

Ava

by [Subramani Mani](#) (October 2023)



The green KSRTC bus originating from Trivandrum medical college had just arrived at its final destination. I had traveled about five miles and it had taken forty minutes, making eight or nine stops along the way. There are multiple routes you could take to get to East Fort, via Gowreesapattom, Pattom, Kesavadasapuram or Kannanmoola. The shortest is touching Pattom and usually only takes thirty minutes. Gowreesapattom and Kannanmoola typically take the longest and I had taken the Kannanmoola route. The only bus exit is in the rear and four to five rows of seats at the back are reserved exclusively for women.

East Fort is the central bus terminus of the city and the bus was still full of people. All the seats were taken and many more people were standing holding on to the bar below the roof of the bus going from front to the back. The bus is supposed

to empty out back to front in an orderly way but that never happens. It was very noisy inside with multiple simultaneous conversations, a baby crying, irritated obviously by the crowd, heat and noise. A few youngsters sitting upfront were arguing heatedly about the current political situation of the state. A vegetable vendor had boarded at Kannanmoola and then two women got in at the next stop Pallimukku with two huge baskets of fish packed in ice cubes. As an accompaniment to the cacophony, a fishy odor wafted inside. A shirtless pot-bellied Hindu priest with a pony tail and a white sacred thread worn diagonally shoulder to hip could be seen muttering Ram-Ram in the melee. As the bus came to a stop, people started rushing towards the exit; it was practically a free for all, to be the one first out of the bus.

I was not in a big hurry and waited with most of the elderly men and women, including the sick, to disembark. There was also a young woman with a toddler waiting in the rearmost seat patiently for the hullabaloo to die down. I started moving towards the rear pausing for the woman and her child to get down and then stepped out. The woman, in a bright yellow silk sari was straightening the piggy tails of the child I presumed was her daughter. When she turned around our eyes met momentarily. The large intense and light brown eyes had a ring of familiarity and the sindhur on her parting hair was unmistakable. Was there a radiating smile in her face? I am not sure of that. A casual polite greeting perhaps, or just a simple acknowledgement of a gaze searching for a long-lost love. But I was instantly reminded of Ava.

Uma and Ava were twin sisters. Uma was older they would say, as she was born first, thirty minutes ahead of Ava. Their dad was also in the army just like my uncle. We all lived in the Cantonment area of New Delhi. Uma and Ava were our neighbors and lived in a nice single-family home in a corner lot while we lived in a smaller row house. Uma, Ava, and I attended the

Cantonment elementary school. Uma and Ava were not identical twins, they looked different and you could easily tell them apart. Uma was a little taller, a shade darker and looked older than Ava. Everybody thought she was Ava's older sister.

Ava's parents had named her Bhava and that remained her official and school name. Growing up in a Tamil speaking family saying "Bha" was difficult for me and Bhava became Pava whenever I tried calling her name. Pava in their mother tongue Malayalam means a doll and naturally I couldn't call her that even if I wanted to. That is how I drifted to calling her Ava and gradually she started taking a liking to it.

My uncle was a Havildar, a junior ranking soldier in the army. Uncle told me that Ava's dad was an officer, a captain. He would always be referred to as Captain Menon. In Kerala society, the Menons enjoy high social status and are typically placed in the higher rungs of the social ladder. A Menon, Sri V. K. Krishna Menon was then the defense minister of India in Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet. Another Menon (Sri Achutha Menon) would later become the Chief Minister of Kerala.

I used to spend a lot of time in Ava's house. We played together inside the house and outside. Her mom used to make delicious paper-thin dosas and soft but crispy vadas which I loved a lot. But my aunt wasn't thrilled about my frequent meals in Uma and Ava's house. The twin girls would also come to my house and play but not that regularly. Their house was much bigger, their yard larger and their home was full of toys. In particular, they had a nice train set, battery operated, that sat on tracks. When switched on it would go around and around the room with sound and light effects. When I went out with the twins to play in the neighborhood, another girl frequently joined us. Her name was Baby, but she was the oldest of the four of us. A favorite pastime of ours was to go looking for mango pods. They would grow near garbage heaps and muddy parts of neighbors' backyards. We would dig them up,

wash in running water and then split open and remove the leathery outer skin. We will then gently grind the tender greenish-yellow inner seed of the sapling at one end till a tiny slit came into view. Ava was the best local expert in this musical instrument creative enterprise. The germinating mango seed does make a great organic whistle under trained hands. Ava would get started, whistle all the way around the neighborhood and then back. We will all be in tow following her, simulating a children's train. Sometimes a few other kids will also tag along making it a long choo-choo kiddie train; at other times it will just be a four-bogie caravan of children.

Baby was in fourth grade; Uma, Ava and I were in third and we all walked together to the Cantonment elementary, a half-mile trek from our homes. Taking back alleys, cutting across a city park, and trespassing through the gardens and backyards of a few houses, we will be in school on time for the morning assembly. In spring, the park and gardens will beckon and tempt us with ripe berries, and if lucky, also with tender mangoes which we will pluck and munch on our way to school. Afternoons used to be hockey time. The game was hugely popular in those days and it was much before Cricket gradually started establishing a monopoly, initially, through Test match Cricket, Ranjit trophy matches and radio commentaries. Then, beginning in the eighties, one-day Cricket and TV started making a huge impact, to the detriment of hockey and football. Most days the third graders played against the fourth. On the days the teams were jumbled across grades, Ava invariably ended up playing for the opposing team. She would then use the opportunity to literally pull my legs with her hockey stick whenever I tried to advance with the ball.

After hockey it was lassi time. There was a lassi vendor in front of our school—in those days a salt lassi cost 5 paise and a sweet lassi 7 paise. Ava would always go for the sweet one and I would be content with a salt lassi because my pocket

money was quite meagre. If she was in a particularly good mood and some of those occasions were when her team defeated ours, she would offer to buy me lassi and then I would pick the sweet one.

Ava had a beautiful handwriting and she could create stunning 3D-looking alphabets on a coated wooden board called *thakthi* which resembles a cutting board with a handle. Using bamboo pen and ink, she would create marvelous Hindi calligraphic letters on *thakthi* and even illustrate them using a twig brush which she herself fashioned out of tender stems. My *thakthi* rendering used to be very clumsy, my handwriting being quite cramped. I was always very jealous of Ava. She invariably got an “excellent” for her work and I would typically end up with a “fair”. Ava would help out some days and then I would get bumped up to a “good” or even “very good” but never to “excellent.” I always suspected that our class teacher knew who was behind the sudden and periodic artistic quality enhancement of my *thakthi* visuals.

Then one day, our regular class teacher called sick and a substitute instructor came in. For the first time I too got an “excellent” because I had help from Ava. But she got incensed and poured ink all over my *thakthi* and some on my shirt too. Her collaboration on my *thakthi* beautification scheme ended then and there that very day but we continued to be good friends. I know now that children fight over trivia and non-trivia easily but also make up quickly and forget the triggers.

Even at that tender age, Ava could draw faces of children and grown-ups—I mean cartoons and caricatures of faces. She would distort the facial features stretching them here and there longitudinally, laterally and diagonally. She would retain the subject’s likeness to a large degree and they would be quite recognizable even with all her imaginative contortions. She would also regularly perform mimicry and act out her subjects.

My uncle had given me a piggy bank and I made it a habit of putting whatever coins I received inside the toy bank. With the passage of time, it was slowly getting filled up. I am embarrassed to say this, mine was just a Cuticura talcum powder tin with a jagged slit at the bottom my uncle had made with a kitchen knife. Ava's was charming, made of ceramic, a curio in its own right and made, I would guess, by a master craftsman. When I squint my eyes, furrow my eyebrows, jog and goad my memories, an image of three monkey figurines—the first with eyes covered by hands, the second with palms on ears and the third with both palms covering the mouth as if declaring to the world—close your eyes to ugliness and unpleasantness, refuse to hear nonsense and do not utter or articulate anything hurtful or abusive. They looked cute and complete with slits bordered with rounded smooth edges for coins and currency notes. All three sat solemnly, almost teasingly on Ava's study desk in her tidy, lighted and airy room. My bank was a facial powder tin and Ava's, a set of beautiful monkey-themed triplets.

There was an open-air theater for military families in the Cantonment. We had movie screenings every month. Children would be allowed only for some of the screenings. I went to see *Kabuliwala*[\[1\]](#) there along with Ava and her family. Holi, the festival of colors and Diwali, the festival of lights and sweets were important, thrilling, and fun festivities for the children. Ava and Uma had access to innumerable *pichkarees*[\[2\]](#) filled with colored water while I would be holding just one. Soon they would overpower me and I used to get thoroughly soaked from head to foot in rainbow colors with random patterns. I would soon start looking like a randomly spray-painted circus clown.



East Street, Pune Cantonment, 1960s (Hindanustan Times)

For one Diwali, Ava showed me a beautiful yellow silk frock with green polka dots her dad had presented her. She soon emerged wearing that getting transformed into a fluttering butterfly. Ava looked gorgeous with piggy-tails adorned with spotted yellow ribbons. I wore textured cream-colored cotton shorts and a matching shirt my uncle got me.

The school took us on a visit to Jawahar Bal Bhavan, [\[3\]](#) which is like a children's museum. The biggest attraction there is "Bachon ki railgadi" or the children's mini train. I sat across from Ava chatting as the train went over a bridge, passed through a tunnel making choo-choo sounds and circled back in about an hour. It was lots of fun and I still have fond memories of the outing.

It was 1962, and the armies of India and China were clashing at the Himalayan ranges bordering the two countries. Soon trenches were dug in the school yard and we would practice staying inside the cut-out ditches and lying there till the all clear was given. These trench drills felt like hide and

seek games.

In those days we had kerosene and coal burning stoves. Both were used for cooking but the coal burning *angeetees*, as they were called, came in handy for heating the living room and bedroom in winter. It was my job to purchase coal from the local bazaar. I was playing with Ava and my aunt announced that she was out of coal and wanted me to buy a small sack. I retrieved the gunny bag she was holding, folded it nicely even though it was dusty and set out. Ava's mom had been pestering her for some time to get coal and she also came along. We got a fill of my sack and purchased a fresh one for Ava's mom. But her sack was also covered with coal dust outside.

Ava was wearing a nice light and bright pink frock and I agree that the coal sack would have soiled her dress. She wanted me to carry home both the bags; we had an argument and Ava just took off to her house empty handed. I couldn't keep up with her. With the two sacks balanced on my head, breathless, panting and cursing Ava, I trekked back slowly to my house. Covered in black dust from head to toe, sweaty, smudged, hurt, looking I am sure like a monkey that had escaped from a coal mine, I narrated what happened to my aunt and uncle.

I had noticed that Ava's dad never visited our house. At family gatherings when we all met in their house, I found my uncle and aunt too deferential. I never saw my uncle express any difference of opinion also while there. I was in no mood to drop off the coal sack in their house that day. Uncle sat me down and told me that they were an officer family and we should be subordinated to them. Reluctantly, for my uncle's sake, but with a long and sad face I took the coal to Ava's house. Ava might have wanted to laugh at my ridiculous appearance and sorry figure, but I found her looking scared. It is possible her mom might have scolded her, or she would have sensed I was really mad and would tweak or box her ears later on.

I don't think my friendship with Ava changed after that episode. But my uncle's statement of fact remained with me. If I had any ear boxing ideas for Ava, I expunged them. Children are still just kids, they're not miniaturized adults. They can sense the demeanor of grown-ups, realize the seriousness in the moment, but slowly the impact of adult words, wisdom, and delivered ground truths chip and wear away.

I only had two toys during my entire childhood. The first one was a helicopter with a mechanical winding mechanism which could make the propeller rotate a few times. The second would be a bicycle I could ride solo or take in a passenger on the backseat. I would ride my bike in the neighborhood and some days Ava would piggyback joy rides. Biking with Ava was lots of fun. One day I was pedaling downhill with Ava on the backseat. I asked her to hold on to me tight but before we knew it, I lost control of the bike and both of us crashed to the ground. No major injuries; we got scraped and suffered some bruises. As I walked the bike back Ava ran ahead and complained to my uncle and I received a good spanking when I reached home. Ava had this innate ability to get me into trouble off and on with my uncle.



MG Road, Pune Cantonment, 1960s (Hindanustan Times)

As a Malayali family from the state of Kerala and the capital city of Trivandrum Ava's parents took special pride in celebrating Onam. Legend has it that Mahabali, the benevolent Kerala king of yore visits the state every year to check on his former subjects. Ava and Uma will put together a huge floral decoration called *athippovu* in their front porch. They will get beautiful new clothes and their mom will cook a traditional multi-course meal called *Ona-sadhya* [4] complete with *payasam* (pudding). I used to hang out with them the whole day and join in their festivities. Ava would be hopping around the house in her new dress and her colorfully decorated piggy tails would sway with her. When her parents' attention was turned, I would pull on her pigtails and make her mad and squeal.

There was a boy in our class named Praful. He had a penchant for showing off his biceps and comparing with every other boy in class. I suspect he had been cultivating his biceps by performing push ups and pull ups from his cradle and crib

days. Yes, they were impressive and compared to mine particularly so. During one such Praful demo, Ava joined in and tried to flex hers. She had basically nothing to show as I could see only skin covering her upper arm bone and nothing else in between. When Praful and I teased her about it, Ava ran away with an impish face.

I don't know if the performances and festivities of this day were part of the Dusshera festival celebrated every year to mark the victory of good over evil. Goodness is represented as King Rama who goes on to annihilate and vanquish the *asura* (demon) King Ravana, considered as an epitome of evil. On the day we went, there was a magic show and performances by clowns, among other happenings.

In childhood, magic holds a special attraction. Many things in nature—plants, animals, birds, the sun, the moon and the stars—everything seems magical and wondrous. And a magician just captivates you, pulling off the impossible, with an effortlessness that makes it irrational and leaves you awestruck. Many actions grown-ups perform routinely on a day-to-day basis, banking on their physical strength and knowledge, definitely seem impressive when you are a child. But a magician's tricks seem to come from the outer space or even from another planet. My earliest recollections of adults are my uncle, aunt and grandma trying to make me laugh. Later on, I observed them and others trying to amuse little kids by showing comical faces and acting funny. But over time, I could see a transformation come over the adults in my life as I gradually grew up. They suddenly started becoming disciplinarians and task masters. That was scary, and naturally I started detesting that even when I did not outwardly rebel against it. As a child I liked the clowns and street performers because they made you laugh and never yelled at you or spanked you.

My uncle, aunt and I had come to Ramlila maidan and Ava was also with us. Various performances were going on in different

stages. There was an atmosphere of a huge village fair with many fun activities. Magicians, musicians, clowns and other entertainers were attracting throngs of people. There were also vendors of various kinds selling food, crafts, balloons, toys and all sorts of other things. There was indeed a carnival atmosphere with people milling around. Most were military families who had come from Cantonment, Karol Bagh, Chandni Chowk and other localities by chartered buses.

I was holding on to my uncle's hand and Ava's and we all were keeping together so as not to get separated. When the various performances got over announcements were made over the loudspeaker system to take the right buses for the different localities. We got to the area where the buses were parked but suddenly there was a big commotion and Ava and I got split from my uncle and aunt. The buses were all getting filled up and in the hurry to board we got into one thinking it was headed to the Cantonment. We scrutinized the faces of people inside but couldn't find any familiar ones. It was too late to get out and the bus started to move. When I realized that we were in the wrong bus, tears suddenly started streaming down my face. All the fun we had that day quickly evaporated and panic set in. I glanced at Ava sitting beside me. Though she tried to be stoic, her expression betrayed some apprehension. Composing herself Ava said in a calm voice, "Don't be upset. See, we have a phone in the house. My dad will call the army HQ and report that we haven't reached home from Ramlila. We will get help." We sat huddled together and I calmed down somewhat. I had only been consoled by my uncle or aunt till that time. I then realized that children could also console each other, though most of the time they end up playing and fighting. When we finally got to ask the conductor of the bus, he said it was headed to a different locality but one not far from ours. Seeing my moist eyes and our worried faces, he assured us that once the bus reached the destination we would be dropped off in Ava's place in a jeep. Finally, when we reached Ava's house, I found my uncle also sitting there. They

were happy to see us back safe but not amused that we got into the wrong bus in the first place!

We were all eagerly looking forward to this day—there would be no classes, no tests and no question-and-answer session today. It was our class excursion to the Qutub Minar. We all went in the school bus, chatting, screaming, and laughing. Two teachers accompanied us and intermittently they would yell at us to keep our voices down. Finally, we reached the Qutub and were excited to go up the Minar, which we were told, stands about two hundred and forty feet tall. In those days we were allowed to climb all the way up, and panting and puffing, Ava and I, along with a number of our classmates, went to the top for a good view of the city.

In the Qutub complex there stands an iron pillar and legend has it that if you can encircle it from behind, your wishes would be fulfilled. We tried the pillar, but we couldn't even bring our finger tips together facing the pillar, and hugging it from the front. Praful's biceps were of no help to him in this task. After we gave up, we saw a few tall *Sardarjis*[\[51\]](#), either from the central reserve police force or local sports teams, easily completing the task and walking away smiling, with a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and wish fulfillment.

The year 1964 was a watershed time-slice in independent India. Independence leader and first Prime Minister of the country Jawaharlal Nehru passed away in the spring of that year. Our elementary school graduation also happened around the same time. Soon after, my uncle also retired from the army. Aunt and uncle decided to move back to Trivandrum with me and my younger sister in tow. My uncle casually told us one day that we all will soon board trains that would take us all the way to Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala where his sister lived. As a child I always thought that you took a train to meet people, to get together or to explore a new town or city. Little did I know then that trains can also permanently tear

you away from places and persons you loved and cared about. Trains cross provincial and national borders. They connect and separate people and places in strange ways.

When you say goodbye to your best friend or childhood sweetheart in elementary school, after five long fun-filled years growing up together, and move out of town, you have no intuition that you may never meet again. That thought never crosses a child's still developing brain. You don't even contemplate, visualize or think about the scenario, it doesn't figure in the calculus of the moment; you just eagerly look ahead and move on. You are so young, innocent and unaware of life's deep waters, rough waves and undercurrents that you never consciously attempt to leave a marker or place-holder for the occasion. And that is the real tragedy of these farewells and separations which later make you feel uprooted and unmoored. You simply move on like an analog clock-hand ticking forward. But years and decades later reminders will sprout up out of nowhere like lava from a long dormant volcano, creating and rekindling that strange longing to go back in time and relive some of those moments. You dream of time travel; you crave to caress your memory portraits in flesh and blood.

And somehow it happened without a thought and no particular prior planning. Ava's dad had many more years of service left and they weren't going anywhere. Decades have passed now, and I cannot recall whose idea it was back then. It is likely Ava wanted to exchange one of her monkey piggy banks with my powder-tin piggy or maybe it was I who suggested it. Without much deliberation we ended up burying the two piggy banks, as if they were some precious flowering seeds, beside Ava's favorite rose bushes in the backyard. After the burial, holding a watering can in her hand she looked at me gravely and said, "I will water them daily". Over the years I have asked this question again and again. What was Ava trying to grow by watering our piggy banks—a plant of love and

friendship that will flower and bear fruits or a money tree that will have coins and notes as leaves and buds. The sun was setting and its golden rays with red hues falling on her face made her light brown eyes radiate with strange and pensive tones. That image of Ava is forever etched in my memory. It was the last time I saw Ava.

Prime Ministers came and went. Some lasted just days, some a few years and some others even multiple terms. One even declared a country-wide emergency to cling on to office. Years later she was assassinated by one of her own bodyguards. Yet another, who happened to be her son was blown up by a suicide bomber. A century and a millennium gave way to a newer era. The population of the country more than doubled during this time and crossed a billion people. After many decades, in the new millennium I found myself at a conference in New Delhi for a few days. I had not visited Delhi in ages. The population of the city had swelled six-fold during this time. It seemed that the number of vehicles—cars, autos (tuk-tuks), two-wheelers and trucks, had just sky-rocketed. The vehicle population must have multiplied fifty or sixty times over the past forty plus years. Delhi seemed dusty and polluted with very poor air quality. You could feel it in your breath. According to WHO, Delhi figures as one of the worst polluted cities in the world for its air quality. Foreign embassies, news agencies, and multi-national companies consider a posting in Delhi as an adversity assignment for their personnel and provide additional compensation for the increased health risks and ensuing distress.

I was reminded of Ava and the piggy banks and an intense longing developed in me to retrace the charming and memorable path from our old house to the elementary school where we once used to pick ripe sweet berries and snatched raw and tender mangoes from tree branches. I hired a cab with a driver and headed in the direction of the Cantonment suburb and

Cantonment elementary. Though we started early morning we could see that a thick smog had enveloped Delhi. Visibility was poor, and traffic was heavy. The city had changed considerably, it was definitely not the city of my childhood. We asked around as nothing seemed familiar to me. There was no sign of our old school. A new private high school had come up nearby. It looked like a pretty and elegantly landscaped boutique school. A Cricket Maidan was laid out in the center. There was security all around. I saw parents driving expensive cars drop off their wards near the perimeter security wall. The students got out of the cars and walked towards the entrance gate with their eyes still glued to their smartphone screens. Many students were wearing masks to protect themselves from the smog. In my childhood I had seen men and women wearing such masks only in a hospital. The sight of school children wearing surgical masks, carrying heavy backpacks and walking alone while still glued to their smartphone screens reminded me of the story of green men and women from planet Mars I had read in my childhood. But I never imagined then that years into the future school children would be transformed like them. Nobody had the inclination or desire or the time any more to walk to school. Everybody seemed to be in one big hurry—the parents, students and even the security personnel at the entrance. My cab driver informed me that the school caters to the rich and the annual tuition runs to many lakhs of rupees. I wondered if the students even heard from their parents or grandparents, that a generation ago, children walked to school; that they pinched berries on their way or plucked low-hanging tender mangoes from trees by incessantly jumping up and down and leveraging their *thakthis*; that they chatted, laughed, and even fought and argued their way to school and back.

There was absolutely no trace of my old house or Ava's. A huge shopping mall with people crowding around as if in a fairground or carnival, stood looming over our old housing complex. My Cuticura tin piggy and Ava's monkey piggy with

hands over eyes might still be lying buried underneath the great mall of modern India or simply got bull-dozed, scattered and disappeared in the process. Like Ava's monkey I sat with my eyes covered in the back seat of the car and silently headed back. I then considered visiting the Qutub and relive the experience of climbing up the Minar. But the driver informed me that the authorities no longer allow the public to go up the Minar. In 1981 there was a power failure in the Minar when about four hundred people were inside, some going up the stairs and others coming down. In the darkness a rumor spread that the tower was going to fall, creating panic. A massive mad rush towards the exit followed causing a tragic stampede. Forty-five people, most of them school children, lost their lives in the melee and many others were seriously injured.

I thought about the wish-granting iron pillar beside the Minar. Maybe, I could encircle it from behind completely now that I was grown up. In the evening of life, contemplating the past, sitting in a Delhi cab on my way back to the hotel, I could think of only one wish—can I get to meet Ava one last time? I sensed that the charming Delhi of my childhood was irretrievably and irrevocably gone forever. Time had ravaged the city of my childhood beyond recognition. I felt completely lost in this megacity which I could navigate with such ease in my smaller feet, where I had so much fun once, and still carry those fond, loving, and tender memories. I realized that life's magical moments never recur as life entwined with time flows only in one direction like a flooded river. I couldn't think of a way to untangle and unwind the two; let alone, reset, rewind and restart both—beginning with the footprint and tender flowering plant of my choice, in the vast sands of time and garden of life. I looked ahead, but nothing was visible. All around there was pitch darkness. It could be the smog, maybe the sun had already set, or my tired eyes were simply closed shut. Even the moon and the stars did not come out of their resting places; they should be scared of the

Delhi sky these days. Is Ava also hiding somewhere in the city; I wish I knew.

[1] A Hindi movie based on a short story of the same name by the renowned writer Rabindranath Tagore

[2] Plastic bottles used to spray colored water

[3] Named after Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India

[4] A traditional sumptuous feast prepared during the 3rd Onam or Thiruvonam

[5] Men belonging to the Sikh community are referred to as Sardars and ji is appended as a mark of respect

[Table of Contents](#)

Subramani Mani trained as a physician in India and moved to the US to pursue graduate studies. Currently, he splits his time between his adopted and native lands. He started writing when he felt the urge to share the memories of certain life experiences and perspectives which could not be done within the bounds of normal day-to-day interactions. He is a co-editor of *Textbook of SARS-CoV2 and Covid-19* published by Elsevier in 2022.

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