

I

A FEW months after the death of his wife, Thomas made the decision to return to India. From that moment of resolve, it took less than half a year to arrange his affairs. He handed in his notice at the optician's where he had worked for nearly twenty-five years, deflecting his colleagues' enquiries and accepting their best wishes. At the end of the requisite three months, he was given a send-off dinner and presented with a gift voucher for a large department store. 'We had no idea what you'd need to take back with you,' one of his colleagues confessed.

He spent some weeks with a solicitor, transferring the deeds of the house – the unremarkable 1930s semi that he and Nimmy had bought after their marriage – to his daughter, Nina. He had numerous phone calls with Mariamma, who attended to the other house – the house that he and Nimmy had built in Cherai, facing the Arabian Sea – making sure that the water-pump was in good order, the generator running; it was three years since he had last been. When he could avoid it no longer, he turned to his wife's last effects. She had been scrupulous during the last year of her life, insisting she had no wish that he be lumbered with the burden of trawling through her clothes and trinkets after her death. She had already given a neatly wrapped parcel of her most special saris and wedding jewellery to Nina. Another parcel of saris had gone to the women's community group that

ran a centre for victims of domestic abuse, and the box of old trousers and jumpers that she wore around the house had been deposited at the charity shop on the high street.

But even so, she had not been able to erase all remnants of her life. And these occasionally surfaced: aide-memoires of his wife. He found some undergarments that had come out of the wash and which he had, months ago, automatically put back in the chest of drawers in their old bedroom. The loose tracksuit bottoms and chunky sweaters, their pockets stuffed with the gloves and woolly hats she had worn in her last weeks, when she had complained of being perennially chilled: these he found pushed into the depths of their wardrobe. There were the vests that were still nearly brand new: he had bought them just days before she had died, when he had felt that if he could do nothing, he could keep her warm at least. And there were her toiletries, left behind when she spent her last two weeks in the hospice: her talcum powder, her face cream, the coconut oil she rubbed into her hair after her bath. He had stood for some minutes with that small bottle of oil in the palm of his hand. He remembered that when she was having her treatment, her hair falling out in clumps, she had been so upset at the sight of the oil, a reminder of her thick wavy hair, that he had hidden it among his shaving paraphernalia in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. It was only after her hair had grown back to a becoming cap that she had asked after her oil and he had returned it to her. All these bottles and pots were as she had left them, in the top drawer of their dressing table.

He left the very last clear-out for Nina's visit. She flew over from France the week before he left for India. He let her spend time in her mother's bedroom on her own. He no longer

thought of it as 'his' bedroom; he had been sleeping in the box room for more than a year. When she emerged, red-eyed, holding a small cardboard box containing everything she wished to keep, he silently took her in his arms and held her, stroked her hair, with a certainty he had not felt for years that that was what she wanted. When she was a little girl, comforting her had been simple and natural: she had always run into his arms when she scraped her knees, when she came off her bike, when she had suffered a slight. He had many, vague, memories of holding her to his chest, unable to stop himself from chuckling at her anguish while she heaved and sobbed into his shirt.

Now, however, his daughter was a woman of nearly thirty. He could not say that she confided in him; she had not sought solace from him for years. And when he held her he could feel that she was taller than her mother, her head brushing against his cheekbone. She felt substantial, with long limbs, shoulders, hips, elbows. He held her for longer than she needed to be held: he was enjoying her warmth and closeness. Then they separated. She had flashed an awkward smile, lowering her eyes, and had gone back into the room. He joined her after a few minutes and together they filled some plastic bags with items that he would take to the charity shop.

When they went back downstairs, after he had given her the details of the estate agents, the letting fee, their commission, after she had answered his queries over her job and her life in Paris with her usual perfunctory brevity, her eyes clouding over with secrecy, they sat in silence.

'Are you sure this is what you want to do, Pa?' she asked eventually. 'You're not very old. It will be a really long retirement.'

‘I don’t see it as retirement,’ he replied.

‘But will you be able to adjust? You’ve lived here so long.’

‘Your mother and I went back nearly every year before she got ill.’

‘But what will you do?’ Her voice was steady, but there was an expression in her eyes that he could not read.

He thought for a few moments.

‘After settling in, I’ll look around,’ he said. ‘I might even see if there’s a need for a teacher or a teaching assistant somewhere.’

She raised her eyebrows, then splayed her fingers, studied her nails. It was a familiar ploy: one she had used with much success as an adolescent, designed to feign a disregard for what was happening in her immediate environs. He reached across the dining table, took her hand. It lay in his passively, until, as if as an afterthought, he felt a small pressure, a squeeze.

‘Now that you are no longer living in London,’ he said, his eyes on her but hers still cast down, ‘there is no one keeping me here. I’ll enjoy the change. And you’ll visit, won’t you?’

She did not ask much more. He was not an elderly, frail parent; he had only just turned fifty-six, was in good health. He could, she knew, always return; no decision was irreversible.

But that night, as he made up her bed in her old room, empty now except for bed and wardrobe, he felt his decision was gathering a sense of permanence. His eyes swept over the house with a sense of detachment, as if he had left already and was inspecting his work of the last few years. He had painted the walls a few weeks ago, and there was still a faint smell of newness. He would do the same with the big bedroom and box room once Nina had gone back to France.

She climbed into her sleeping bag, her hair falling over her face, and he let himself gaze at her, drinking her in. She was a young woman, full of ambitions and desires he had no knowledge of, born of he and Nimmy, but individual, a person with a soul not of their making. Although she had seldom come and stayed in the years since leaving home and before Nimmy's diagnosis, at that moment he felt tremendously close to her – this adult-child – and tremendously distant, a feeling that was disturbing in its familiarity. He kissed her goodnight and then lay for what seemed many hours in the dark of the box room, the curtains undrawn, so the streetlight and the lights of the passing cars cast shadows on the wall. He hoped he would hear her call for him, as she had done when she was a small child, but he heard no more from her and presumed she had fallen asleep.

He remembered the first night that he and Nimmy had spent in the house, lying on a mat on the floor of the big bedroom, dizzy with excitement at being householders after three years of saving, Nimmy's stomach already a mound. The first night they had spent with the baby wrapped in a white blanket lying between them on their bed, marvelling at her curled-up fists, her rosebud lips, her shock of black hair. Helping Nina paint her bedroom aged fourteen; Nina arriving back in the summers during her university years to clump around her bedroom behind a closed door.

But I don't need to be here to have memories, he thought. In that small room he felt like he was speaking to his wife, that she was lying in the dark beside him, her body encased in the long house dresses she favoured. He could picture her face: the thick eyebrows, the cusp of her lips. She had looked younger

the closer she had grown to death, her face the triangular shape of her youth, rather than the rounder womanly shape of motherhood and her middle years. Her short hair, grown back after the chemo, curling around her ears and revealing the smoothness of the back of her neck, harked back to the styles worn by the fashionable, wealthier girls in her year at college, who had styled their hair into chic gamine cuts, foregoing the traditional long plait. Her wrists, her ankles, towards the end were all impossibly thin and fragile. The last time he had held her he had thought of her as a girl, not his wife of more than thirty years.

He drove his daughter to the airport a few days later, and then straight on to the used-car dealer who had made him a reasonable offer. He took the bus back to the house, looked out at the familiar streets as they passed by. The grey pavements, the flurry of people of all hues, the shops and bars of Tooting Broadway: all far removed from the slender state hugging the coast in the south of India. Could he do it? he thought. Could he slip back into the rhythms dictated by the swell of the sea and the cycle of the moon? The question preoccupied him over the last hectic days, but by the time the plane landed, by the time the taxi he had hired pulled up at the house, the only thing he could think of was how he felt like he was breathing anew. And how sweet, how heavy was the air.

The house occupied him for his first weeks. It was not in disrepair but felt careworn, unloved. The water pump and generator were, however, in perfect working order – unsurprising, given that they were less than a year old – and every evening he enjoyed a shower, after which, wearing only a mundu tied around his waist, he stood on the balcony, where the warm

breeze cooled and then dried him. He spent the first days dusting and cleaning the house out; Mariamma from next door sent her son to help. The shutter for the window in the second bedroom had suffered during a storm and was now swinging off its hinges. All the rooms had a thin, sticky film on every surface. Ants had taken over the ground floor: a family, a village, a city. At first he took a certain pleasure in watching their industry, their endless repetitive toil. They marched along the skirting boards and then, for some insect reason, on reaching a door continued up and then over the arch sketching a black outline, as if a child had traced over the lines and angles of his house. After some days, however, he grew tired of having to step over their parades, stand on them in error and feel the little bites: not painful but plentiful. He and the boy spent a week laying down bicarbonate of soda, a remedy suggested by Mariamma, and then sweeping out the remnants, the mounds of tiny carcasses, in the mornings.

The backyard was an exposed square of land, sandy, hosting a trio of elegant coconut trees. He negotiated with the man down the road for a delivery of bamboo and other supplies, and then, after sketching some plans on a piece of paper, he constructed a canopy, a supporting frame: a gazebo. The physical work, the sun strong on his bare shoulders, woke him up to his new life but also reminded him of his upbringing in the hills. As a child, he had swum in the rivers and paddy fields that surrounded them, climbed trees; his muscles had been lean and taut from a young age. In London he had found a swimming baths near his work where he went nearly every day, the chlorine of the water a bitter contrast to the slippery warmth of the rivers of his childhood. One morning he stood on his balcony, gazed at the sea.

Then, he straightened up, went downstairs and crossed the road. On reaching the beach, he could see, further to his right, the fishermen still pulling in their boats. He continued across the sand and plunged into the sea.

The water embraced him, the waves resisted and then pulled him further in. He could feel nothing below his feet, just expanses of the warmth. The undertow was persistent, but he was a strong swimmer and it did not take him long to find a rhythm, find a way to use the wave to move forwards. He swam out, and when he opened his eyes he was surprised to see that the land was now far away. A panorama lay before him of the beach, the fringe of coconut trees. Behind him, the vastness of the ocean, the sky. He was not on the land any more but in limbo, wallowing in the warmth, as a baby in his mother's womb. He swam further along, through the waves, and found that when he was ready to turn back, the sea helped him, nudging him forwards and then spitting him out so that he landed ungracefully on the sand, his chest heaving with his exertions. He had faced the land and been thrust upon it, as if he were to be thrust into a new life. He felt reborn.

Just as he had never constructed anything in a backyard, he had never swum in the sea before. Since buying the small square of land a few years ago and then overseeing the construction of the house in fits and starts, he and Nimmy had found the visits to Cherai increasingly hectic: the backdrop was always her plaintive family, nagging, demanding their attention. A stroll on the beach had been the closest they had come to enjoying the sea. Now, having ploughed through the waves, the salt water swilling in his mouth and ears, he saw a new release. Rather than returning to the house that they had built to pick at a life that had

been thwarted, he had been given a chance to create something new: a step towards the rest of his living years. He had felt when he was in the water, looking back at the land, as if he was only then making his decision to return: there and then. As if, if he chose, he could turn around and swim away, back to his life of the last decades.

Three weeks after his return, he made the long train journey to Calicut, where his elder sister was in a convent. There, he spent an enjoyable two days. He was given a room in the visitor wing and took his meals with the nuns. He and his sister took a walk every evening along the tracks winding through the hills. They reminisced about their younger days and about their parents, both buried in the church of their village, Vazhakulam, along with their elder brother, who had died in a bus accident nearly thirty years ago. When his sister asked after his daughter, Thomas replied with a smile and an air of resignation.

‘She will visit,’ he said.

‘She must come here,’ his sister said. ‘I’ve not seen her since she was this high,’ placing the flat of her hand at her breast.

Thomas smiled, not refuting her even though his sister was round, diminutive; his daughter had most likely been towering over her aunt when she had last visited India, aged sixteen.

When they turned their conversation to Nimmy, his sister spoke in hushed tones, slipped her arm through his. ‘God moves in mysterious ways,’ she said. ‘Here I am at sixty-three, and nobody will really miss me.’ She shushed his protests: ‘It’s true, I’m just an old nun. But Nimmy, a mother, taken at fifty-five . . .’ She sighed and shook her head. ‘It’s not for us to understand, Thomasmon,’ she said. ‘We just need to accept.’

He had long eschewed the piety of his upbringing, but he took comfort, if not in his sister's words, in the whole encounter. His affectionate and mischievous older sister, whom he had adored when he was growing up. He had been bereft when she had joined the convent and left the family home; he was just fifteen years old. Her comedic appearance: her dark, masculine face in habit and veil. The pithiness of her Malayalam and the rendering of his childhood name: *Thomasmon*. He had not been called that for years. He left his sister with a full heart, promises to return and arrangements. He would visit again at Easter in a few months' time, and she would come and stay with him at Christmas.

On arriving back in Cherai, he walked for some hours up and down the beach, long after the sun had gone, while some youths hoping to have a quiet smoke of ganja loitered in the shadows. His next port of call required some preparation. Nimmy's mother was still alive, nearly ninety and suffering from dementia, a mother of nine and a grandmother to fourteen. She lived in Idukki district, not far from where Thomas himself had grown up, in the house of her eldest son, Thomas's brother-in-law. They would be welcoming, he knew. But full of questions: what were her last days like? Did she not get treatment? Why did she not visit before she died? And then: where was she buried? Who would attend her grave if he were here? Back in Tooting he had asked himself the same questions, effortlessly finding answers for each. These he could not now recall. He remembered that they had planned to come to India the year before the tumour was found, but something had forestalled their plans. By the time they were looking into flights, Nimmy was complaining of an ache in her stomach. After the chemo,

she had then undergone radiotherapy. When she was pronounced terminal, she had spent all her energies in preparing him and their daughter for the eventuality. And, although the days had sometimes dragged by with tedium, with a feeling of suffocation, although he had sometimes sat alone in the evening, angry with everyone, even Nimmy for getting ill, sat alone in a time that seemed to slow down with a cruel relish, each second a drip feed towards the inevitable, in the end, the *end* had arrived with a rapid stealth. He had not really thought of the others: her aged mother, who admittedly had long said farewell, and Nimmy's five brothers and three sisters, all scattered over India and beyond.

Arriving in Idukki some weeks later, he found Nimmy's family had grown softer, less brash and abrasive. In truth, the distance established over space and time, over thousands of miles and more than thirty years, had not frayed bonds but rather calmed frayed tempers. All the arguments, the niggles of old – why did Thomaschayan not remit more money than he did, stingy miser; why did Nimmy not spend more time in her old home on their visits back to India – had themselves grown older, and remained in the shadows, like elderly aunts. The arguments had grown old and weary, Thomas thought, but Nimmy was not allowed to. He cast aside his momentary bitterness and tried to throw himself back into her family in a way he had never done when she was alive. They were, all of Nimmy's siblings, parents now, some were grandparents. They had broken up into small exclusive units dealing with their own quota of personal dramas. While Nimmy's mother did not recognise him, the rest seemed primarily concerned with Thomas's well-being. After the customary salutations, the questions he had expected arrived

but were asked half-heartedly. Rather than dwell on Nimmy, the family preferred to probe after Nina. Photos were produced, she was exclaimed over: she looks like her mother, but she has your chin. Beautiful girl, she needs to marry, don't delay it too long. He could deflect the queries with ease, throw his hands up in mock exasperation at the lack of nuptials, playing the baffled father with panache.

It was only after a long and bountiful meal, where he was served delicacies that he had not tasted for years, that his brother-in-law took him aside, suggesting that he and Thomas go for a walk, to look over the old village. As they walked, just as the heat of the day was beginning its slow decline, his brother-in-law drew out a small business card from his breast pocket.

'When you are ready,' he said, 'get in touch with Jos. He told me to tell you to call. He needs someone to take over his business while he and his wife are away. They're going to the States for about six months to visit their first grandchild.'

On the bus back to Cherai, Thomas had stared at the small card, creased with sweat and crumpled at the edges: 'Jos Chacko, Optician, Chacko's Optical Store, Off MG Road, Opposite Boat Jetty, Ernakulam, Kochi, Kerala'.

The card stayed in his trouser pocket, and it was only when he was hanging up the washing some days later that he discovered the white fragments, soggy, impossible to reassemble. But he remembered the address; he suspected that he knew exactly where the store would be because there had been a well-known optician's, Panikkar's, on that street. Jos must have bought it and reopened it under his own name. He needn't ring, he decided. Jos would have found someone already, and, rather than put his

friend in a quandary, it was better that he turn up at the shop on the pretence of passing by, dropping in. If his brother-in-law was in touch with Jos, then his friend would know about Nimmy. At least he would not have to have that awkward conversation.

He prevaricated a further five days; by now he had been back two months. He had developed a daily routine: waking up when the room became too hot, swimming in the sea, embracing the fresh morning air and walking across the backwaters to Junction. He could do the necessary shopping for the day and be back at the beach before the sun was at its highest. The afternoons, he spent reading. He had always enjoyed his own company and even as a father and a husband he had always kept a space for himself. He did not have any friends nearby, but he had developed an easy rapport with the cluster of autorickshaw drivers who stationed themselves at the turning from Cherai Beach to Junction. Most knew him already from the visits he had made when overseeing the build of the house; those who didn't would have been apprised of the news about Nimmy. They behaved with a consideration that touched him. He had no idea what troubles and trials had befallen them, but clearly, living in his own house, however modest its size, with no financial difficulties, placed him in a different tier. And yet, it seemed that they regarded his loss as momentous as any they had endured.

When he was drinking his coffee in the morning, he thought, today is the day. He would go into Ernakulam and look up his friend. He caught the bus into the city and during the journey enjoyed a few pleasant memories of his college days with Jos. By far the more flirtatious, Jos had never seemed short of a daring comment for the female students on their course. He

came from a wealthy family who owned a pharmacy in Trivandrum, already earmarked as his inheritance. As young men, they had been close and had at one stage considered opening their own partnership together. But then Thomas had married Nimmy and moved to London. Later, he heard that Jos had also married and moved in turn to Houston. He had last seen Jos about seven years ago, when the two men had arranged to meet up with their wives in town. He remembered a small woman, Rose or Rosie?

The street was cleanly swept, tidy. The pavements were in not bad repair, and the street was narrow enough so that, at least at this time of day, there was a pleasant shade. The store was, as he had expected, in the premises of the old Panikkar's. He stood for some minutes on the other side of the street. Ahead, he could see people crossing over the main road towards him: passengers arriving at the boat jetty a few hundred yards away on ferries from the islands. To his left was a coffee shop which he had not seen before, with a freshly painted sign, Green Gardens. If Nimmy had been with him, they would probably have entered the café; they could have been among the passengers disembarking after visiting the islands, which they had done occasionally on their trips back. The thought occupied him, and he stood still for some moments before he noticed a movement in the window of the optician's. Someone was waving at him.

He crossed the street and opened the door. Inside, the cool air greeted him. The colours of the rugs and chairs were bright; a glass cabinet along one wall held an array of frames of different styles. Someone was holding the door open for him.

'Welcome, sir.' Her voice was brisk. 'Please come in.'

He stepped inside quickly, the door swung shut and they faced each other. She was young, smartly dressed: black trousers and white collared shirt, her hair arranged in a neat bun at the back of her head. He could detect, however, that her sober costume, rather than clothing her, was containing her; she was bristling with enthusiasm.

‘Please. Sit.’

She motioned to the plump blue armchairs artfully arranged in pairs up against the far wall. He nodded and sat down. The young woman returned to her desk, smiling at him. Then, with a quick movement she stood up again and walked over, her arm outstretched.

‘I am Rani, sir,’ she said. They shook hands. ‘Mr Jos will come out soon.’

She pointed at the door behind them, which had a small frosted-glass window.

‘He is with a client in the testing room.’

‘Thank you.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I’m . . .’

‘Mr Thomas, sir,’ she interrupted, smiling widely, revealing large white teeth.

She pronounced his name as he was called by all close to him: his family, his wife and friends. It had only been when he had arrived in London that he realised he was destined to be ‘Tom-us’ to the rest of the world.

As if she could read his thoughts, she added, ‘From London.’

It was often a sobriquet, but just as often said in one breath: Thomasfromlondon. He nodded and smiled back.

‘How did you—’

‘We’ve been expecting you. You will be joining us, I hope.’

‘Well—’

‘And Mr Jos said you were tall,’ she continued. ‘And I could tell from just looking at you!’

‘I see.’

There was a slight pause while she continued to smile widely, then she clasped her hands in front of her.

‘We are a nice business. Honest, professional.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘And you are so qualified. More than Mr Jos!’ she giggled.

She was nervous: this accounted for the babble and the laughter. And indeed, so would he be in her position. He was well-enough known to his friend; he was as yet an unknown to this young woman, who, if he decided to take on the post, would have to work with him every day.

‘Do you get very busy?’ he asked, in an attempt to deflect the attention from himself.

‘So-so,’ she said. ‘Some days, so busy. Some days not.’

She smiled again, nodded.

He smiled back, and they remained like this for some moments, until he saw a hint of unease creeping into her eyes. He stood up.

‘Shall I wait in the café across the road?’ he said. ‘I don’t want to disturb you.’

‘Oh no, you are not disturbing!’

She looked aghast, her palms aloft, as if she had been entrusted with safeguarding his continued presence and could not allow him to leave.

The door to the street opened. A middle-aged woman entered, fanning herself with the end of her salwar. She looked from one to the other.

‘Sorry, am I interrupting?’

‘Madam.’ Rani’s hands dropped to her sides, then she turned back to Thomas. ‘Please sit.’ She threw the words at him and then darted across the office. As she started pulling several plastic boxes off the shelves, he resumed his seat. The atmosphere changed. Action stations: the description popped into his head. Rani was arranging several frames on the counter.

The woman gave Thomas a sidelong glance. ‘So hot,’ she said and then, sauntering to the counter, drew up to Rani. ‘These are the frames?’

‘These are from our usual suppliers, but we also have an international catalogue. Expect a week’s wait at least.’ She spoke quickly.

The woman stared at the dozens of frames being unloaded before her.

‘I was thinking of . . .’ she began.

‘For a round face, square glasses are better, madam,’ Rani said. ‘They have a slimming effect.’

Her frankness amused him and did not seem to offend the client, who, in contrast to her earlier imperious manner, became meek, trying on the frames that Rani advised, deferring to Rani’s pronouncements. Blue was unflattering to Madam’s complexion; larger frames only emphasised her heavy eyebrows.

As the two women continued their discussions, he surveyed the store and, beyond, the street outside. It was pleasant, he found, to be somewhere which had a purpose. He had only worked for a few months in the country of his birth, after his graduation, as a teaching assistant at his old college, before joining his father in the rubber plantations in the hills. In those days, leaving India had seemed the only way to have any chance of a secure future. Not yet twenty-four, he had married Nimmy, a

nurse with a post to accept in London: it was one of the reasons his father had approached her parents, made the introductions. They had left soon after their marriage and had worked there ever since. He knew that, without a reason to do otherwise, he was in danger of secluding himself in Cherai. Perhaps he would settle into his new life better if, at least for the next few months, he had some company, had some interaction with the world beyond the fishing village.

By the time his old friend joined him from the testing room with his customary effusive welcome, slapping his back and proclaiming how well he looked, Thomas had already made his decision. The details were simple: Jos and his wife were expecting to stay in Houston for six months to help their daughter and son-in-law with their first child. A photo was brandished: a chubby baby, two proud smiling parents. Rather than leave the shop in the care of an acquaintance – Jos mentioned the manager of the café across the road – it would be altogether much more satisfactory to leave it in the hands of a professional and, what was more, a friend. Thomas would be doing a great service to give of his time to take over the duties for that period.

It was a generous offer, sensitively worded. And as Jos talked about logistics – contacting suppliers, the process of ordering frames, making the lenses – there began a stirring, as if, deep inside his midriff, a set of cogs had started turning again. The life that lay ahead, evoked by Jos's words, was appealing. The business was not his, and so he would feel no great responsibility. He would have to wake up early, in order to get the bus from Cherai Junction to Ernakulam, but he could get off at the High Courts and then walk the remainder of the way. The journey would take an hour – not dissimilar to his daily commute in

London. Rani would already have opened up the shop, and they would welcome their first clients from ten o'clock. He could be back in Cherai by six, after which he would feel that he had earned a quiet evening. The weekends would be his, to walk along the beach, to swim.

On the bus back that afternoon, with arrangements made for some days' overlap before Jos and his wife left for Texas, Thomas stared out of the window. This time a year ago, he thought, it was the middle of winter in London. The garden was bare of its leaves, and we were having problems with our boiler. Nimmy had the schedule for her chemotherapy, and we were making plans for her hospital visits. His mind floated back as, outside, the stalls and vendors of the city grew sparser, until they were on the road heading to the sea.