The Queen

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juggernaut

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For my daughter

Nila Whitehead

whose conception triggered the conception of this book

2005

'Turn up the AC,' said Kalai Arasi.

The thick curls on driver Ilango's head bobbed, then an icy wind enveloped her neck with a smell like the stale air from a fridge. She didn't need the AC turned up. It was January, in any case. All night the rain had fallen, heavy as rubble. Now it was a sweet, damp, cool-season Madras morning. Fresh sea winds to brace the commoners and cut-throat rich alike. But the men in the car, chosen to join her for this morning's ride to the 'fish market', as she privately referred to the lower house, were already sweating.

'OK,' she said. 'Let's go.'

Ilango gestured and four policemen leapt to swing open the gates. Even through the closed windows of the Bentley, the cacophony that greeted them as they emerged on to the street was deafening. Policemen, those guardians of majesty, twirled their moustaches and batons, shouting in gruff voices to the devotees who pushed out from the great mass to try to creep past the roadblock. All to catch a glimpse of her. One policeman lifted a skinny man in a lungi clean into the air before hurling him back into the throng. She could almost hear the policeman's thoughts: these semi-literate nincompoops, jostling as though they were in a temple to get a darshan of the goddess herself.

As though all their worries and poverty and ugliness would be swept away by a single glance from her. Kalai Arasi, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. No matter which gods they personally cajoled, her flesh-and-blood presence was right here – was it not? – sweeping past, no more than a flash in a window of a car worth more than their whole family could earn in a lifetime, but anyway real. Seen with their own eyes. No other flesh and blood came close, did it? Not even that beehive baba from Karnataka. And anyway, he was a Kannadiga. Kalai Arasi was one hundred per cent Tamil.

She shifted a little, the bulletproof vest beneath her sari uncomfortable as always, watching the ecstasy in the passing faces for a moment more, the thrill, the hullabaloo out there, the frothing white-clad party men, eyes not blinking for fear they might miss her passing. Then she turned her attention to the men in the car.

Manikavel, the MP for Social Affairs, was beside her. His star had been in the descendent recently. A building scam. She decided to raise it back up again. Cultivate a deep gratitude in him. He was still young. Not hardened like some . . . She would do it subtly. She was a woman, after all. And the wolves, they were all men.

'Manikavel,' she said, 'you are the best man to tell me about this poster fracas. People, you see, have been coming to me since last evening with this and that. No one says anything clearly, simply. Now you are here, I'm grateful. Guide me through this mess. Please.'

The man had another burst of sweat. Kalai Arasi's nostrils quivered. It was exasperating at times. The more

she patronised them, the more they seemed to fear her. That was good. Fear was good. One feared the gods, didn't one?

Yes madam, no madam, this madam, that madam, he began, with the man in front, also sweaty – she couldn't remember his name for the moment – interjecting with his own madams. Eventually, just as they got on to Cathedral Road, Manikavel came out with the matter.

She knew it already, of course. About three dozen people had told her last night. However, no one seemed able to make up their minds (or tell her, in any case) whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, with the election now just around the corner. She turned to look out of the window, trying to decide for herself – and there they were, rows of them.

'Stop the car,' said Kalai Arasi.

Ilango, veteran, the only driver she would use, stopped the car smoothly. She opened the door herself. As she stepped out, a little clumsily, she heard a series of screeches, the cars behind hers also halting. The car in front slammed to a stop some two hundred yards ahead, and reversed at great speed. The two motorbike police U-turned and rode back. But the police jeep, the lead vehicle of her entourage, its siren blaring and lights flashing, rushed off and away into the distance.

She straightened her sari pleats. Then, with Manikavel and the other man flanking her, she approached the poster spread on the compound walls of the Agarwal Eye Hospital. There it was – the problem. Multiple images of herself, younger-looking, wearing a crown and carrying

weapons with her four arms. Just like a calendar goddess. *RE-ELECT!!*, one screamed in bold ink. *Permanent CM*, announced another in swirly font. She nearly smiled, but for the fact that the two men's terrified eyes were upon her.

'Madam, look.' The other man pointed. On another part of the wall, white sari with a blue border covering her head, she was the Virgin Mary. *Holy Mother, who better?* opined this one. This time she couldn't help smiling openly. What would Sister Flavia say?

She got back into the car. She would give the matter some thought. Were the posters meant to get her votes? Would the fence-sitters be swayed? Or would they be put off? Whose brainchild were these posters? She could reward them. Or she could punish them.

Then a thought occurred to her. The Speechwriter was going to have a high old time with this. She could imagine him and his minions huffing and puffing, giving out statements to their own dailies and weeklies and sound bites to television. Blasphemy, sacrilege, bloated with hubris, etc. etc. As if she had anything to do with it.

They had barely travelled a kilometre when the car stopped again. Some fracas ahead. Several policemen approached her car. Leading them was the commissioner, gleaming brass on his lapels and belt and cap, perfectly ironed uniform, his moustache waxed stiff, his chin pointing down respectfully.

'Very sorry, madam,' he said, 'but one cannot grapple with nuns and girls.'

She peered through a gap in the khaki melee and caught

a flash of, indeed, grey-turbaned nuns and green-pinafored schoolgirls. That she should be thinking of Sister Flavia and her own school just a moment ago – and now here they all were. Her own school, though not from her own time, of course. They hadn't even changed the uniform. Same green pinafore. Same length of skirt. Same white blouse. The girls standing stiffer than army boys on an Independence Day parade.

'. . . only take a few minutes, madam,' the commissioner was saying. 'As soon as the lady police arrive, we will shift them.'

'What do they want?'

'I thought you knew, madam.' He turned panicked eyes to the men in the car.

'Tell me.'

'They are protesting the posters.'

'Don't tell me, the Virgin Mary. I see.'

They were protesting already. The nuns who kept themselves to themselves and the girls out of sight. Now arranged on the road for all to see. Such is the way of the righteous.

She opened the car door. Immediately, a hubbub started all around her. The schoolgirls, the policemen. She got out. She didn't bother checking her sari pleats. Beyond the police and the girls, behind police cordons, she could see the general public avidly watching. Then from the little gaps and side streets, autos and scooters, even with their engines switched off, strained with pure will to get on to the main road. All buzzed and whispered. She started

walking. Once upon a time, she had been in school. Once she had been so young. It seemed incredible now that such a thing could be. Indeed, she had not walked on the road for what, now, years?

There they were, the nuns and girls. In rows as if at a school assembly. Sister Flavia acting as shimmy inspector. One by one, lifting up the skirts of the girls. Nasty punishments on hot days, when a demon tempted her to forgo the silly garment. Why had she ever imagined they wouldn't notice? Some girls they let pass with a wave of their hand. But Sister Flavia had an invisible antenna for girls with their shimmy-less knees quivering under their skirts. She always found them. Branded their poor bottoms. *And* sent them home to change. Now look at her. Chief Minister Kalai Arasi. Virgin Mary, indeed. Maybe Sister Flavia was still alive, and fuming at the sight of the posters. She might very well be. Old wrinkled nut with an indestructible kernel of hate.

'Madam, you cannot walk to George Town.' The commissioner was quaking in his silly boots.

Still, Sister Flavia would have the last laugh. Shawl after shawl piled on Kalai Arasi in every public outing. In such coastal weather. Plus the coat and vest. She had sworn she would do and wear as she pleased once she left school. She did too, as she pleased. In a way. For a while. Didn't she? And now, all this shawl swapping was necessary. As was the bulletproof vest. Very necessary indeed, after what happened.

'Madam?'

Kalai Arasi realised she hadn't explained to them what she was doing. She had been walking, and they were all following her, like goats. Now the nuns and girls were in front of her. Astonished at her presence. Judas or Mary.

'Madam?'

'I'll talk to them,' she said to the commissioner.

For a moment she thought it was Sister Flavia. The nun spearheading the protest. The same dimple on the cheek and the curly hair. Kalai felt sixteen so suddenly, and she hadn't felt young in such a long time, that she nearly took a step back, as a precaution, to protect herself from the nun's wrath. But no, it was not Sister Flavia. She was not sixteen.

The commissioner hung back. Kalai Arasi approached the nun close enough to notice that it was a mole, not a dimple, on her chin, that her hair was grey, not jet black, and that it was she who was trembling.

1965

Kalai was so nervous all morning there was no room for wondering why her mother looked morose. Anju had that frown on her face, that slight crinkle on the skin of her nose-stem, which meant she was being put upon by all the world, and to top it all there was a bad smell in her nostrils. In any case, Anju's moods changed quick as clouds. One minute, open-faced and smiling, the next, closed up like a book in a foreign tongue.

Anyway, Kalai had her finals results on her mind and nothing else. She hardly noticed what she ate or wore or whether the bus was empty or full. At the school gates, a classmate, her tight double plaits making her head slope like an ant's, screeched, 'Hey Kalai, you won't believe what I got.'

All the way from the school gates to the admin office, nuns and girls came up to say this and that, but Kalai's ears were filled with the sound of her own heartbeat and the words did not register.

Anju stopped outside the door and Kalai went in alone. The office staff, Prema, Gita and Subramani, broke into smiles when she entered. This wasn't unusual. Everyone knew her, of course. But when they all stood up and applauded, Kalai felt her cheeks turning hot and probably

reddening. It was absolutely the best moment in the sixteen years of her life.

Outside, Sister Flavia swooped upon them and held Kalai's hand in a pincer grip as she told Anju, 'How proud you must be, Kalai's mummy. How proud the whole school is of your daughter. What a clever girl you have, Kalai's mummy.'

Kalai, mortified and blissful at the same time, absorbed the praise, with just a hint of unease at how expressionless Anju's eyes now were, how without joy, how remote.

Her best friend Pinky came and hovered behind Sister Flavia till she left. Then they giggled wordlessly at each other, shaking their heads, unable to discuss the old witch in front of Anju.

'The toilet ayahs are calling you the blessed one,' said Pinky. Pinky was an average student who would get into law college with her father's influence.

Anju mumbled something like 'Don't let this go to your head'.

'Any chance of a little celebratory tea at my house?' Pinky asked, with her eyes on Anju. Anju's remained expressionless.

'Maybe,' said Kalai, cautiously. It depended on Anju's mood.

'At least to celebrate *my* results,' laughed Pinky. 'I didn't fail a single paper.'

~

'State second, Anju. Would you believe it?' Kalai said, once she eventually saw the backs of her well-wishers at school.

Anju was busy counting the change in her handbag. They were walking to the bus stop. The air was clear and pure, the crows caw-cawed sweetly up in the trees, and the people on the road all looked friendly and lovely. She wanted to skip, but she was not a little girl any more. Anju would have a fit. As it was early afternoon, the buses whizzed past half-empty. Kalai wanted to hug her mother. But, of course, they didn't do hugs. She caught Anju's arm on the pretext of wanting to steady herself, and felt her mother's soft flesh against her thumb.

Anju pulled free from Kalai's grip and made a show of securing the handbag strap on her shoulder, her head twisted away, on the lookout for the bus.

'You don't have to be so upset, you know,' said Kalai, laughing. 'Second in the whole of Madras state is nearly as good as the first. And there is only a difference of point two per cent between the first and second, they said.'

Anju said nothing. It irritated Kalai, but only a little. Nothing would spoil this day. To top the school was all she had been expecting. She smiled at two women at the bus stop who were staring at her, envying her fairer-than-wheatish skin and big eyes and straight hair like that of a Marvadi girl. They were always staring at her beauty. Kalai would usually frown at them, but not today. She turned to Anju, who had been silently watching her, then looked away and into the distance again.

A bus came, and Anju said, 'Come on.'

'This is the wrong bus,' said Kalai. 'Doesn't take us home.'

'We are going to the beach to talk,' said Anju, and stepped up without waiting for Kalai.

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By the time they found a rubbish-free spot just before the watermark, Kalai felt helpless against Anju's hostility. It was as if the news of her academic triumph had opened her heart to the world, only for Anju's bad humour to flood in like enemy troops.

The sea roared and crept upon Marina beach. Kalai sifted sand with her fingers while waiting for Anju to spill whatever was swilling around inside her. The dull September sun was oppressive, and the sundal-wallas were already out. A little boy appeared, holding a rusty biscuit tin propped on one shoulder and paper cones in the other hand. He looked about six or maybe eight years old. Approaching, he cried from the pit of his throat, 'Mango, coconut, fried peas sundal . . .'

'Get lost with you,' said Anju, and the boy walked off reluctantly like a piece of elastic being pulled away from them, his feet first and face last, grinning like he had been complimented.

The tide came in fast. The waves made sounds like a hard hand slapping a thigh, magnified and sent echoing through a hollow chamber.

Finally, Anju spoke. 'I have no money left.'

So it was true. Anju's acting career had ground to a halt. A minor actress, she had always played either a slutty extra with a couple of lines of dialogue, or a second comedienne. Lately, she had been trying to get some mother-of-the-hero roles. The one time she had been cast as the hero's mother, the director fired her after the first day of shooting. She did not look motherly, even with the make-up and clothes and the acting from the guts. Anju was much too saucy, and much too spirited. Her eyes flashed like a young woman's. Kalai had heard the gossip from the servants they used to have, when they didn't know she was listening.

She *was* still a young woman, her mother. Her eyes, looking out to the sea, were sad and tired, but there were no shadows under them. There was not a single grey hair on her head. She was thin. She did not have the matronly hips one wanted in a mother. She would be thirty-five in March.

'Medical fees at Ramachandra aren't that much, mummy,' said Kalai. The mummy was a slip. She had only called Anju 'mummy' as a child on the days that she ran a temperature. Anju remained silent.

'You can sell my jewels,' said Kalai. It wouldn't be a sacrifice. She liked to dress simply, in any case.

'They aren't real,' said Anju.

Kalai's throat went rigid. The waves slapped. The jewels had been a kind of insurance. They had reassured her on the days she doubted Anju's reliability.

'Well,' said Kalai, 'Stella Maris charges peanuts. I'll do a BA then. Literature or commerce. Become a secretary.'

She laughed. Of course she didn't mean that. Any second now, Anju would laugh too, and say, 'We aren't quite that desperate.'

Anju only scowled. 'No money for that either.'

'I didn't mean–' said Kalai before she realised Anju was serious. 'Come on, Anju,' she said, 'a BA costs nothing.'

'It's not just the course,' said Anju. 'We don't have any money at all.' She looked down, and then up, finally meeting Kalai's eyes.

Kalai read the hopelessness there.

'What will we do then? Must we leave home? Go elsewhere?'

'There is a solution,' said Anju, her gaze straying again. 'You could enter films.'

Kalai turned to look at the sea, digesting this. Acting. Actress. The waves broke with a sound like rocks. Those men who had recently been dropping in. 'Say hello to uncle, Kalai Arasi.' Anju usually never called her by her full name. It sounded so artificial, from her. Who were these uncouth men? Why did they run their eyes up and down her body, instead of just keeping to her face? They were sizing her up like tailors of blouses, skirts.

The noise was too much. It filled her ears, entered her head. How was she supposed to think with this ocean in front of her? Why should she be the one to supply the solution? She was only sixteen. Where was her father? He was supposed to be the provider, not her. And her brother, wasn't he responsible for the family, after her father?

'What about Ganesh?' she asked Anju. She would not cry.

'We'll have to pull him out of law college, if you won't do it.' Anju caught Kalai's hand, and caressed it. 'There is a good, decent film, baby.' Her voice had turned pleading. 'Once you finish, you can enter college. Just one year will be lost. Then you need only act in the holidays. That will keep us going.'

The sea pounded the shore, monotonous, relentless. What Kalai had meant by 'What about Ganesh?' was – why couldn't he be the provider, why does it have to be me? But he was in first year law. He had to finish. Get a decent job. Start a career. Then he could help. He couldn't very well quit now and become a clerk in some office, she knew that.

The sundal boy passed by again, then stopped in unmerited hope. 'Sister, please. No business all day.'

Kalai thought, why does he come back, after Anju dismissed him so rudely? But the boy was smarter than her, for all her coming state second. Anju was saying to him, 'Two cones. Mind that there is no sand in it.' He had more life experience, in spite of his age. He had been in the business long enough to know that people changed their minds like tides changed direction.

Expertly, the boy propped the tin between his thin knees, folded two cones and held them with one hand while filling them with the other.

Anju gave him two annas. He went away.

The tide was now retreating, the waves almost noiseless,

scuttling like crabs, just when Kalai wanted something to fill her head and drown her thoughts.

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The summer had given way to the cool season. Kalai had been twiddling her thumbs and losing her mind with envy for all her friends who were going on to college. Finally, they were told to come to Ooty.

With two modest suitcases ('They will provide all we need,' said Anju, 'including underwear.'), they climbed into Kovai Express. For hours, Anju sat on the thin blue rexin complaining either about the slowness of the train ('Call this an express? Stopping at every two-bit town.') or about their seats ('How dare they book second-class seats for the heroine's mother and the heroine?'), while Kalai looked out of the window. The people around tried to make extra space for the unhappy, fair-skinned, well-dressed woman, and Kalai could only be amazed and embarrassed by Anju. How dark the people were, and how thin and simply dressed. How quiet and modest, unlike Anju. There was something about going out of town that made Kalai view her mother like an object in a museum.

At Coimbatore station, they got on the Nilgiri Express. Outside, the smoky blue train, named after the blue mountains, looked romantic and inviting, but inside, the second-class seats were wooden benches. Anju resolutely dragged Kalai to the first-class compartment, where she sat and glared at everybody, including the TT, who checked

their tickets without comment and moved on. The people looked more well fed, and there was more room. Kalai had lost a little of her self-consciousness by then. Anju had insisted she pay attention to her looks and dress, so Kalai was wearing a new orange kameez with a pinched waist and Punjabi pyjamas that made her bottom fill out pleasingly.

The train reached Munnar station and began the slow climb up the mountain when Anju started pinning Kalai's hair up in an excruciating top bun like Sharmila Tagore's, all the time criticising Kalai's features.

'Your arms,' said Anju with a mouthful of pins, 'are at least chubby. They make up for the lack in the bosom department.'

Kalai held up a hand mirror to watch her transformation from schoolgirl to starlet. She just looked stupid.

'My face is too round for this hairstyle, Anju.'

'That's good. Tamils love a chubby face. But you have to show your modern persona. The character is also modern and educated, like you. You can't give a first impression in flat, oily hair, like a village girl.'

Kalai could only suck air in exasperation.

She knew little about her role in the movie, only that she was modern and educated. Nobody sent a script. Kalai hardly ever watched Tamil movies. She preferred Hindi movies, and the occasional Western. Her classmates would laugh if they knew she was going to be in a Tamil movie. It was not a very sophisticated thing to do. She had only told Pinky about it, but no doubt they all knew now, everyone in Madras.

Still, she had never been to Ooty. Kalai looked out of the window as they climbed the hazy blue mountain. Acres of tea leaves followed orchards of apples, people garbed in sweaters and mufflers sparsely picking their way through the hilly paths. Suddenly the train would glide past a steep drop. There was a sense of possibility and purity here, and the air was sweet. It was not so bad that the shooting should be in the hill station. She would try to find time to explore – with Anju, or maybe there were people her own age. She knew there were two more new faces in the film, a boy and a girl. The boy was older, probably eighteen, but the girl was her own age, Anju had said.

By the time the train rumbled into Ooty station, Kalai was waiting at the open door, eager to jump out. Her eyes were on a kite skimming above a little hill. She did not notice the welcome party on the platform till the train halted. When she saw them, she felt their eyes like sharp knives used to peel the skin off living things. They were a group of twenty or so men. She realised they must have been watching her, looking her up and down all along the platform as the train crawled to a halt. She drew back into the coupé. She fiddled with the luggage, leaving Anju to descend first, and only got down after the whole compartment emptied.

Anju was smiling her 'making friends' smile at an elderly man holding a garland.

'Kalai, this is the director.'

'How do you do, Mr Selveraj?' She thrust her hand at

him, only noticing too late that he was holding out his garland to her.

The men started up in malicious tones.

'Mr Selveraj?' said one. 'Call him Selveraj sir, little girl.'

Someone else said, 'That is how they speak in those convent schools.'

'Hoity-toity missy.'

Unnerved, Kalai took the garland and fussed with her handbag. Anju had bought her a new handbag, to carry make-up and money. To tip the boys. Kalai hadn't tipped anyone in her life.

'Now, now,' said Selveraj. 'Very quickly you will become accustomed to our traditions.'

So this was how it was going to be. All these men, all the time, all around.

Selveraj himself seemed inoffensive. An elderly man, he had wrinkles and a balding head, his body soft and shapeless in its baggy clothes. His gaze did not stray to her assets as he walked Anju and Kalai out of the station, then accompanied them to the hotel in his Ambassador, sitting next to his own driver with them in the back.

They drove up and down hilly streets, small and traffic-free. The driver, nevertheless, honked generously at every bend.

'Where are we staying?' asked Anju. 'What is the schedule?'

The director twisted around from the front seat. 'The starring cast, yourselves included, and some selected crew,

including myself, the production manager, cameraman and dance master, will be staying at Hill Heights, a five-star hotel.'

'For the whole shoot?'

'Of course, Miss Anju.'

Pleasure radiated from Anju. A five-star hotel would compensate for the second-class tickets.

'And the schedule?'

Kalai winced. She wished Anju wouldn't overdo the haughtiness.

'Most of the movie,' he said, 'and all of the scenes involving Kalai are set in a colonial bungalow. The song–dances will be in the botanical gardens, the slopes and tea estates, all close by. It will be like a picnic.'

Anju snorted.

'I have no doubt,' said Selveraj, as the car rolled into the portico of the hotel, 'that such an intelligent and highly educated girl with such natural grace like Kalai will be a delight to work with.'

Kalai did not in the least feel reassured by the director's confidence in her as she got out of the car and climbed up the steps of the forbidding-looking hotel. The heavy, bus-wide doors were guarded by an unsmiling Nepali in a turban. Somewhat surprised that he let her pass through, she nearly stumbled on the mirror-like marble floor. A uniformed attendant plucked her handbag without ceremony. Beside her, Anju was practically singing in delight.