demanded my help and my visitors left me alone. On the whole I was a busy man, and such business as I could not take up I passed on next door to be done on original Heidelberg. I was so free with the Star that no one knew whether I owned it or whether it owned me.

I lived in Kabir Street, which ran behind Market Road. My day started before four in the morning. The streets would be dark when I set out for the river for my ablutions, with the municipal lamps flickering (if they had not
run out of oil) here and there in our street. I went down Kabir Street, cut through a flagged alley at the end of it, trespassed into the compound of the Taluk Office through a gap in its bramble fence, and there I was by the river.

I had well-defined encounters all along the way. The milk man, starting on his rounds, driving ahead a puny white cow, greeted me respectfully and asked, "What is the time, master?"—a question that I allowed to die without a reply as I carried no watch. I simpered and let him pass, suppressing the question, Tell me the secret of your magic: how you manage to extract milk-like product out of that miserable cow-like creature to supply thirty families as you do every morning? . . . What exactly are you, conjurer or milk-vender? The old asthmatic at the end of our street sat up on the pyol of his house and gurgled through his choking throat, "Didn't get a wink of sleep all night, and already it's morning and you are out! That's life, I suppose!" The watchman at Taluk Office called from beneath his rug, "Is that you?"—the only question deserving a reply. "Yes, it's me," I always said and passed on.

I had my own spot at the riverside, immediately behind the Taluk Office. I slmnned the long flight of steps farther down: they were always crowded; if I went there I was racked with the feeling of dipping into other people's baths; but this point upstream was exclusive, in my view. Over the bank of the river loomed a palmyra tree, from which dangled mud pots. Toddy dripped into them through a gash in the bark of the tree, fermented, stank to the skies, and was gathered

in barrels and sold to the patrons congregated at the eighteen taverns scattered in the four corners of the city, where any evening one could
see revelers fighting or rolling in gutters. So much for the potency of the fluid dripping into the pots. I never looked up the palmyra without a shudder. "With this monopoly of tavern-running Sankunni builds his mansions in New Extension and rides his four American cars driven by uniformed chauffeurs." But I was unable to get away from the palmyra myself.

At the foot of the tree was a slab of stone on which I washed by dhoti and towel, the dark hour resounding with the tremendous beating of wet cloth on granite. I stood in waist-deep water, and at the touch of cold water around my body I felt elated. The trees on the bank stood like shadows in the dusk. When the east glowed I sat for a moment on the sand, reciting a prayer to the Sun to illumine my mind. The signal for breaking off contemplation was the jingle of ox-bells as country carts forded Nallappa's grove, bringing loads of vegetables, corn, and fuel from nearby villages to the market. I rose and retraced my steps, rolling up my washing into a tight pack.

I had some more encounters on my way back. My cousin from the fourth street gave me a cold look and passed. She hated me for staying in our ancestral home, my father having got it as his share after the division of property among his brothers. She never forgave us, although it had all happened in my father's time. Most of the citizens of this area were now moving sleepily toward the river, and everyone had a word for me. One was the lawyer known as the adjournment lawyer for his ability to prolong a case beyond the wildest dream of a litigant, a sparse, hungry-looking man who shaved his chin once a fortnight. He cried the moment he saw me, "Where is your bed? Unless you have slept on the river how can you be returning at this
unearthly hour?55 When I saw him at a distance I cried to myself, "I am undone. Mr. Adjournment will get me now." There was one whom I did not really mind meeting, the septuagenarian living in a dilapidated outhouse in Adam's Lane, who owned a dozen houses in our locality, lived on rent, and sent off postal money orders to distant corners of the Indian subcontinent, where his progeny was spread out. He always stopped to give me news of his relations. He looked like a newborn infant when he bared his gums in a smile. "You are late today," I always said, and waited for his explanation; "I sat up late writing letters, you know how it is with all one's children scattered far and wide." I did not mind tarrying to listen to the old man, although my fingers felt cramped with encircling the wad of wet clothes I was carrying home to dry. The old man referred to four sons and their doings, and five daughters, and countless grandchildren. He was always busy, on one hand attending to the repairs of his dozen houses, about which one or the other of his tenants always pursued him; on the other, writing innumerable letters on postcards, guiding, blessing, admonishing, or spoiling with a remittance of cash, one or the other of his wards.

I was content to live in our house as it had been left by my father. I was a youth, studying in Albert Mission, when the legal division of ancestral property

occurred between my father and his brothers. I well remember the day when his four brothers marched out with their wives and children, trundling away their shares of heirlooms, knickknacks, and household articles. Everything that could be divided into five was cut up into equal parts and one was given to each. Such things as could not be split up
were given to those that clamored the loudest. A rattan easy chair on which my grandfather used to lie in the courtyard, always watching the sky, was claimed by my second uncle, whose wife had started all the furore over the property. She also claimed a pair of rosewood benches which shone with a natural polish, and a timber chair that used to be known as a bug-proof chair. My father's third brother claimed, as compensation for letting these items go, a wooden almirah and a "leg" harmonium operated by a pedal, which was also being claimed by another uncle whose daughter was supposed to possess musical talent. This harmonium had gathered dust in a corner for decades without anyone noticing it. No one had even asked how it had come to find a place in our home, although a little family research would have yielded the information that our grandfather had lent a hundred rupees to a local dramatic troupe and attached their harmonium, as their only movable property, after a court decree, lugged it home, and kept it in a corner of our hall, but had died before he could sell it and realize its value. His successors took the presence of the harmonium in that corner of the hall for granted until this moment of separation.

All of the four brothers of my father, with their wives and children, numbering fifteen, had lived under the same roof for many years. It was my father's old mother who had kept them together, acting as a cohesive element among the members of the family. Between my grandmother, who laid down the policy, and a person called Grand-Auntie, who actually executed it, the family administration ran smoothly. When my grandmother died the unity of the family was also gone. The trouble started with my father's second brother's wife, who complained
loudly one day, standing in the passage of the house, that her children had been ill-treated. She made out that she was steadily hated by everyone, and her cause was upheld by her husband. Soon other differences appeared among the brothers and their wives, although all the children continued to play in the open courtyard, unmindful of the attitude of the elders to one another. Before the year was out, actually on a festival day, they had the biggest open quarrel, provoked by a minor incident in which an eight-year-old boy knocked down another and snatched a biscuit from his mouth. The mother of the injured child slapped the offender on his bare seat, and a severe family crisis developed.

My father and his brothers were sitting around, eating their midday meal. My father muttered mildly, "If Mother were alive she would have handled everyone and prevented such scenes." Two of the brothers, incensed at the event, got up without touching their food. My father commented, without looking at anyone in particular, "You need not abandon your food. This is a sacred day. Such things should not be allowed to happen."

My mother, who was bending over his leaf serving ghee, whispered, "Why don't you mind your business ? They are not babies to be taught how to conduct themselves on a festive day." My father accepted her advice without a word and resolved at that moment to break up the joint family in the interests of peace.

The next few days saw our family lawyers, assisted by the adjournment expert, walking in and out with papers to be signed, and within a few weeks the house had become empty. It had been a crowded house since the day it was built by my father's grandfather, with numerous children,
womenfolk, cousins, relations, and guests milling in and out, and now it became suddenly bare and empty.

The household then consisted of my parents, Grand-Auntie, me, and my two sisters. My brother was away in Madras in a college hostel. As my father grew older he began to spend all his time sitting on the pyol, on a mat, reading Ramayana or just watching the street. Even at night he never went beyond the pyol. He placed a small pillow under his head and stretched himself there. He hardly ever visited the other parts of this immense house. Occasionally he wandered off to the back yard to pluck the withered leaves off a citrus tree which had been his favorite plant. It had been growing for years; no one knew whether it was an orange or a lime tree. It kept people guessing, never displaying on its branches anything more than a few white flowers now and then. This plant was my father's only concern. He hardly ever looked up at the six tall coconut trees that waved in the sky. They were my mother's responsibility and Grand-Auntie's, who regularly had their tops cleared of beetles and withered shoots, sent up a climber once a month, and filled the granary with large ripe coconuts. There were also pumpkins growing in the back yard, and large creepers covered the entire thatched roof of a cowshed which once, years before, used to house four of Malgudi's best-bred cows.

After my father's death my mother lived with me until Babu was a year old, and then she decided to go and live with my brother at Madras, taking away with her her life-companion. Grand-Auntie. And I, with my wife and little Babu, became the sole occupant of our house in Kabir Street.

Chapter Two

Sastri had to go a little earlier than usual since he had to perform a puja at home. I hesitated to let him go. The three-color labels (I prided myself on the excellence of my color printing) for K.J.'s aerated drinks had to be readied. It was a piece of very serious work for me, although my personal view was that the colored ink I used on the label was safer for a drink than the tints that K.J. let into his water-filled bottles. We had already printed the basic color on the labels, and the second was to be imposed today. This was generally a crucial stage of work, and I wanted Sastri to stay on and finish the job.

He said, "Perhaps I can stay up late tonight and finish it. Not now. Meanwhile will you . . ." He allotted me work until he should be back at two o'clock. I had

been engrossed in a talk with the usual company. Nehru's third Five-Year Plan was on the agenda today, and my friend Sen was seeing nothing but ruin in it for the country. "Three hundred crorcs—actually are we counting heads or money?" His audience consisted of myself and the poet and someone else who had come to ask for quotations for a business card. The discussion was warming up, as the visiting-card client was a Congress man
who had gone to prison fourteen times since the day Mahatma Gandhi arrived in India from South Africa. He ignored for the time being the business that had brought him here and plunged into a debate, settling himself inexorably in a corner. "What's wrong with the people is you have got into the habit of blaming everything on the government. You think that democracy means that if there is no sugar in the shop, government is responsible for it. What if there is no sugar? You won't die if you do not have sugar for your morning coffee some days." Sen disputed every word of the patriot's speech.

I listened to the debate until I noticed Sastri's silhouette beyond the curtain. Sastri, when there was any emergency, treated me as a handy boy; I had no alternative but to accept the role. Now my duty would be to fix the block on the machine and put the second impression on all the labels and spread them out to dry—and then he would come and give the third impression and put out the labels to dry again. He explained some of the finer points: "The blocks are rather worn; you'll have to let in more ink."

"Yes, Mr. Sastri."

He looked at me through his silver-rimmed small glasses and said firmly, "Unless the labels are second-printed and dry by three o'clock today, it's going to be impossible to deliver them tomorrow. You know what kind of a man K.J.is. . . ."

What about my lunch? This man did not care whether I had time for food or not—a tyrant when it came to printing labels, no consideration of working conditions. But there was no way of protesting to him. He would brush everything aside. As if reading my mind, he explained, "I'd not trouble you but for the fact that this
satyanarayana puja must be performed today in my house. My children and wife will be looking for me at the door. ..." He'd have to trot all the way to Vinayak Street if his family was not to starve too long. Wife, children. Absurd, I felt; such encumbrances were not necessary for Sastri. They were for lesser men like me. His place was at the type board and the treadle. He produced an incongruous, unconvincing picture as a family man. But I dared not express myself aloud. The relationship of employer and employee was getting reversed now and then, whenever there was an emergency. I accepted it without any fuss.

According to house custom, my friends would not step beyond the curtain, so I was safe to go ahead with the second impression. Sastri had fixed everything. I had only to press the pedal and push the paper onto the pad. On a pale orange ground I was now to impose a sort of violet. I grew hypnotized by the sound of the wheel and the machine that was set in motion by the pressure I put on the

pedal. I could hear, whenever I paused, Sen's voice: "If Nehru were practical, let him disown the Congress. . . . Why should you undertake projects which you can't afford? Anyway, in ten years what are we going to do with all the steel?"

There was a lull. I wondered if they were suddenly struck dumb. I heard the shuffling of feet. I felt relieved that the Third Plan was done with. Now an unusual thing happened. The curtain stirred, an edge of it lifted, and the monosyllablist's head peeped in. There must be some extraordinary situation to make him do that. His eyes bulged. "Someone to see you," he whispered.

"Who is he? What does he want?"

"I don't know."

Whispered conversation was becoming a strain. I shook my head and winked and grimaced to indicate to the poet that he should take himself out and say that I was not available. The poet, ever a dense fellow, did not understand but kept blinking uiiintelligently. Then his head suddenly vanished, and at the same moment a new head appeared in its place—a tanned face, large powerful eyes under thick eyebrows, large forehead and a shock of unkempt hair over it, like a black halo. My first impulse was to cry out, Whoever you may be, why don't you brush your hair down?

The new visitor had evidently pushed or pulled aside the poet before showing himself to me. Before I could open rny mouth, he asked, "You be Nataraj ?"

I nodded, and he came forward, practically tearing aside the curtain, an act that violated the sacred traditions of my press. I said, "Why don't you kindly take a seat in the next room, I'll be with you in a moment?"

He paid no attention. He stepped forward, extending his hand. I hastily wiped my fingers on a rag, muttering, "Sorry, discolored, been working . . ."

He gave me a hard grip. My entire hand disappeared into his fist—he was a large man, about six feet tall and quite slim proportionately, but his bull neck and hammer fist revealed his true stature.

"Shan't we move to the other room?" I asked again.

"Not necessary. It's all the same to me," he said. "You are doing something; why don't you go on? It won't bother me." He eyed my colored labels. "What are they?"

I didn't want any eyes to watch my special color effects and how I achieved them. I moved to the curtain and
parted it courteously for him. He followed me. I showed him the Queen Anne chair. I sat in my usual place, on the edge of my desk, and now regained the feeling of being master of the situation. I adopted my best smile and asked, "Well, what can I do for you, Mr. . . . ?"

"Vasu," he said, and added, "I knew you didn't catch my name. You were saying something at the same time as I was mentioning my name."

I felt abashed to hear it, and covered it, I suppose, with another of those silly smiles. I checked myself suddenly, feeling angry with this man for creating so much uneasiness in my mind, asked myself, Nataraj, are you afraid of this

muscular fellow? and said authoritatively, "Yes?"—as much as to indicate, You have wasted my time sufficiently; now say whatever you may want to say.

He took from his inner pocket a wad of paper, searched for a handwritten sheet, and held it out to me. "Five hundred copies of notepaper, the finest, and five hundred visiting cards."

I spread out the sheet without a word and read, "H. Vasu, M.A., Taxidermist." I grew interested. My irritation left me. This was the first time I had set eyes on a taxidermist. I said, assuming the friendliest tone, "Five hundred! Are you sure you need five hundred visiting cards? Could you not print them one hundred at a time? They'll be fresh."

"Why do you try to advise me?" he asked pugnaciously. "I know how many I need. I'm not printing my visiting cards in order to preserve them in a glass case."

"All right, I can print ten thousand if you want."

He softened at my show of aggressiveness. "Fine, fine, that's the right spirit."

"If you'd like to have it done on original Heidelberg—"

"Look. I don't care what you do it on. I don't know what you are talking about."

I understood the situation; every other sentence was likely to bristle and prove provocative. I began to feel intrigued by this man. I didn't want to lose him. Even if I wanted to be rid of him, I had no means of getting rid of him. He had sought me out, and I'd have to have him until he decided to leave. I might as well be friendly. "Surely, whatever you like. It's my duty to ask, that's all. Some people prefer it."

"What is it, anyway?" he asked, suddenly interested.

I explained the greatness of Heidelberg and where it was. He thought it over and suddenly called, "Nataraj, I trust you to do your best for me. I have come to you as a friend."

I was surprised and flattered.

He explained, "I'm new to this place, but I heard about you within an hour of coming." He mentioned some obscure source of information. "Well, I never give a second thought to these things," he said. "When I like a man, I like him, that's all."

I wanted to ask about taxidermy. So I said, looking at his card, "Taxidermist? Must be an interesting job. Where is your er . . . office, or . . ."

"Right here I hope to make a start. I was in Junagadh —you know the place—and there I grew interested in this art. I came across a master there, one Suleiman. When he stuffed a lion—you know, Junagadh is one place where we have lions—he could make it look more terrifying than it would be in the jungle. His stuffings go all over the world. He was a master, and he taught me the art. After
all, we are civilized human beings, educated and cultured, and it is up to us to prove our superiority to nature. Science conquers nature in a new way each day; why not in creation also? That's my philosophy, sir. I challenge any man to

contradict me." He became maudlin at the thought of Suleiman, his master, and sighed. "He was a saint. He taught me his art sincerely."
"Where did you get your M.A. ?"
"At Madras, of course. You want to know about me?"

I wonder what he would have done if I had said, "No, I prefer to go home and eat my food." He would probably have held me down and said, "You'll damn well listen."

"I was educated in the Presidency College. I took my master's degree in history, economics, and literature." That was in the year 1931. Then he had joined the civil disobedience movement against British Rule, broken the laws, marched, demonstrated, and ended in jail. He went repeatedly to prison and once when he was released found himself in the streets of Nagpur. There he met a phaclwan at a show. "That man could have a half-ton stone slab on his cheek and have it split by hammer strokes, he could snap steel chains, and he would hit a block of hard granite with his fist and pulverize it. I was young then; his strength appealed to me. I was prepared to become his disciple at any cost. I introduced myself to the phaelwan"

He remained thoughtful for a while and then went on, "I learned everything from this master. The training was unsparing. He woke me up at three o'clock every morning and put me through exercises. And he provided me with the right diet. I had to eat a hundred almonds every morning and wash them down with half a sccr of milk; two hours later six eggs with honey; at lunch chicken and rice,
at night vegetables and fruit. Not everyone can hope to have this diet, but I was lucky in finding a man who enjoyed stuffing me like that.

"In six months I could understudy for him. The first time I banged my fist on the century-old door of a house in Lucknow, the three-inch panel of seasoned teak splintered. My master patted me on my back and cried with tears of joy in his eyes, 4You are growing on the right lines, my boy.9

"In a few months I could also snap chains, twist iron bars, and pulverize granite. We traveled all over the country and gave our shows at every market fair in the villages and town halls in the cities, and he made a lot of money. Gradually he grew flabby and lazy and let me do everything. They announced his name on the notice, but actually I did all the twisting and smashing of stone, iron, and whatnot. When I spoke to him about it, he called me an ungrateful dog and other names and tried to push me out. I resisted, and"— Vasu laughed at the recollection of this incident— "I knew his weak spot and hit him there with the edge of my palm with a chopping movement, and he fell down and squirmed on the floor. I knew he could perform no more. I left him there and walked out and gave up the strong man's life once for all."
"You didn't stop to help him?" I asked.

"I helped him by leaving him alone, instead of holding him upside down and rattling the teeth out of his head."
"Oh, no," I cried, horrified. "You couldn't do that!"

"Why not? I was a different man now, not the boy who went to him for charity. I was stronger than he."

"After all, he taught you how to be strong—he was your guru," I said, enjoying the thrill of provoking him.

"Damn it all!" he cried. "He made money out of me, don't you see?"

"But he also gave you six eggs a day and how much milk and almond was it?"

He threw up his arms in vexation. "Oh, you will never understand these things, Nataraj. Don't talk of all that. You know nothing, you have not seen the world. You know only what happens in this miserable little place."

"If you think this place miserable, why do you choose to come here?" I was nearer the inner door; I could dash away if he attempted to grab me. Within this brief time familiarity was making me rash and headstrong. I enjoyed taunting him.

"You think I have come here out of admiration for this miserable city. Know this, I'm here because of Mempi Forest and the jungles in those hills. I'm a taxidermist. I have to be where wild animals live."

"And die," I added.

He appreciated my joke and laughed. "You are a wise guy," he said admiringly.

"You haven't told me yet why or how you became a taxidermist," I reminded him.

"Hm!" he said. "Don't get too curious. Let us do business first. When are you giving me the visiting cards?" he asked. "Tomorrow?"

He might pulverize granite, smash up his guru with a slicing stroke, but where printing work was concerned I was not going to be pushed. I got up and turned the sheets of a tear-off calendar on the wall. "You could come tomorrow and ask me. I'll be able to discuss this matter only tomorrow. My staff is out today."

At this moment my little son Babu came running in,
crying, "Appa!" and halted his steps abruptly on seeing a stranger. He bit his nails, grinned, and tried to turn and run. I shot out my hand and held him. He was friendly with the usual crowd at my press, but this stranger's presence somehow embarrassed him. I knew why he had come; it must be either to ask for a favor such as permission to go out with his friends or to deliver a message from his mother.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Mother says, aren't you coming home for food? She is hungry."

"So am I," I said, "and if I were Mother I wouldn't wait for Father. Understand me? Here is a gentleman with whom I am engaged on some important business. You know what he can do?" My tone interested Babu, and he looked up expectantly.

Vasu made a weary gesture, frowned, and said, "Oh, stop that, Mr. Nataraj. Don't start it all. I don't want to be introduced to anyone. Now, you go away, boy," he said authoritatively.

"He is my son—" I began.