

Murmurer was talking to farmer Ramasamy, “Hi, brother. Hi brother Ramasamy. See the Sun. The Sun. It is hot. Scorching. Your crop. Your crop is sad. She is hanging her face. You see. You see her face. She is hanging her face. She will die. She will die if you don’t water this field now.”

He always talked like this, in short sentences, a few words at a time. Repeating what he had just said. It seemed like a kindergarten teacher talking to her students. His mouth was not under his control, it was as if the TV that was running inside his head was wired directly to his mouth, obligating him to report to all the world whatever was going on inside.

He talked constantly, while standing, sitting, walking, working, eating, drinking and even while others were talking to him. He kept on talking from morning until night. Luckily he was excused from this constant reporting when he went to sleep.

His real name was Vairan, but that was forgotten long back. Everyone called him Munumuthan, by the Tamil word for Murmurer. Actually he never talked in a Murmur or a whisper. It was loud, loud as if he was having a conversation with someone across the room. In fact you could hear him sixty feet away.

Ramasamy, to who Murmurer was talking to, knew about the imminent danger his crop was facing, but he didn’t know what to do. There was water in the well, but the coil in his electric motor was burnt.

The mechanic who had taken the motor to rewind the coil wouldn’t be back for another four or five days. His crop couldn’t wait that long and he didn’t know what to do. The farmer told all that to Murmurer, who kept talking. Between his statements, Murmurer would stop occasionally for a second or two and in that short interval Ramasamy had to explain his problem.

Murmurer could never bring himself to away from someone’s problem. He sat on a rock and kept talking, about the Sun, the water, the crops, the best time for

planting, the harvest, the well, and the pump.

Then he stopped talking, only for a few seconds. There was *Silence* for that short period. Such silence was rare. He seldom stopped more than two seconds. After the brief silence he began to talk.

“Hi brother Ramasamy. Chellaiah. You know Chellaiah?”

There were more than twenty five Chellaiahs in the Village and poor Ramasamy didn't know which one of them Murmurer was talking about, but he couldn't ask him. Murmurer didn't give him a break.

“Chellaiah. Our one Palmyra tree Chellaiah.” Now Ramasamy understood who he was talking about.

It was customary to grow a Neem tree or other shade giving trees in the yard, but never a Palmyra tree. No one knew how a Palmyra tree came to be in front of Chellaiah's house, that event was lost in time. But it served the important purpose of giving a nickname to the man of the house.

Murmurer continued, “One Palmyra Chellaiah has a spare motor. You could borrow it. Borrow it. Then return it.”

Ramasamy understood, but had many questions. Would One Palmyra, (people often omitted Chellaiah,) allow him borrow the motor for a few days? Even if he did, how was Ramasamy to carry it to his farm and fit it in place all by himself? Ramasamy felt helpless. Murmurer understood Ramasamy's problem.

He immediately volunteered, “I will come. I will help you. Come on. Come on. Let us go”.

Together they walked, straight toward the tall Palmyra tree. On the way Murmurer kept talking about things relevant to the work in hand. He said that One Palmyra was not a bad person at all, and if approached properly would surely help.

Then he mentioned about himself, about his own knowledge of motor mechanism and ability to fit the motor in place and do all the mechanical

connections, except the electrical connections, which he said could be done in twenty minutes. Then Murmurer went on talking about the mechanism of electrical motors.

Ramasamy had never listened to Murmurer for this long. Whenever he listened, he never tried to make sense of the words. As he walked with Murmurer he listened to him and found that his words were very sensible, just that it took longer for him to explain. They reached One Palmyra Chellaiah's house, and were lucky to find him at home. They greeted each other.

"Welcome Ramasamy, welcome Murmurer," said Chellaiah.

"Yes, One Palmyra tree," said Ramasamy and Murmurer almost in unison. Then Murmurer expressed the need for urgent help in his own way, and Ramasamy also pleaded for help. Chellaiah understood the urgency of the situation and agreed to help. He didn't want to say "No" to Murmurer. He might need his help another day; whether he might need help or not he didn't want to be in Murmurer's black list.

The three men picked up the motor, which had been safely stored in a corner, put it on a bullock cart and took it to Ramasamy's farm. There they unloaded it from the cart, carried it inside the pump room and placed the motor in position. The area around the motor was all smeared with grease. Murmurer talked about grease and its lubricating properties and how without grease the motor would heat up, make noise and wear sooner. He continued talking about the extreme care needed in fitting the pump, motor and pipe, all aligned perfectly. His words entertained the other two and he soon finished fitting the motor. Now only the electrical connections were left, and Chellaiah took leave of them.

Murmurer took Ramasamy to the electrician's house. His wife informed them that he hadn't come back from Nimandu Chellaiah's, ('pestering' Chellaiah's), farm yet, so they both went there. There they found him still at work.

Murmurer explained Ramasamy's urgency to the electrician and told him that he must help Ramasamy as soon as possible, and added that it would take only about twenty minutes. The mechanic said that he would be able to go with them in an hour.

Murmurer and Ramasamy decided to wait till the mechanic finished his work. While waiting Murmurer looked at the mechanic's helper and started talking.

"His hair. His hair is puffed up. It is flying everywhere. No oil, no oil on his hair. His teeth, his teeth are yellow. Brush. Brush his teeth, hard. Brush hard. Then it will shine. Shine bright."

The helper was embarrassed, but Murmurer continued, not realizing it one bit. The helper tried to fix his hair, ran his tongue over his teeth and cursed himself for his laziness. Though nobody asked him he explained that he had worked late the previous night and that morning the mechanic came to his house very early and brought him to work.

Then Murmurer walked a little further away and sat under a tree. A crow came and sat on a branch. Murmurer started talking about crows, what they eat, where they nest, how many eggs they lay, how they are a pest to farmers, how to scare them with a black cloth or a dead crow, and how they would not be afraid of children when they tried to chase them and he talked of their cunning behavior.

Then he saw an earthworm and his narration switched to earthworms, the benefits of earthworms to the farmer, their capacity to aerate the soil, their use as baits for fishing. Then his mind wandered off in to the subject of fish, how fishes swim, different kinds of fishes, varieties of fish curries etc.

The mechanic finished his work and they started off to Ramasamy's farm. Reaching Ramasamy's farm the mechanic started working, and as Murmurer had predicted it took only twenty minutes. After making sure everything worked fine,

the mechanic and his helper left.

It was already six o'clock, and the Sun was setting. They hadn't eaten in several hours. Ramasamy thought of going home for dinner and then try his best to irrigate the field alone. He knew he wouldn't be able to find anyone to help him this late. So he decided to thank Murmurer for his help and invite him home for dinner. Murmurer, as if he knew what was going on in Ramasamy's head, volunteered again.

He said, "I will stay here. I will stay here and do the irrigation. You brother, you go home. You go home and eat. Eat and come back. Come back with a flashlight. We should finish irrigating this field. This field tonight. Finish it however long it takes."

Ramasamy hesitated, he was not happy to keep Murmurer that long.

Murmurer spoke, "Don't worry. Don't worry about me. Do as I said. Do as I said."

He didn't wait for Ramasamy's answer. He took the spade and began channeling the water into each small plot, one at a time. About every five minutes, when the water had reached the corners of that plot he would, by moving the mud with his spade, direct the water to the next plot. All the while talking about irrigation, channels and plot building and everything connected with it.

Ramasamy hurried home, ate and returned soon with a flashlight and food for Murmurer. Murmurer took the food, washed his hands, sat on his haunches and ate, while Ramasamy did the work.

As he was eating Murmurer said, "The rice is good. But the sambar. The sambar is not cooked enough. But your wife. Your wife didn't expect, all this." Then he continued about Ramasamy's wife, what a nice person and a good cook she was.

Murmurer talked and worked, worked and talked, and Ramasamy listened

while he worked, worked while he listened. Murmurer talked a lot, Ramasamy never thought Murmurer knew so much, and a lot of what he heard was completely new to him. By midnight they finished irrigation, and after a quick wash, in the small tub of water next to the pump house, walked home.

Murmurer lived alone, in the house he inherited from his parents. His only close relative, his sister, lived next door. She helped him if he needed anything, but usually it was he who helped his sister. He needed his sister's family for emotional support, particularly her two children whom he loved very much.

Murmurer was one of the five people in the village who could lift the "Veeran Kallu", the brave man's stone, a heavy spherical stone. Of the five, he was the only one who could walk with the stone on his shoulders. What people thought of his mental health is hard to say, but no one questioned his physical health.

Even though some people were annoyed by his constant talking, they liked him for his behavior and hard work. Everyone wanted to hire him, but he would not accept any permanent job that would tie him down. For him every day was a new day. He would work for the first person that called him. It was not possible to book him in advance. Farmers were so interested in hiring him that they didn't mind waiting at his bed side for him to wake up, so they would be the first.

His daily pay was only two Rupees, while all other men demanded ten. But whoever hired him should also feed him that day. He was not picky, he would eat whatever people offered him, but he was well aware of taste and quality of food.

Once, Rathnam, wife of Chellaiah, who hadn't been given a 'good' nickname yet, gave him stale food. She probably thought Murmurer would not notice it. It was lunchtime and all the other workers were sitting around in the shade of several trees and eating their lunch. Rathnam gave a bowl to Murmurer and filled it with food, and waited for him to finish so she could refill. Murmurer

started eating.

He looked up at Rathnam and said, as usual in his loud voice, “Amma, Kanji nara kanji. Kanji nara kanji.”

*“Lady, your food is rotten food. Your food is rotten food.”*

“Hope you didn’t feed this. You didn’t feed this to your children.”

He ate some more and repeated, “Lady, your food is rotten food. Your food is rotten food.”

By the time he finished his lunch he had repeated it at least a hundred times. He kept saying that in front of fifty other people who were having their lunch. That phrase ‘Nara Kanji’, rotten food, stuck with their family forever and became their nick name.

As everyone got used to the name, they dropped his real name and called him, ‘Nara Kanji’. They used the name everywhere, from casual meetings to public gatherings. Without nicknames the postman had difficulty identify which Chellaiah it was for, so even his family members added the title ‘Nara Kanji’ before his name. After giving directions they would say, “Don’t ask for Chellaiah, ask for ‘Nara Kanji’ Chellaiah.”

Murmurer’s constant talking didn’t affect most people. He never talked violence, or profanity. He must have had a good mind, to think only of good things. However on occasions he talked violently but never hurt anyone by acting upon it.

At the sight of the village barber, Muniandi, Murmurer would say, “I will cut him.” He would look at whoever was on the street and say, “Sir, I will cut him. Chop him.” He would cut one palm with the other. He would continue, “I will kick him. I will punch him.” And, he kicked and punched in the air and followed the barber wherever he went. Muniandi would run and hide upon hearing him, for Murmurer was heard first.

In the village presidential election, it was rumored that the incumbent disenfranchised some voters and rigged the election. He won the election but lost the respect of the people. The rumor was only a minor reason for that. The major reason was Murmurer. When he learned that he had been disenfranchised he talked about it, as usual. In addition, whenever he saw the president he called him, “Kalla Vote Karuthapan,” thus letting everyone know that the president, Karuthapan, had stolen the election.

“Cheat. He cheated the people,” he would continue. He would go on about how bad it was to cheat the very people he claimed to represent. He didn’t stop with that, he dug into the president’s family history. He reported that the president’s father made his money by selling illegal liquor and that the president himself was an elementary school dropout. He talked when he passed by the president’s house or his office, or whenever he saw the president or any of his family members. Any rumor about the president’s life was broadcast for everybody to hear, embarrassing the president and his family.

The president, using his influence with the police, decided to get Murmurer arrested. The police were very reluctant to arrest him at first, but after receiving a hefty bribe they arrested him. They put him in a cell, where he talked continuously. He talked about the police’s duty, responsibility, their uniform, the law, the legal system etc. The policemen threatened to beat him up, but that only added fuel to the fire. He talked more about police brutality, police excesses and custodial deaths. The policemen couldn’t take it any longer. They beat him up thoroughly. That didn’t silence Murmurer.

The policemen didn’t know that he verbalized everything he thought. There was no way to stop him from thinking and so he talked, about how they beat him, where all they beat him, how it hurt, and that it was illegal, and that he did nothing wrong. He went on about how the very people who should uphold the law were



breaking it. He kept talking through the evening and into the night.

The police men had to listen to all his words, since it was a small building. As they listened to him even they were ashamed to hear of their own atrocities. Until then no one had told them in such details, if anyone spoke they could easily beat them into submission. But beating Murmurer was of no use, they knew. The next day they brought Murmurer to the village and released him.

After that Murmurer didn't work for two weeks. He said his whole body ached, and he was very angry. He talked about who might have been responsible for all his pain.

He said, "If I catch him. If I catch him, I would cut him. Cut him with my knife."

"Cut him and feed the crows."

"Cut him and feed the dogs."

"Hang him. Burn his house."

The president was afraid, he never showed himself to Murmurer. He consulted a lawyer in town to see if he could take any legal action, but the lawyer advised against that. He advised him to avoid and ignore Murmurer, and to hope soon that he would find something else to talk about.

A few months later, a young girl's wedding was stopped because her parents couldn't give the promised quantity of jewelry. That bothered Murmurer so much that he talked less and less of the president. That year the chili crop failed everybody. The girl's parents explained their problem and pleaded with the boy's parents to allow the wedding to go on as scheduled. They promised to buy the jewelry the next year. But the boy's parents refused to conduct the wedding without the jewelry. When Murmurer heard of it he was very upset. And so he talked. When Kumaran, the boy, was waiting for the bus with many others, Murmurer started.

He said, "She is a beautiful girl. You must be blessed to marry her."

"How about you, are you that good?"

"A man. A man must be a man."

"He must talk. He must talk when necessary. A man is not a stone pillar."

The bus was late and he went on talking until the bus arrived. "Unfair," he said, "Your sister. If your sister's wedding was stopped. How will you feel?"

He said it was not Kamala, the girl's, fault. He went on and on. His slow, short, repetitive sentences were easy to understand even for a child.

The next day Murmurer saw Kumaran's father and talked more. How his own father started from humble beginnings and was such a nice man, and would definitely not approve of his son's action if he were alive. "Marriage. Marriage is not a business," he said and continued.

Murmurer did the same with the other member of Kumaran's family, modifying his words to suit each person. They were all embarrassed. They knew Murmurer was right and it affected them all. It appeared to them as if somebody from above was giving them advice. Soon the family consulted Kamala's parents and decided to conduct the wedding.

Both the bride's and groom's family agreed that they should invite Murmurer to the wedding. However, they were concerned that guests, from out of town, might be annoyed by Murmurer's constant talking. But still they thought it was only proper to invite him.

On the day of the wedding Murmurer walked in without a word. He went to the stage where the newlyweds were sitting and blessed them with gestures alone. Then without uttering a single word he ate the wedding meal and walked away in *Silence*. That was very strange but people enjoyed the *Silence*, for a short period. The next day they could hear him talking happily about the wedding.

There were times when he saw things that others couldn't. It was as if he

knew intuitively what was coming. It was raining; when the light shower started getting heavier people left their work and took shelter under the thicket of mango trees. Murmurer stood under a coconut tree, next to the mango trees, leaning himself against the trunk. It didn't provide much of cover but he didn't mind.

He talked aloud as usual, about the clouds, rain and the birds. Then he talked about rainbows and when and where they would appear. There was a small lightning bolt and he started talking about lightning, their brightness, and how they disappear in a second and several seconds later you hear the thunder.

Suddenly he stopped talking and was *silent*. Then he picked up a three-year old child, who was also standing under the tree, put her on his shoulder and ran towards the middle of the open field. He ran for about thirty feet, stopped and looked back. Others didn't understand anything, they were just watching him.

He waved to them, as if saying "Come on, come on," and signed to say, "Don't stand under the tree, come on, come on," then he ran away from the trees as before. Everyone, recognizing the possible threat in his silence, followed him immediately and reached the middle of the open field. Seconds later, they saw the brightest light they had ever seen in their life. Some were even temporarily blinded by the light. Then there was such a loud noise that their ear drums almost burst. When it was all over, in less than a few seconds, they realized a lightning bolt had just struck the trees where they had been standing. When they looked at Murmurer he was *Silent*. He didn't say anything for the rest of the day.

If the villagers didn't see or hear Murmurer for a day or two, they usually assumed he was busy. Suddenly there was *Silence* and it lasted several days, and people realized something was wrong. Soon the news was spreading, Murmurer was sick. He worked day and night in the rain for someone and ended up with a very bad cold. Without proper care it got worse, to the point where he was having difficulty breathing, and he couldn't talk. He was in bed.

Prolonged silence from Murmurer was unusual and the people didn't like it. Suddenly they felt as if their favorite child had left their home. The eerie *Silence* was unbearable. In those few days of silence they missed him more than anything. Still, nobody knew what to do. It took several more hours for the news to reach Mr. Srinivasan; when he heard the news he rushed to Murmurer's house. He understood that the *Silence* that engulfed their village might become permanent without a doctor's help.

Mr. Srinivasan didn't have any money, so he sold two of his goats and took Murmurer to Palyankottai General Hospital, where he was admitted. After examination, tests and X-Rays the doctor explained to Mr. Srinivasan that Murmurer had a very bad pneumonia. Mr. Srinivasan told the doctor that Murmurer's survival was really important to everyone in the village, particularly to the poor and helpless. The old doctor had worked with villagers in his younger days and understood their problems.

The doctor explained that it was a government hospital where every thing was free for the poor, but some of the expensive medicines were not available there. And, to cure Murmurer's condition some expensive medicines were needed. If Mr. Srinivasan was willing to buy it from outside he would be able to administer the injections, but without that Murmurer's chance were slim.

When Srinivasan asked about the price of the medicine the doctor said that each injection would cost one hundred Rupees, and Murmurer needed three-a-day for seven days. Reflexively Mr. Srinivasan took out four hundred Rupees from his pocket to give it to the doctor. The doctor waved his hand away and said he wouldn't accept money and that it was Mr. Srinivasan's responsibility to provide the medicine, and he gave him a prescription. Mr. Srinivasan soon came back with medicine enough for a day and immediately left promising to come back the next day.

When news reached the village, people came one-by-one to Mr. Srinivasan's house. They came with ten, twenty, fifty and hundred rupee notes. One or two people were even able to give more. They said, "Please save him, we need him, we can't bear the *Silence*." Having collected enough money for the treatment Mr. Srinivasan returned to the hospital with the remainder of the medicines. Murmurer already seemed better and Mr. Srinivasan stayed with him for the rest of the treatment.

It was more than a week since the village fell into *Silence*. Early morning activities at Chellaiah's tea shop were picking up. Men were sitting on wooden benches waiting for their cup of tea, talking about Murmurer and the ghostly *Silence* that had gripped the village. Would Murmurer ever come back alive and if he came back would he be able to talk again, they worried.

That morning, women were doing their chores, fetching water from the public well, milking cows, cleaning sheds and getting ready for the day. When two of them met they talked about Murmurer and the *Silence*.

As the sun rose in the east and the first rays touched the streets of Muverirundali village, a voice spoke, "The sun sustains all of us. All of us. All living things, plants and animals. Including people. We all need the Sun. Without the Sun. Without the Sun there is no life."

Everyone looked up and was filled with joy to find Murmurer just entering the village. Mr. Srinivasan, who accompanied him, explained that, Murmurer was discharged the day before. Since it was already too late to catch the last bus, they came by the early morning bus. As they both reached the tea shop everyone came and greeted them. Someone ordered two cups of tea. Murmurer stood under a tree and soon a big crowd began to gather. And everyone was given a cup of tea. They were all so happy to see him back and to hear him again. Already the cloud of *Silence* that had shadowed the village was melting away.

Murmurer talked about tea, and everyone listened as though it was the Sermon on the Mount.