

 [Mia Molvray](#)

© 1997, 2010

*Analog* 1997

## Gender Gap

Palanniappam Veenda bowed his head and tried to meditate as he walked to Siva Settlement. Instead he saw only a woman's face. His gentle, patient mother had steadfastly refused to leave her family for the Settlement, even after she had almost been kidnapped. But she had been the last. Since she had died three years ago, Pala had not been alone with a woman except in his dreams.

Sometimes, in one of his many moods of self-doubt, he worried about his unattractiveness. He had pleasing features that could have been designed by a sculptor, but his beauty was of a fine-boned sort not much admired in men, and he was rather thin and short. He was too intelligent, however, to really believe that lack of size or muscle made him uninteresting. He knew what the problem was. It was lack of money.

Dry grasses jostled in a faint breeze, as if they were elbowing each other to get to a place with rain and flowers. Pala raised his eyes and idly wondered why the breeze couldn't make itself useful in the stifling heat. The breeze finally brought him the smell of cooking fires near the stream where he could see beggars setting up camp. They were burning aromatic branches of neem and acacia, and anything else they could pick up. The overtones of burning garbage were not so pleasant. Pala sighed.

He walked by a temple and bowed like the good Brahmin priest he was, but his mind took no part in his body's respect. It only looked sarcastically at the lingam, symbolizing male creativity, which decorated the roof. Male creativity! What exactly had it created? A land without women. A land that was going to grow old and die.

Soon, with the familiar pit of nervousness in his stomach, Palanniappam

Veenda rang the bell at the Settlement's massive outer gate. Once every three months his turn came around, and had been coming around for the last twelve years, always to no avail. However, he continued to inflict himself on the tea parties through a stern sense of duty since they were his only chance of ever finding a woman to share his life.

The huge Punjabi guard at the gate checked Pala's retinal scan against the records, even though he recognized him, and then let him through. One dog was ordered to escort him so that the other dogs would not attack. Abductions of women may have been a problem in the past, but Pala had no trouble seeing why they had stopped once the Settlements became customary.

At the door, the house matron greeted him and indicated the same door of the same lounge where he had participated in so many of these dreadful, stilted events.

"We are very happy you could join us, Shri Veenda," said the gentle voice of the aged chaperone. He bowed his head. "I would like to introduce you to a new member of our little circle--" he looked up with too much interest "--Indira Tal."

She was a pretty young slip of a thing. She was also obviously bored with the old geezer being introduced to her. Pala dropped his thirty year old eyes back to the carpet.

"So pleased to meet you," he mumbled, and moved off to help himself to some samosas on the sideboard. Figuring out what to do with your hands was always the most difficult thing at these events.

He busied himself staring at a school of bright blue and red fish, swimming around the aquarium at the center of the room, while he took small bites out of his samosa, and threw furtive glances around the room. It was not the first time the tragicomedy of his situation had struck him. Here he was, the man who laid awake nights consumed by longing for a kindly, understanding female to share his life. It was more than sex, much more. He had never had sex with a woman, and had long since discovered how to take the edge off that particular need by himself. Nor was he the sort of man who could find satisfaction with boys, as so many did these days. No, it was a woman he wanted, full of that indefinable, magical femaleness. It was a woman that he wanted until his soul hurt, yet he could not even talk

to any of the specific women in this specific room.

"Pala, Pala, I keep telling you. You have to mix," said a quiet woman's voice next to him, her tone and her poke in his ribs making it clear that she was sharing an in joke.

He turned and a smile lit up his face.

"Saira! I'm so glad you came. I was already afraid you weren't going to be here today."

Her large laughing black eyes answered his smile. She had an air of complete confidence Pala secretly admired. Standing arrow-straight in a glorious blue and gold sari, her black hair arranged in an elegant twist, she could have been a Maharani from days long past.

"Oh, Pala, I keep telling you, there's no point mixing with me. I can't marry you."

"Well, at least I can talk to you, which is more than I can do with anyone else." Maybe today he would finally ask her why she was always saying that.

"How is your respected father?" she inquired politely.

"Much the same. But something really wonderful has happened." He paused, enjoying the pleased anticipation in her eyes as she lent herself to sharing whatever he felt. "I just got an invitation to speak at the conference in Amsterdam!" He pulled a fat envelope from his pocket. Thirty fifth World Religions Congress it said on the envelope.

"They accepted my paper." He pointed excitedly at the title, "Adaptations in Hinduism to the Realities of Gender Imbalance."

"How wonderful for you! I'm so glad!" Saira beamed with delight, making Pala feel that his own joy was finally real.

"Mainly I'm going to be discussing the changed position of women," he explained, talking quickly to keep himself from hugging her, "the destruction of the caste system, the ability to marry across castes. It's such a recent development, yet now we priests are all convinced that this is ancient and venerable tradition. A lot of my paper is about the cognitive psychology of rationalization." He smiled apologetically. "I thought I might bring you a copy, but then I thought it wouldn't be very interesting for a genetic engineer."

Saira laughed and swatted him.

"Send it. Next time you come I'll tell you everything that's wrong with it. So when will you be going? Where exactly are they holding it?"

"Wrong with it?" he asked with some trepidation. "What do you mean, wrong with it?"

"Pala, Pala, I'm just joking. I'll bet you spend all your time on how women can marry anyone. What about how we can't live anywhere?"

He remembered a conversation decades ago with one of his most crotchety aunts.

"Are you angry with me?" he'd asked her timidly.

With a little puff of scorn and a shake of her head she'd said,

"No, child, no. But how would you like to be born free, and end up caged inside your own house?"

Pala glanced toward Saira sorrowfully.

"I never did decide whether you are freer being shut out or shut in."

For a moment Saira was silent, and then she said quietly,

"That's what I like about you Pala. You understand things." She continued in a more conversational tone, "Anyway, you still haven't told me: where and when?"

"Next month before the fall trimester starts. It's being held at the big Amsterdam Ko--" he looked at the envelope and spelled out slowly "Koninglijke Hotel."

"Next month?" she repeated as if calculating something. Then, more absently, "The old Koninglijke Paleis? That's a beautiful, seventeenth century palace right in the center of the old town. I wandered through the public section for hours and hours."

"You've been there?" he asked with some surprise. "I thought you'd gone to university in England?" It was hard for him to say it blandly. He himself, like almost every other boy, had received the polite form letter. "...Due to repeated incidents involving male students from your country, we regret that our policy does not allow us to consider your otherwise excellent application..." His brilliant academic record, his perfect behavior, the venerable Brahmins who wrote supporting letters for him, it all counted for nothing.

But he was letting his mind wander and was missing her answer.

"-Leeds. But of course on holiday I always went as far as my money would

take me, and Amsterdam was one of my favorite cities."

There was a radiance to her smile and a fire to her enthusiasm Pala had not seen before, and it pained him to see how much she loved those distant, exotic lands when he wanted her heart to be here, in Ganjapur. Yet why should it be? There she could walk through splendid palaces at will, while here she lived surrounded by dogs.

"Why did you ever return?" he asked her in a small voice.

She leaned back with a quiet laugh.

"There I am just one of many molecular biology Ph.D.'s. Here I can become a millionaire just for being a woman."

He shrank as if someone had thrown ice water on him. Surely not Saira too? It couldn't be!

She laughed again, a bit sadly.

"Well, actually, it's more complicated than that, but that is the deciding reason. For myself, I might have stayed there, but I might also not have. This is my home, my family is here, and most important, life here is so full of dreams. Everything is brighter, bigger, more intense than the drab, bare facts of the Western world." She glanced at him appraisingly. "Take you for instance. You have enough fire just sitting there, talking, to ignite ten Englishmen."

He blushed under his coffee-brown skin. In a world where they were both free, it would have been a compliment to dream about. But he lived in a world where he laid awake nights, and he wasn't so sure.

"Lucky Englishmen," he said.

She threw her head back and laughed out loud.

"Yes, well, I know what you mean," she said, still chuckling as she settled back down. "Anyway, be all that as it may, it was the successful marriage of my older female cousin that first lifted my family out of poverty. They were Harijan, you know. I am the only other marriageable female, and my family is very definite that they want me to make an advantageous match."

Palanniappam stared fixedly at the floor. He'd had no idea, even though he'd talked to her many times over the past four years. If her family had been Untouchables, and this was the first generation to taste prosperity, the pressure on her must be enormous.

"I don't understand," he said shaking his head. "There's Trivanastra who owns the cellular plant," he nodded toward a fellow standing by the samosa table with two women talking to him, "there's Saruddin of S & A Financial Services, there's Singh of Singh Agro." You had to be someone to be admitted to these teas at all. "Any of them would probably give you everything he had."

"Mmm," she said. "There's only one small problem. I don't mind waiting for money for my family's sake. But they have to wait for someone I like, for my sake. It appears to be very difficult to satisfy both requirements."

He looked at her sadly, and slowly shook his head.

"Oh, Saira," was all he could say. It suddenly occurred to him that she always came and talked to him when he was there.

"People here, people in so many countries, wanted nothing but boys," he was continuing softly, almost to himself. "We were desperate for boys. We got what we desired and we got disaster. Now only the rich have children, and who knows but that may be an even worse disaster--"

Saira meanwhile, stood up and beckoned.

"I think I want you to see something," she said cryptically. He followed her as she headed toward her room. Discreetly, she pressed her commlink to request a chaperone, since entertaining a gentleman alone in her room would lead to endless speculation.

"Not a word of this to a soul, Pala. I'm getting the patents as we speak. Look," she leaned toward the computer screen with singleminded intensity, oblivious to the chaperone who slid quietly into an armchair by the door. The screen showed rows upon rows of red, blue, green, and yellow lines as meaningless as modern art to Pala's eyes. "Those two are identical! See that? Identical! The coding regions match perfectly, the introns are the same, even the tandem repeats--." She happened to glance at him and took pity on his blank stare.

"Remember when I found that sperm carrying an X chromosome have a different membrane protein from those with a Y? Well, I've designed two genes to make proteins that bond with the X- or Y-related membrane protein, and I've found a way to get that protein to embed itself in the vitelline layer!"

As always when his conversations with Saira got technical, Pala felt he was trying to read fine print off a speeding train. Luckily, this time he remembered the relevant facts she'd explained before.

"So, since that outermost vitelline layer of the egg is the first one contacted by the sperm, you can choose which type of sperm binds with the egg?"

"Exactly," she crowed triumphantly. "End of gender balance problem!"

Pala stared at the hieroglyphic screen with its tremendous message invisible to the uninitiated. Could it really be? Was he looking at the end of Settlements? Of men-only parties? Of streets without a single woman on them? Was this little screen showing a sudden lifting of the death sentence on his whole vast land--and so many others? He felt a lingering doubt that the calamity brought on by cheap and effective gender selection could be cured by more of the same poison. It was true that no one was mad keen on sons these days, but now--

"Saira, now they'll just have all daughters. If I were young enough to benefit, I might even feel it would be an improvement," he smiled slightly to show this was a joke, "but, really, Saira...."

"Not at all," she exclaimed, still alight with victory. "I've been following the work of Schuijvendaal on endangered mammal species. Do you realize just one regulatory gene is responsible for the size of litters?"

The train had just speeded up again, and the print had gotten smaller. He thought they were talking about gender selection?

"No, think about it, Pala," said Saira mistaking his fogged expression for doubt. "It could be a package: one engineered gene promoting twins through double ovulation--which helps mitigate the population crash we're having with only ten percent of the population female--, and two others making these X and Y factors in equal amounts, so that children have to be born in gender-balanced proportions."

"Ah," he said. "I see," but before he could begin considering the implications, she ran on.

"There is a problem, however, and you can help me with it."

Pala leaned forward. Help Saira? Him? He felt foolishly delighted at the thought of being useful to her.

"To make enough copies of the genes for field trials--which I should get

the OK for soon--I need ultra-pure template. That way I can be sure that the copies are right. The only way to be sure of pure template is to use a micro-gravity environment like SpaceLab--"

Pala blinked in surprise.

"Schuivendaal has offered to take my sample up piggybacked on his, but he's booked on a flight early next month and I was just thinking there's no way I can get my samples to him by then..."

It took Pala a second to figure out his role in a space flight, then he beamed.

"I'll be delighted to carry your samples to Sch-, to Sh-, to the Dutch gentleman." He didn't even ask her why she didn't simply send the samples by courier, but in the next breath she answered his thought.

"I'm worried about Veerapatram."

That was the grand old man of the Indian Academy of Sciences, a proponent of uterine replicators as the solution to all their problems, and a ruthless critic of all other approaches. Saira had mentioned him before.

"It's not just bad reviews of my work anymore," she continued. "I'm almost certain he's been eavesdropping on my email. Then there was that strange and frightening loss of samples at Singh's lab. I'm beginning to think old Veera will stop at nothing to remove any competition for funding. I'm certain if he could bribe a courier to get my samples, that'd be the end of it."

"You'd think his funding would dry up regardless, since he never actually gets results," puzzled Pala.

"Oh, he gets results. Every year he--well, his postdocs--solve another little problem. Transport of monosaccharides across the pseudoplacenta. Regulation of monosaccharide transport. Transport of gamma globulins across the pseudoplacenta; regulation of... and on and on and on. Kliunas once started to tally how many different molecules cross a placenta, and he stopped counting at ten thousand. At this rate in twenty thousand years, Veerapatram will actually be able to support an embryo." Saira would have snorted except she'd been brought up not to.

"You'd think hundreds of other scientists would be trying other tacks besides you."

"And sink their careers?" Saira asked with raised eyebrows. "That old goat is the IAS. They'd never get anything published, and they'd have to work without funding. The only reason I can function is my family, especially my cousin, channel money to me. They know I wouldn't last here very long if I had nothing to do. How many other scientists have that luxury?"

"Now," she continued, looking at him seriously, "you be careful, and watch out for pickpockets. There's no reason for him to think you're my messenger, but be careful."

Pala left in a warm glow at Saira's trust in him.

Pala called for a minicab on the day of departure, more excited than a boy on his first elephant ride. He was disappointed when the company did not send around his family's usual driver, who would have enjoyed his elation, but that didn't stop Pala from beaming at every passerby from the open back seat of the little three-wheeler. As a priest, half the town knew him, and good wishes mingled with the cab's electric hum almost to the airport. There the cab driver turned down a bumpy dirt road.

"Ei!" Pala cried. "The airport."

The driver ignored him.

"Ei!" Pala cried louder and shook the driver's shoulder. The man shrugged him off and set the speed to maximum. The cab whined much more and went a little faster, Pala gesticulating wildly in the back. He was seriously frightened by now. Just a moment ago the world had been so familiar.

A farmer's pickup appeared bumping along in the other direction. It slowed. A young man with a mop of bushy hair leaned out the window.

"Good day, Shri Veenda! Is there a prob--?"

The minicab driver had to slow to avoid the interfering pickup on the narrow dirt road. Pala grabbed the chance to jump out.

"Desi, quick," he babbled, struggling with the pickup's passenger door, "quick, get me to the airport." *And away from this demon driver!*

The minicab driver abandoned his mission and steered his cab away, whining its heart out.

Pala stared after it bewildered. It occurred to him he was lucky Veerapa-

tram was just an amateur at this. Suddenly he was jolted back to the here and now by noticing that Desi was turning to follow the cab. Was it more important to follow one cab driver, who probably couldn't even be linked to Veerapatram, or to complete Saira's vastly important project?

"No, no," Pala commanded. "To the airport!" Desi was urging the need for police. "Forget the police. I have to get my flight!"

At the airport he asked Desi to stay with him. He might have imagined it, but he was sure a disappointed fellow shadowed the pair of them until he was actually boarding the plane. Pala sincerely hoped old Veera didn't have any henchmen in Holland. And what was he going to do once he got back? Demand a police escort? What plausible reason could he give, since he had no time now to fuss around with a police report? The flight itself was uneventful, until Shri Palanniappam Veenda felt the wheels of the jet carrying him bounce on the runway of a grey, flat, misty country, dimly seen through the little window. The four hour flight on the slow jet from Delhi had left him feeling tired and cramped. He had expected to be unable to contain his excitement at this point, but now all he really wanted was a bath.

However, his feelings started to change in the cavernous Customs hall, even before he walked out into the new world itself. There were women everywhere. Women fussing over baggage; women reading books as they waited in line; serious, uniformed women asking curt questions and marking bags as having passed inspection. One woman quickly moved away from him when she noticed him behind her in the line, but he was too busy staring around to give it any more thought until much later. For now he just goggled at the overwhelming result of people wanting daughters as well as sons.

Out in the throng of people meeting the plane, he saw a sign with his name on it floating above the crowd. Two people, not one, were standing under it: a large, black man with smiling eyes, and a little, white woman with a bold and confident air.

"Mr. Veenda?" the black man had spotted him. "Amenatave Mbalavu," he pointed to himself. "I am the Fijian representative for the Methodist delegation. Ms. Karen Springer, with the USA Unitarians."

They asked about his flight and said he must be tired, but Pala was sud-

denly wide awake as the cold air of northern Europe hit him when they stepped outside.

"Ai-ya," he breathed, "what a country!" Every pore in his body clamped shut, and even wrapping his arms around himself hardly helped. "I- I have a few warm things in-n m-my bag," he said, his teeth already chattering, pointing to the suitcase the Fijian was courteously carrying. He opened it, and pulled out a vest and a long cloth coat in the Nehru style.

The Fijian's ready smile showed what he thought of these completely inadequate garments. He took his coat off.

"Here. I've had a few days to acclimatize, being an organizer. We brought a coat for you in the car, in case you didn't have one. No, no, no. Put it on. You'll get pneumonia otherwise. Come on, put it on."

"I know how it is," Mbalavu continued as they trekked across a vast parking lot. "It was thirty eight degrees Centigrade with ninety percent humidity when I left Suva. When I got off the ramjet it was like walking into a meat cooler at five degrees in my underwear. It was probably closer to twelve but--" He stopped and looked around. "Where is that miserable two-horse excuse for a car anyway?"

"That way," the American nodded toward their left.

Mbalavu just shrugged his shoulders, as if to say he was willing to take it on faith, headed in that direction, and continued to talk.

"I'll tell you the real secret, though, to dealing with this climate. Long underwear."

"Ah, long? Long what?" asked Pala, just as they found the car. Gratefully he got out of the biting wind blowing cold, damp air through every chink in his clothes.

"You know, that's a very good idea," Springer joined in. "There's a C&A just a little bit out of our way."

A short while later, outfitted in his new thermal bodysuit, his Indian clothes blowing gracefully in the wind, Pala got back in the car feeling like a new man. It was amazing how much nicer the intricate houses and vibrantly green fields looked, now that he was no longer freezing. And the cold, damp breeze -- why hadn't he noticed how good it smelled? There was no hint in it of dust or cooking fires; only rich earth and grass.

"There's a reception tonight at seven," Springer was saying. "And you're welcome to join us for dinner before that."

"You are very kind," Pala thanked her. His mind having thawed enough to start working, he suddenly remembered something. "Eh! You must be the Karen Springer who is in the same symposium with me?"

"That's right." Her face crinkled into a cute, apple-cheeked smile. "The one from the all female family."

"An entirely female family..." Pala mused, boggling quietly to himself at the thought. "I wonder if it would be something like growing up in Siva?"

"Is that a Settlement? I'd love to talk to someone from there. But any single-sex upbringing must have common elements. Did you find that you idealized women? Which expectations did subsequent experience show were wrong?"

Pala shook his head dubiously.

"I don't know. I haven't had any subsequent experience. And I didn't really grow up without women. My father's five older sisters were always around, and my mother lived with us." It feels so long ago now, thought Pala. "Anyway, I could easily give you the address of a woman who lives in Siva."

"That'd be wonderful," Karen Springer nodded happily, handing him her commlinker. As Pala tapped in Saira's address, he had the disorienting sensation of being in two places at once. One tap at the "send" instead of the "store" button, and he'd be talking to Saira as if he were back in the Settlement's drawing room, breathing the heavy air laden with smoke from cooking fires and the smell of old furniture dying in the heat. However, he didn't tap the "send" button, though for one wild moment he considered it. For an unattached male or female to send an unexpected communication to a member of the opposite sex amounted to a declaration of love. Pala doubted Saira would appreciate such pushiness on his part.

"On your left," Mbalavu was saying, "is the Rijksmuseum. You must visit it before you leave. Not far from here is also the Stedelijke, where they have a number of Van Gogh's." The car rattled about on cobblestone streets, its electric motor whining now and again as it climbed the steep but short incline of a bridge crossing a canal. "We're thinking of gathering for dinner at about five in the lobby, which gives you about three hours till then." Mbal-

avu stuck his head out the window and let out an earsplitting whistle for the bellboy as they rolled up to the hotel.

In a moment there was an answering whistle, only slightly less fearsome, and a diminutive bellboy strode up.

"Deze keer heb jij gewonnen, kleintje," said the little chap, pointing at the big Fijian towering over the car.

Mbalavu's teeth gleamed in a huge smile.

"Ahh. I think he said I won that time." Then, looking a bit dubious, he added, "I also think he called me 'Tiny'." Taking only the time to wash and hang up his packed clothes, a scant hour later Pala was back out on the windy street, making his way to Schuijvendaal's lab in the Amsterdam Free University. Turning his map this way and that, he hurried down one of the smaller streets leading away from the square in front of the Palace, and soon came out on a canal lined with cobblestone streets, trees, and centuries-old houses. Pala peered surreptitiously into the cozy interiors, with patterned carpets on the floor, lace antimacassars on the antique couches and armchairs, and plush rugs on the tables. Elaborate chandeliers were lit in some apartments even in the middle of the day because the clouds were so thick. Pala wondered whether the sun ever came out here.

The small streets were by no means crowded, but there was a steady stream of pedestrians, bicyclists, and the occasional car. Men and women went about their business, or traded greetings and conversation, or sat on benches along the canal enjoying the quiet melancholy of fall. There was a pervasive air of peace, and normality, and predictability that permeated this place. You did not turn the corner to find a homeless beggar talking to his god. There were no homeless beggars. Nor did you see guards at the gates of the walled compounds of the rich. The glass of these houses could be broken with a simple stone. Nor did you come upon the funeral of a man killed for his wife. There were plenty of wives.

Briefly, Pala felt the foreign life as if it were his own, as if he had grown up in it. He would not be likely to die alone; it would not even occur to him to worry about it. His life and his mind would not have to sidestep desires, and his meditations would be free of the burden he could never quite shake. He would be free to feel like he felt now, pleasantly enjoying the place and the

people, with nothing particular on his mind. Like he felt, he thought to himself with a wry smile, after he got himself a suit of long underwear.

Once he found the building, finding a specific lab in it was almost as difficult. However, perseverance won out, and soon Pala was shaking hands with a large, pink, jovial scientist in a large labcoat, with bushy eyebrows and matching wispy hair ringing his bald head. Pala was again tripping over Dr. Sch--, Dr. Sk--, Dr. Sh--

Dr. Schuijvendaal was looking at Pala's card and saying,

"Very pleased to meet you, Meneer Veenda," pronounced the Dutch way to rhyme with 'rain-da', when he noticed his visitor's difficulty. Smiling he said, "Klaas is easier, I think."

Pala nodded and suggested 'Pala.'

"You received Dr. Satnam's message?" How strange it felt to say her name so formally.

Saira's colleague nodded.

"Everything is ready. Have you the vials...?"

Pala took out three tiny clear plastic tubelets, half the size of his thumb-nail, containing nothing visible. Saira had explained to him that the desiccated, stabilized DNA was in there, but he still found it hard to take on faith.

"Ahh," said Dr. Schuijvendaal looking at the tiny tubes in his palm, "so this is it. The end of an era." He dropped the tubes into wells and handed them to his lab tech for shipment to the launch site. He turned back to Pala. "And which vector will Dr. Satnam for the finished product use? Mosquitoes, I would imagine?"

Pala knew enough to guess that he was talking about how the engineered genes would be inoculated into people. He hadn't really thought about it. He'd just assumed it would be one of the usual methods: dermal patch, nasal spray, or injection.

"Mijn hemel, nee!" laughed Schuijvendaal when Pala suggested this. "Then you would have to wait till people to their senses came. You have not the time for that, not?"

He had a point, but Pala was disturbed. Gender choice had to be taken away, yet he would not want to be the one to explain it to people suddenly deprived of it. Was this really what Saira was planning? Mosquitoes, fleas,

gnats, horseflies, Saira could probably command them all with her magic. What, exactly, was he helping here?

He left the lab far more preoccupied than when he'd arrived and he got lost on the way back.

With considerable concealed trepidation he approached the only person on the street, a woman. She gave him directions, but so briefly as to be almost rude, and he heard her muttering under her breath as she turned away.

"Surround the lot with barbed wire until they're finally dead from their precious maleness. Can't even walk in my own country without being harassed."

She muttered it in English too, just to be sure he heard her.

Pala opened his mouth to protest that his motives were not at all ulterior, but she was already marching away and he gave up. He stared fixedly at the melancholy autumn trees, but he was no longer a tourist in an exotic place. He was an undesirable alien. He couldn't stop trying to prove to himself that he was nothing like the foreign woman's picture of him.

"It's not as if I'm thinking of sex every time I see a woman," he thought as he deliberately concentrated on one of the many women on the busier street where he had come out. But it was no good. It was as if he had told himself not to think of pink elephants. Soon he could think of nothing else.

Matters only got worse at the reception. The Western fashions for evening wear tended to run toward body suits with strategic swirls. Only the young and fit usually wore them, but that did not make it easier for Pala. It took more and more effort to concentrate on what people were saying to him. It took more and more effort not to stare. His responses grew ever more disjointed, and he felt ever more conspicuous in his need. He finally went to sit on a couch by himself with a plateful of appetizers, to pretend he was eating.

"So," Karen Springer suddenly plopped down on the couch beside him, "how's it been going?"

"Ah, very well, thank you. Very well."

She looked at him narrowly.

"I'd say you need to relax. What are you worried about anyway? I've heard

several people comment how we could learn something from India with regard to gracious manners."

"You- you are very good." He swallowed some kind of appetizer with difficulty.

"Well, then, relax," she commanded him confidently.

"I- ah- would not like to damage India's current good reputation by relaxing," he managed to say.

She eyed him narrowly again as understanding gradually dawned.

"I see." She paused. "Well, even as to that, I don't think you'd have much to worry about. Not only do you have charming manners, but you're exotic. And handsome," she added as an afterthought. "I bet three out of four unattached women in this room would be quite curious to give you a try."

He stared at her, speechless. He completely forgot to chew his last bite of appetizer. He did not begin to recognize himself in her description. He couldn't believe anyone, certainly not a woman, could calmly sit there saying such things. And the notion that anyone could give anyone "a try".... He sat there, dumbfounded.

"Oh go on," she laughed at him, "don't even try to tell me you never thought of it."

He blinked and gulped and started chewing again. He wasn't sure he liked her ability to share these particular feelings of his.

"Um," he finally said. "Thinking is one thing. I would never say anything. Probably not even to myself."

"Well, it's been said. So go for it."

There was a directness about her, a matter-of-factness that was appalling. How did she expect him, after thirty years, to race off and pick up some woman? So many thoughts, so many longings, so many wakeful nights couldn't simply be wrapped up in an offhand,

"Well, I'll see you upstairs then, shall I?"

Slowly, he shook his head, staring at the floor.

"I come from a more dream-heavy land," he murmured to himself.

His symposium was on the morning of the fifth day. The months he'd

spent preparing paid off wonderfully, the discussion following the talks, including his, was animated, and before he knew it he'd been corralled to have lunch with the chairman of the Philosophy Department at a large Canadian university, discussing the ethics of selection. (And of anti-selection, thought Pala heavily. Soon he would have to discuss it with Saira.) The lunch stretched out over three hours, and Pala missed most of the afternoon talks. Shaving hurriedly before dinner, he checked his commlinker as an afterthought. There was a message.

"Identify," he spoke at the machine lying next to the washbasin.

"Saira Satnam, Ganjapur, India, 555-10-357-"

His heart skipped a beat. "Stop," he cut the machine off. Saira... sending him a message.... Why...?

"Read text," he ordered the commlinker.

"Pala, just a short note to say that I hope your talk this morning went well. My cousin and her family came for a visit. Have I ever mentioned what conceited, helpless, silly asses rich children can be? All the best. Saira."

He sat down heavily on the edge of the bathtub, half his face still unshaved. A strange, wild joy shot through him that he scarcely dared to let himself feel. She had sent him an unexpected message. Just like that. His heart didn't seem to care if she took justice in her own hands. It was then he realized how much he loved her.

Suddenly he leaped up and finished dressing for dinner in a frenzy of activity. It was impossible to contain his excitement. He wanted to run and jump and shout. He vaulted over the bed to get his dhoti, and laughed out loud. He made a valiant effort to settle down.

He emailed back, "Dearest Saira. Overjoyed that you agree. However, we need to talk as soon as I return. About--"

He stopped himself just in time. If Veerapatram really was monitoring her mail, it wouldn't do to tip him off. He sent the message without any explanatory sentence.

◇ ◇ ◇

The air of Ganjapur enveloped him like a warm blanket on a summer day. How could he have forgotten the heat here so quickly?

Looking about rapidly, he didn't see anyone suspicious-looking, but neither did he see the three family servants he'd asked to meet him. Someone bumped into him, someone he hadn't even noticed, and gave a sharp tug on his cabin bag. He whirled, clutching it more tightly than ever. What would have happened next if he'd remained unaccompanied, Pala did not like to think, but suddenly the huge Punjabi guard from Siva appeared, towering over the lesser men scurrying around below.

"Ji Satnam hoped it might be convenient for you to come directly to Siva," he murmured, bowing as he approached.

Pala stared about wildly, but the would-be robber had vanished. Pala's breathing gradually returned to normal.

Pulling up at the Settlement, for once without dread, Pala was glad but surprised to see Saira waiting at the door. There wasn't a chaperone in sight. She had clearly made her mind up, money or no money. However, they hadn't actually said anything, and he didn't quite know how to say hello to her. In the time it took him to get out of the car he decided that if she was bold enough to stand at the door and wait for him, he could be bold enough hug her. She seemed surprised and pleased at that.

He was wondering when his arms and chest would stop tingling.

Pulling him along she said,

"So, you want to discuss involuntary gender balance, I suppose?"

"Uh, yes," he said, feeling inexpressibly relieved that she understood the problem.

"Well, Pala, I'm afraid my feeling is that a disaster has been created through stupidity and prejudice, and that waiting to do anything about it until people are less stupid is just asking for more. We can't afford any more."

"Are you going to tell them that when they want an explanation?"

"Gladly," she said. She looked eager to start.

"No, Saira, listen. You're taking a choice away from people. The end does not justify the means."

"Pala, if the gender balance problem isn't fixed, and soon, there won't be anyone around to appreciate your ethical restraint," said Saira, kindly but firmly, as they reached a little shed apparently made of screens, inside and

out. When they stepped inside, Pala saw why. It was an insectary, quite a large one.

"As soon as I get the regulatory approval--which should be quite soon now because all the simulations have checked out and the process has been fast-tracked--I'll get my gene copies into these beasts, and away they go." Saira smiled happily, and her army of mosquitoes sang back in their thin, high whine.

More and more of them landed on the screens enclosing the internal passage, smelling the blood in their midst. Pala frowned at the thought that in a very few days, their bites could be changing his life. And what was next? After Saira did this for a good cause, would someone else, the government, the criminals, do it for a bad one?

"Won't Veerapatram try to block it?" he suddenly objected.

"He's already tried. The simulations show the genes to be safe though, and the government certainly doesn't want to be accused of stonewalling on this one!" She took another look around her insectary. "So, aren't you impressed with this?" She waved her hand to take in the thousands of healthy insects.

Pala shook his head sadly.

"Saira, you always get ten times more done in half the time of anyone else. I'm always impressed. But what are you doing?" He looked straight into her eyes, and did not look away.

A shade of doubt crossed her face, and she dropped her gaze.

"I thought I was trying to help save the world. Why? You have a better idea?"

He smiled slightly at this. No, he shook his head.

"I would just like to avoid the path where everyone with a good idea feels they can alter anyone's genes."

She looked startled, as if it hadn't occurred to her that genetic alteration might proceed beyond her attempt to save the world.

Pala unzipped his cabin bag and pulled out the box containing her hard-won, ultrapure template.

"This," he spoke softly, "is yours. I would not keep it from you, and what you are doing is in the best of causes. But, if not for your own sake then for

mine, think about how you might use it more fairly."

She looked at him, her eyes wide with sorrow, and now filled with doubt.

"Oh Pala," was all she said at first, sitting down heavily on a bench. "I don't know how else to use it. Effectively, at least. We may as well not use it at all. Wait for the uterine replicators, like everyone else."

She was so truly miserable, Pala felt like crying himself.

"Saira, no, I didn't mean...." He was so distressed for her he sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulders to comfort her. She didn't move away. "You're not supposed to give up, Saira. You're the one who does the impossible. You're supposed to figure a way out."

However, she just sat there, leaning into him slightly, hunched as if she were cold.

"There's no way," she muttered. "To be effective it has to be universal. Give people a choice, and they'll dither and procrastinate, even if it's an idea they approve of. Like organ donation."

"Well, so you can't give them a choice at the front end, give them a choice at the other end," Pala said suddenly. Saira looked up, not sure of his meaning. "Don't engineered genes all have to be destructible, for safety reasons?"

"Yes, but normally they only lose effectiveness after ten or fifteen years. There won't be much point having one that only works for a few weeks."

"No, no, that's not what I mean. Don't you have to show the ability to turn them off, in case there's a problem?"

"Yes. Mine get turned off by a sudden spike of galactose to the system."

"Well then. Provide free gala-whatever to people who want it. You've reintroduced choice, but now people have to do something to activate it, so if they dither and procrastinate, it'll help the cause!"

The limpness went out of Saira's body and the look in her eyes was one of calculation.

"It just could work. It'd be very expensive, of course. I'll be getting royalties for agricultural applications of my genes, which would probably be enough to begin with, but soon it would have to be government money."

"I could help," Pala broke in. "My father knows half the politicians anyway."

"And we wouldn't want too many people actually choosing the antidote..."

"I'll spend my time marching around the country," Pala said, smiling and earnest, both at once, "convincing people that the one true path is not to select genders. It's the one thing I'm good at," he said, taking both her hands in his, "talking about right and wrong."

"Not just talking," said Saira quietly.

+ + +