



A Road to Nowhere?

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*Nothing behind me,
everything ahead of me,
as is ever so on the road.*

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

“IT’S A BOY, AMMA!” THE midwife cried out, triumphantly displaying the newborn. The exhausted features of the young mother displayed a weak smile. She whispered: “Does HE know?”

“Yes, Amma! HE is on his way, along with our family priest.”

Three faces peeped into the birthing room, then silently entered.

“Amma,” the youngest whispered. “Are you happy?”

“Of course, she is happy, you idiot!”

chided the middle one. “It’s a boy-child, isn’t it? Nanna¹ will be very pleased.”

“HE’S coming! Hush!” the eldest cautioned.

The three girls stepped away from their mother and hid behind the midwife. The tall figure of the father, clad in pristine white clothes, threw open the door. Behind him was a pot-bellied bearded man, bare-chested, and sporting a shikha,² and displaying the sacred thread of the twice-born Brahmin on his chest.

¹ Father (in the Telugu language)

² A tuft of hair kept at the back of the head by a Hindu following tonsure. Though traditionally considered to be an essential mark of a Hindu, today it is primarily worn among Brahmins, temple priests, and ascetics.

“FINALLY! God has FINALLY seen fit to bless me with a son and heir.”

The midwife handed him the baby boy wrapped in swaddling cloths. He raised the baby above his head and cried out: “Welcome, Balamuralikrishna!”

An old woman, clad in the traditional nine-yard-sari, hurried into the room.

“Son? Has it really happened?” she wheezed. “Have the gods finally blessed you?”

The father bent down to touch the dust in front of his mother’s feet.

“Yes, mother! It has happened. And he is perfect in every way—fair of complexion, jet-black hair, . . .”

“All ten fingers and toes?” the old woman interrupted.

“Yes, Amma, yes. All intact. He’ll grow up to be a fine specimen of manhood.”



It was recess time at the Vijaya Primary School. The schoolyard quickly filled up with the laughter and shouts of the children.

“Hey, Bala! Let’s see you dance again!”

Wielding a cricket bat, the class bully Shankar came threateningly close to Balamuralikrishna.

“Yes, yes!” echoed the other boys in the schoolyard. “Dance! Dance!”

“Do you need a skirt? Or perhaps a sari?”

Balamuralikrishna felt the usual tears spring to his eyes.

“I won’t cry!” he told himself. “I won’t do it.”

The cricket bat connected with his right leg, then his back, and finally his head. He felt the warmth of the blood trickling down his face.

“Let’s go!” said another boy. “He’s such a sissy!”

“Yeah!” agreed another boy. “He cries like a baby—a baby girl!”

Giggling, the group returned to the school house.

“Bala!” he heard a soft voice behind him. “Are you okay?”

It was Malathi, a girl from his class.

“Don’t pay any attention to those bullies!”

“But . . .” spluttered Balamuralikrishna. “They’re mad because I don’t want to play cricket with them. Why can’t I be with you and the other girls?”

“Because, silly, you are a boy!”

He sighed and looked enviously at her outfit: a pretty blue blouse with embroidery on the sleeves, and a matching skirt. He spotted his older sisters Brunda, Kamala, and Shanta approaching, and hurriedly turned away from Malathi.

That evening he vanished into the third courtyard behind the house, where his father’s paddy-

field laborers ate their midday meal and rested. He took out his youngest sister Shanta’s skirt and blouse and tried them on. They felt so right, so much more comfortable than the shirt and shorts that his mother forced him to wear. He sat down on the mud floor, pulled a sketch pad and a box of colored pencils out of his shoulder bag, and began to draw. as he did every evening.

The outline of a road quickly appeared on the paper. It wound snakelike from the bottom left to the top right of the page. Bala took out a blood-red crayon and began drawing the fire-breathing river Vaitarani³ that was the path between death and hell, just like the one his mother had described to him when he couldn’t go to sleep. “You don’t want the river to take you away, my son!” she would say. He had just finished coloring the river in violent purples and reds when his sister Shanta came to get him for the evening meal.

She asked him, as she always did: “Why do you draw the same thing? Always this funny road, winding like the river Godavari up and up, almost cobra-like . . . and so dark, so purple and red and black everywhere. But why

doesn’t the road disappear into the sky? You make it come back. It loops right back. Why, Bala, why? I love colors, but those reds and purples—they are . . . they are frightening! And . . . and where is the sun?”

And he would give her the same answer: “One of these days, the sun will shine through those clouds, the horror will disappear, and I will be home.”

Shanta would give him a puzzled look and say: “But you are home already, aren’t you? It doesn’t make you happy, does it? What makes you happy, little brother?”

Bala would hug her and mumble:

“You . . . you make me happy.”



On his fourteenth birthday, Bala’s father had insisted on putting him through the ordeal of Upanayanam or “initiation.”⁴

“You are a man now, my son! From tomorrow, you will accompany me to supervise our paddy fields and meet the laborers.”

But Bala’s world was soon to change more drastically than he had imagined, even in his drawings. Unexpectedly, one of the laborers had returned one evening to the courtyard to retrieve a

3 The Vaitarani is a river in Hindu mythology, similar to the river Styx in Greek mythology. It is said to lie between the Earth and Naraka, or hell, the realm of Yama, the Hindu god of death.

4 One of the traditional rites of passage for a Hindu man, signaling his advent into adulthood.

forgotten bag and had discovered Bala in his sister's skirt and blouse.

"So, you are one of those!" he had said. "Don't be afraid! You know you cannot hide this for long. Best to go to where your kind is welcomed."

"But . . . but . . . what do you mean?" Bala had stammered.

"You feel like a woman inside, right?"

Bala had nodded mutely.

"Then you need to go to Hyderabad, to meet a guru. Write this down in that book you have."

He had dictated the name and address of a hijra community.

"They are like you. And the guru, who is like a mother to everybody, will provide everything for you. Of course, you have to work hard and give some of your earnings to her."

"Earnings? But for what kind of work?"

The laborer had grinned.

"Well, cleaning spittoons, washing clothes, and . . . and servicing men."

"What does that mean?"

The laborer had just grinned. One of the boys in school who had begun to protect Bala from the bullies had also laughed at Bala's question: "Gopal, what does 'servicing men' mean?"

"That means having sex with them, like prostitutes."

Bala took out a fresh sheet of paper and furiously drew his road. Ten

minutes later he sat back, emotionally exhausted. He heard Shanta quietly stand behind him.

"This is new!" she said. "That figure . . . who is it, little brother?"

"My guru! The one who is going to take me away from all this."

Shanta began crying softly. Then she bent down, picked up an orange crayon, and drew the stick figure of a girl.

"Who is that supposed to be?" Bala asked.

"That's me, stupid! I am on the road with you."



Bala fingered the five hundred rupees in his pocket, money that Shanta had stolen from their father's money purse for him. It would be enough for a train ticket to Hyderabad. His shoulder bag contained the sketch book and one of Shanta's dresses. He had removed the so-called sacred thread that his father had forced him to wear after putting him through the customary manhood initiation ceremony, and had tied it around one of the gate posts leading to his father's house.

"Free at last!" he thought to himself, then sadly remembered how Shanta had wept at his leaving. "I should have taken her with me. She knows that laborer—he'll tell her where I've gone."

As he waited for the train, he looked around him. He had never been with so many different people, from so many different castes and classes. He saw two women completely covered in black niqabs and wondered why they would want to hide their womanhood. He squatted on the floor of the platform, took out his sketch book, and began to draw. He made the winding road wider, and the clouds less threatening. The dark present hadn't completely vanished. He looked at the drawing. Did Shanta belong in this new picture? He was not sure. He needed more time, more hope. Perhaps the guru would help banish those dark clouds and allow the sun's rays to break through.

A shadow fell across his sketch. He looked up and saw an older man observing the drawing with interest.

"Sad!" the man commented. "Sad, and from someone so young! I should be the one to see the world in such dark hues, not you, my friend!"

Bala smiled embarrassedly and quickly slipped the drawing into his bag.

"I didn't mean to intrude," the man apologized, and smilingly walked away.



Bala grabbed his bag and jumped out of the train. The noise, the smells were overpowering. He pulled out the sheet of paper with the address and was

about to ask someone for directions, when he heard a voice behind him.

"Welcome to one of the busiest cities in India, young man!"

It was the man who had commented on his drawing. Bala breathed a sigh of relief. A familiar face—he didn't feel quite so lost in this foreign environment. He smiled at the man, then showed him the address.

"Ah yes! That is close to where I live. Come! My car is waiting outside. Let me take you there."

Bala let out a sigh of relief. It was going to be alright. He gratefully followed the man who aggressively pushed his way through the crowds.

"Here we are!" the man said. A uniformed man saluted him.

"Driver, we will take my friend to this address."

"Sir!"

Bala couldn't believe his luck. This was a different world, one filled with helpful people. Before they got into the car, the man turned to Bala.

"I haven't introduced myself to you. My name is Barkat Ali. And you are?"

"Bala . . . I mean, Balamuralikrishna."

"And your people? Your father?"

Bala hesitated. Why did this man want to know this? Perhaps it was customary in the city? What harm could it do? He replied: "My father is Akkinapalli Venkataramayya."

“And he knows that you are here in Hyderabad?”

“Well . . .” Bala hesitated. If he told this man that he had sneaked out of the house, would he call the police? Would he even try to contact his father? Best not to tell him.

“Well, yes. He has sent me to further my schooling.”

“Good!” Barkat Ali nodded approvingly. “I teach art at a local college here . . .”

“Art?” Bala interrupted. “But . . . sir . . . that’s . . . that’s wonderful.”

Barkat Ali looked at his chauffeur in the rearview mirror and nodded.

“We are almost there. Here—have a sip of water! It will help against this dry heat.”

Bala gratefully drank the cold water from the thermos.

✱

“Where am I?” He couldn’t see anything. Had he gone blind? His head was throbbing, there was a heaviness in his legs and arms that he didn’t recognize. He heard a door opening.

“Ah! I see that you have woken up! Balamuralikrishna, son of Akkinipalli

Venkataraamayya. Welcome to your new home!”

Barkat Ali shoved a bundle of clothes at Bala.

“You will wear these for this evening’s performance.”

Before Bala could respond, the man had disappeared and the door closed with a bang. He heard something else open—it was a window, and sunshine streamed through it into the room. Bala looked at the bundle and opened it. Women’s clothes, richly embroidered silk and satin. The colors were ruby-red and emerald-green, with jewelry to match. A cloth bag lay at the bottom. He found a pair of leather ghungroos in it.⁵ The door opened again. The man who had acted as the chauffeur entered.

“Come, my lovely! It is time for the *nirvaanam*.⁶ We have to get you ready for your eager customers!”

✱

Akkinipalli Venkataraamayya marched into his wife’s bedroom and roared: “Where is the lad? You must have done something, wife!”

Wife Savitri cringed and cowered in the corner of the room.

“Husband, please calm down! Nowadays boys . . .”

“He is MY SON!” Venkataraamayya thundered. “He dares to disobey me? And look at this!”

He thrust the sacred thread that Bala had tied around the gatepost. “Look at this! The boy dares to take off the sacred thread? What was he thinking? And . . . and where would he go? He doesn’t have any money.”

He looked at his wife. “You . . . you whore! Did you give him money?”

Savitri held her breath as her husband took out his belt. And then it happened—she saw her husband being pushed from behind. He fell on the ground and hit his head against the edge of the marble-topped table. Shanta went up to him and held her finger against his nose. He had stopped breathing.

“It’s alright, Amma,” she said. “He won’t hurt you anymore. I am free to leave now, Amma. Please don’t stop me. I have to find Bala.”

Savitri got up and hugged her daughter. “You are the child who always protected me, my Shanta. You are my Ardhanarishwara.⁷ Go with my blessings! And bring him back to us.”

“Before I go . . . I want to show you something, Amma.”

Shanta showed her a sheet of paper.

“This is why Bala left us, Amma.”

It was one of the earlier drawings that Bala had forgotten in his hurry to leave. Savitri cried out at the hopelessness that it had captured so powerfully.

“You can see why he needed to go away, Amma,” Shanta said. “He needs to break through those clouds, to reach light.”

“Was he drowning here in Vaitarani? I used to read a story to him when he was a little boy about the fire-breathing river Vaitarani that is the path between death and hell river,” Savitri said, tears coursing down her cheeks. “My fault. I should have protected him, allowed him to fulfill his destiny. When he was born, a group of hijras⁸ came with their Gangireddu⁹ to bless him, as was their custom.

One of the hijras handed me the sacred hibiscus and marigold flowers in a basket. But when they saw Bala, they wanted to take him with them, saying: ‘He’s one of us!’”

⁵ A ghungroo is one of many small metallic bells strung together to form a musical anklet tied to the feet of classical Indian dancers.

⁶ *Nirvanaam*, “castration,” where penis, scrotum, and testicles would be removed.

⁷ Ardhanarishwara, literally “the half-female Lord,” is a form of the Hindu deity Shiva combined with his consort Parvati. Ardhanarishwara is depicted as half-male and half-female, equally split down the middle.

⁸ In Western terms, most hijras are feminine-identifying people assigned male at birth.

⁹ This is an age-old tradition in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The bull, known as Gangireddu, is adorned with colorful and beautiful sarees, and flowers are tied around its horns and anklets to its legs.

“Well, Amma, don’t worry! Our laborer Gopal will be with me at all times. We’ll find Bala.”

✱

It was 5 A.M. on a very hot and dry day. Bala crept out of the decrepit shanty next to the bus depot. Today would be like every other day, selling himself to drunks and druggies who didn’t have much money to spend. For the last week, he had been noting down the departure times of all the interstate buses in his sketch pad. There was one leaving in half an hour for Rajahmundry, the town closest to his village. Barkat Ali’s so-called chauffeur was actually his pimp, keeping a strict lookout for customers, and protecting him from excessive violence.

People were lining up for the bus. It was now or never. He fingered the money in his handbag and cautiously approached the ticketing booth.

“Where to?” The grumpy man behind the counter put out the beedi

that was dangling from his lips and repeated his question.

“Rajahmundry, please, sir!”

The man looked up at the sound of Bala’s voice.

“Don’t I know you? You live in this basti.”¹⁰

Bala shook his head. The man thrust a ticket at him.

“Bus leaves in ten minutes. You’d better hurry if you want a seat.”

As Bala turned around, he felt a stab in his right forearm.

✱

The road was carrying him forward and upward. He felt as light as a feather. There was no pain, just infinite serenity. Was it possible that he would see the sunlight breaking through the clouds today? He glanced at his sketch pad. The darkness had disappeared. There were two figures with him on the road: Shanta and his beloved amma. The sun broke through. He erased the road and disappeared above the clouds. ✱

¹⁰ A basti is an overcrowded area where many poor people live.

