

M.S. Blues

On the last day of school, no matter which city we lived in, we would be on the evening train to Madurai. The overnight train journey was always fun--but our annual destination--we were a little less excited about that.

Madurai was my father's hometown and my grandparents still lived there. The heat, the mosquitoes, the bathrooms a slippery tenth of a mile away from the house, the sheer lack of things to do - these were some of the reasons we might have cited - if anyone cared to ask me or my brother about our lack of enthusiasm.

After my father's transfer to Bombay we were even less keen on spending summer in Madurai because it seemed so unbearably boring in comparison. Why, it did not even have a TV station yet! But we did not have that much influence over anything at that age. I was ten. My brother was twelve. Much in advance of this inevitable trip the *bai* was already making inquiries.

"When are you off to your *muluk*?" she asks, mopping the floor. Maybe she wants to coordinate her vacation with ours. My mother would like to believe just the opposite. She is quite sure *bai* will take off once we are back. Right now, my mother isn't even certain what *muluk* means.

"To where?" she asks, to be sure. The language used in Bombay is a tangy mixture of many tongues and not the pure Hindi of my mother's textbooks. Still she has some idea that *muluk* means native place. I confirm that suspicion for her in Tamil and then repeat the word for myself.

"*Muluk,muluk,*" I just like the sound of it.

"Your village, your village! When will you go there?" *bai* prods her on.

Mistake! My mother was born in the city but *bai* is calling her a villager.

"Sometime in summer," she says testily without looking up and poor *bai* has to be satisfied with that response.

Over dinner my parents talk and decide it is time to book the train tickets. Everyone goes to their *muluk* around summer, so it is never too early to make reservations. Just our luck, we have to head towards Madurai which would be hot as a furnace.

In the leafier Madurai of my father's youth, streets, even entire neighborhoods took their names from the trees that grew in such profusion. Orchards of mango, jackfruit, and coconut became residential addresses. My grandparents' one-storied house must have stood in a grove of berries, then.

Grandfather is hovering anxiously near the gate, waiting for us. Grandmother comes to the veranda to receive us only when she hears the taxi's trunk slam shut with finality. Her mouth is a dull orange from the betel leaves she chews all day. My aunt is last and with a quiet smile she carries some of our luggage indoors. My cousins, all boys, all older than me, don't help their mother.

"Come here, my sweet lump of sugar," my grandmother beckons to me. In spite of her endearments, I am tongue-tied and stay close to my mother.

"How tall the boy has grown," she remarks looking at my brother.

He rushes over to hug her without any further encouragement. He pretends he can't lock his hands around my grandmother because she is fat. Everyone laughs, including her.

"*Ai*, touch-me-not, will you curl in if I look at you?" she teases, trying to draw me out as well. My cousins snicker. The dogs are barking in the backyard. They have been tied up in the bike shed because they are known to bite guests. I have a horrible feeling the twins will set them free any minute. I step into the house warily.

In the afternoons, I keep my ears open for monkeys. It is as good a way as any to pass time in Madurai. A distant siren signals the break for the textile factory and shortly after my uncle comes home for lunch. Once he leaves, the kitchen is closed briefly and my aunt rolls out the mat to lie down for a while. I hear that distinct clatter on the asbestos roof. I rush to the window.

They are there! On the roof of the backyard bathroom, the monkeys make their unhurried progress toward the mango tree's shading canopy. Like a parrot's beak its green mangoes curve into a red-tinted tip. Even when the flesh ripens to gold within, the skin stays green. Despite the poetic name it is a sour disappointment to my grandmother.

The fruits of this particular tree are stringy and tart and my grandmother has to buy mangoes in the market just like everyone else who doesn't have a big tree in their backyard. Its delicate brownish blossoms waft to the open tank below and scent the bathwater. Grandmother doesn't have the heart to have the tree cut down but complains about it at every chance.

My uncle's trusty *Chetak* is parked in the bike shed. The dogs are tied in the corner, too hot to care about anything. The mailman came to the gate a few minutes ago. They did not even bark at him. One of the monkeys has reached the scooter now and is making a grab at the side-view mirror which is glinting in the sun. The dogs look on bemused.

This monkey joins the group for the feast, shortly. Expert but forgetful tasters, they chuck the mangoes with disdain after a few sample nibbles. The pulpy mess

rolls down the roof with a muffled clatter and lands with a plop near the shed. Some of the monkeys aim the fruits at the dogs. Unable to take the impudence of the intruders the pets howl their heads off.

Aunt goes charging into the din. The monkeys don't look too worried at the sight of her long bamboo stick. They confer and then make a jaunty exit as if they have much tastier orchards to raid. I can believe that. I wonder why they come here in the first place. Surely, they can't be as amnesiac as all that! Perhaps they are as bored as I am and enjoy a bit of drama in the afternoon. In any case our siesta is over.

Grandmother is up and she is in a bad mood. Actually she has been up even before the monkeys came on the scene. The power outage unfortunately coincides with the hottest hours of the day. Everyone stays in except my brother and my cousins who are up to their usual games in and around the house, mindless of the heat.

"Can someone fan me a little?" the old lady demands imperiously. Grandfather who has dozed off behind *The Hindu* is startled awake by her request. The boys snicker and quietly leave the room just as I wander in.

"Why don't you take a nap also?" grandfather asks me kindly.

"It is too hot. I wish I had some story books," I reply.

"What do you want to read when the school is closed? Tell me, what are the books about?" he inquires.

"Oh, they are books about children in England. My favorite series is the one about the Five Find-Outers. They can solve mysteries much before the local constable Mr. Goon can. The Inspector from London is their friend," I inform him. He looks a little mystified. Surely the London constabulary doesn't need the help of children to solve cases!

My grandfather was a firm supporter of the British Raj and even cried a little the day India got its freedom back in 1947. My father says he also cried when India's first Prime Minister died fourteen years later. All this I know from my brother, so the reports are probably untrue. Still grandfather is a tender-hearted man, that is for sure.

"I may be able to get you a copy of the *Vicar of Wakefield*. I have heard it is a classic," he says. Like many men of his generation, my grandfather considers fluency in English a necessary and sufficient proof of scholarship. My shrewd grandmother is much harder to impress.

We keep our voices low but grandmother cannot go back to sleep. She cannot participate in our conversation either. Her back is eloquently turned on us. When

the commotion in the backyard starts, she sits up and glares at us. It looks like she is trying to decide who the bigger nuisance was -- her husband who is chattering with me in English or the backyard monkeys. At least she can do something about those impudent creatures. She goads my poor aunt into action.

In a little while, quiet reigns. The dogs are in the veranda and they have a fresh bowl of water each. My aunt re-opens her kitchen and starts making preparations for the tiffin. It is going to be onion fritters with coconut chutney, my grandmother's favorite snack. She is in the kitchen, ahead of all of us but she is still in a bad mood.

"Your children!" she tells my mother, "They don't speak to me because I don't know English. They can't speak their own language Tamil and who understands this Bombay language of theirs -- this Hindi!"

"Yes, I can't understand it either, Amma," my mother says, only in part, to mollify her.

"Why don't we take them to the temple, tomorrow?" she tactfully suggests hoping to take her mother-in-law's mind off this tricky language issue. Grandmother has an appointment with the dentist in the evening. This means we will have to go first thing in the morning. The gods too nap in the afternoon and the temple doors are shut.

My grandmother is an early-riser but having us ready by dawn will be quite a task for my mother. Nearly everyone in the household will be inconvenienced by this plan. The old lady greets this with considerable relish.

Madurai is a one-temple town. At its heart it is not just any old temple, it is the ancient Meenakshi temple. The paths are lined with shops selling fragrant garlands, strings of plump jasmine, mounds of turmeric and vermilion powder, and anything that can be considered auspicious. Granite demons stand guard at the entrance.

We have been to the temple before, of course, but we have always rushed home before dark as per the unwritten family rule; the women need to be home to light the lamps for the evening prayer. This time, we can visit the shrine of the green goddess and then stroll through the temple's famed Corridor of Thousand Pillars.

Skeptics, my brother and I, start to count them but then we notice something amazing. Each pillar is a richly sculpted *yali*, the mythical beast of many parts. It is staring at us, its goat eyes bulging with mock curiosity. The boar ears are perfect to eavesdrop on the conversation of all those who walk within, I realize.

This is a Lord Shiva temple but everyone refers to it by his fish-eyed consort's name. "That is because in Madurai, the women rule," my grandmother tells me in an aside. The *yali* chuckle and relay this information to their friends at the end of

the corridor.

Outside, we buy framed photographs of the green goddess. Meenakshi wears her huge garland like a feather boa; a parrot is perched on the fingers of her right hand. They make great souvenirs for her friends in Bombay. My mother buys me a dozen glass bangles. They make a pleasant jangle every time I move my arms. When they catch a bit of sunlight, they sparkle dazzlingly, throwing little rainbows on my dress.

I still have three bangles left on each arm, when it is time to go back to Bombay, a month later. Despite the complaint that there is “nothing to do” in Madurai the time has passed quickly enough. My mother is busy packing our suitcase. To get us out of her way she suggests that we go seek my grandparents’ blessings.

We do this by touching their feet in respect. Most elderly couples stand together for this ritual but my grandparents do it one by one. It is a ritual we look forward to. Grandfather pats our heads and invokes his favorite deities in a faint voice to wish us well. He looks very sad at the thought of our leaving. Grandmother is still rummaging through her iron bureau when it is her turn.

She comes back with a framed sepia photograph of herself. In it she looks younger. Her nose and ears twinkle with diamonds; her hair is pulled back in a bun. She is wearing a silk sari shot with dark threads. She passes this picture around for our inspection and approval.

“You looked very nice, when you were younger,” I tell her. I turn to my brother for help.

“Very distinguished,” he remarks. It is evident that my grandmother is looking for more but we are at a loss.

“Does it remind you of anyone?” she asks. No, we shake our heads.

“People say I resemble M.S. in this,” she informs us.

Fans refer to the classical singer M. S. Subbalakshmi simply by her initials. Many South Indian households, even in Bombay, wake up to her soulful rendition of *Suprabatham* but we could not have come up with her name, just then. My grandmother always gives us some money as a parting gift. It is not a lot and we dutifully hand it over to our mother. We can draw on the amount for an entire year to buy ourselves small treats.

At the station, we wave to our Uncle on the platform, until we can’t see him anymore.

I did not realize this was one of the last times I would see my grandparents. They died within a year of each other, when I was in my early teens. My father did not

insist on visiting his hometown anymore. Madurai became a distant memory much before I left for America. I now live two continents away in New England, where it gets dark before 5 PM, in the winters.

I smile when I think of my family's absurd curfew for women --always be home by dusk to light the lamps. To cook the dinner, they meant. Madurai got street lighting in the 1930s and being a city of culture, held open-air classical concerts that went on late into the night. So much for the dangers lurking in the dark! I chuckle at the memory but the road ahead is slippery and needs my full attention.

I-93 is slick with snow. My gas tank is close to empty. It is rush hour --it will be difficult to pull over to the breakdown lane. Even if I managed it, what could I do? The cell phone is dead. I am close to panic but I let the audio player pick a CD for me.

M.S. Subbulakshmi's *Bhaja Govindam* comes to my rescue.. I can appreciate the Sanskrit song without knowing the lyrics or the *ragas*. It fills me with a sense of calm. Her voice is divine; I have no other word for it.

At the gas station, as the tank is filling up, I pull out the CD cover and try to get more details about the composition. There is a picture of M.S. on the jacket. She has this radiant quality about her; a kind of beauty which grows with age. This was the 'resemblance' my grandmother had wanted us to spot. Of course, we had let her down.

I know by now that many people from my father's *muluk* claim some kind of tenuous kinship to the singer. My grandmother has never been alone in wanting to establish a connection with this icon. When I realize that the 'M' in the singer's initials stands for Madurai, everything clicks into place.

Knowing my grandmother, I know for sure that our ignorance must have affected the amount of money she gave us that day. How much did our ignorance about the culture we were born in to, cost us overall?

That would be impossible for me to calculate.