

Tejas S. | Welfare

Selected as the recipient
of the *Emerging Writers Award*

10:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday to Saturday, Shrinivas sat behind an iron grill with a semicircular hole through which myriad hands passed him bills and notes. Armed with a computer and a printer which stamped long reels of perforated paper with bill details, he worked automatically, entering the account numbers, the bill amounts, noting the delays and consequent fines, and then, signing in a sort of shabby cursive on receipts, handed them over to customers and impaled the original bill on a spindle.

There was a post office farther down the street, and sometimes he watched the postmen cycle up and down, most of them growing old on the pittances and watery tea the post office provided. They delivered notices to the Electricity Board Office, while the fax machine remained unused, inboxes empty.

The job wasn't depressing, but Shrinivas could not honestly count himself among the happy denizens of the city. He realized that he was more a government slave than a servant of the people, but as long as the pay was on time and no one asked him any tough questions, there really was nothing very offensive about the musty office. Three tables for three people, a file cabinet arranged in the corner. A bust of Shivaji Maharaj sat on the table nearest to the partition. On the sculpture's head was a rose with the bud removed. His mother had always said it was more respectful that way. It'd just become habit later.

Shrinivas had been working there for close to four years and, while new people kept moving into the locality, there were always regulars—both in arrival and in schedule. Some habitually came the very next day after they received their bills. Others were perennial defaulters, ever ready to pay the paltry fine. He knew who fell into each category by observing their hands. The texture gave away a lot. The poor and the old came early. The better-financed and young invariably late. He tended to easily remember hands that defied these class lines, for they were few and far between.

Whenever an exceptionally beautiful hand came through the opening in the grill, he would stare transfixed for a few seconds at the slender fingers that rested almost lovingly on the ledge. He never looked up to the face, afraid to risk disappointment. Otherwise, that came very easily too. It was not uncommon for another hand to follow, bearing an unspoken ward-off, a marital band.

It had happened a few times that the hands had precipitated a dam-burst of memories. A

pensioner's wrinkled and liver-spotted skin brought back visions of the summer-brown mountains of the South, the lithe mountain goats clambering up thin ledges, and the temple upon the hill.

One afternoon, when the office was closed for lunch and the others were out, Shrinivas examined himself in the mirror from different locations, trying to see how he had changed from his lanky, clean-shaven college days. Much fatter than he had ever been. His face was covered by a three-day beard that made him look like he'd been used as a pinboard. Reflecting light into a white glare, his rimless rectangular spectacles hid his eyes. Put that together with the large yellow dot of tilak on his glabella—and he could easily be mistaken for a hardliner Hindu, textbook bigot. The tilak was the only thing his mother would've approved of. Always tired and drawn out, hair thinning before she'd even touched forty, she'd made Shrinivas groom himself almost obsessively. Once he moved out, he let himself go with a vengeance.

Shrinivas's father had been—and still was—silent and introverted, sitting on the leather sofa with his sausage-shaped fingers steepled and his eyes closed, often dressed only in a blue lungi and a sleeveless undershirt. They'd drifted apart after his mother had died, and the man now spent his time in dingy local restobars. Incapable and jealous, he'd resented Chacha's aid towards Shrinivas. Called it charity—beggars' wages. Shrinivas smiled to himself, marvelling at how closely his thoughts now resembled his father's—even though it was Chacha who had been more like the providing father. Shrinivas had even copied Chacha's hairstyle.

Without much regret, he remembered wishing his intellectual abilities would compensate for his lack of physical attractiveness in the eyes of the prospective partners, for whom he had once shaved and combed, perfumed and preened, but nothing had come of that wish. To be honest, he hadn't really tried.

He gave a start, realising that the postman had been watching through the door for a couple of minutes. With as much dignity as Shrinivas could muster, he went to the door and reached out a silent hand for the envelope, extending the other with a twenty rupee note as he retrieved his letter. The postman gave him a knowing smile. He got another ten rupees. Not that word would get out. Shrinivas was unmarried and lived alone. No one cared about the eccentricities of such a man.

Shrinivas sat down at his table, held the envelope to the sunlight, and abruptly dropped it when he saw the name printed in Courier, and the signature in fountain pen below that.

The distinctive slant of hand was unmistakable, and images of teak bookshelves towering over him flashed through his mind: him five feet four inches tall, looking up in wonder at all the books he barely understood the titles of. The lawyer at his polished desk smiling at him, proud.

“Your grandfather told me you're excelling at school, Shrinu.”

It was the lawyer's wife who'd written.

Slackjawed, Shrinivas had not registered the lawyer's words.

"If only my son showed as much interest," he went on. "Maybe I should just adopt you and make you my heir."

It was obvious now that it was wishful—both on the lawyer's part and his—to imagine Shrinivas would ever inherit anything but socioeconomic baggage. The lawyer's son, the letter said, had inherited the firm and, in a sustained manner, run it into the ground. Shrinivas expected that he would be asked for some funds to get them started up again. He could do that. He lived frugally anyhow, and had savings he would never use. It would give him a chance to pay Chacha back for all those years of informal scholarships. Some scholar he had become.

As he read on, Chachi's tone became more and more pleading. Their office hadn't yet been closed down. They were still living in their bungalow. But Chacha's books had been sold off, she said, along with the rosewood bookshelves. The table was gone too. Now they used a plastic chair and a plastic table with a hole in the centre, the purpose of which was long gone from human memory.

Then she went on to tell him how even their grocery bills had been unpaid for three months, since February. Chacha was too proud to borrow money from his friends, and their son was already neck-deep in debt. She could not, therefore, ask Shrinivas for money. Even her conscience balked at that.

But their power supply had been cut off for a few days now—non-payment of bills—and she'd remembered Shrinivas from the old days, the son of those two poor kindergarten teachers. She'd heard that he now worked for the Electricity Board. Surely he could, if and when the situation arose, have the person in charge turn a blind eye to a single month's bill? It could not be more than thirty-five thousand, she said, but Chacha was too proud to let anyone cover it for him, and her son too arrogant. Still, if she somehow arranged for the bill to be overlooked her son would not be averse to the situation. Chacha, of course, would not be told about this.

So far it was working—he felt pity, and empathy too, from his days of just getting by. He read on, unease tightening his stomach and knotting his brow.

"Shrinivas, you know Chacha always helped you when you were young. Getting through school, paying that college donation of yours."

He pursed his lips. He'd taken his first salary to Chacha, hoping to pay back all the money in a few months. *Welfare money*, he thought. But Chacha had been angry, telling Shrinivas that he didn't want any of his money and he wouldn't be treated like a bania by someone he considered a son.

Shrinivas had been hosted well enough that day. Chachi fed him well. But he'd felt strange even then. The lawyer was not the most honest of people, even among those of his profession. Sitting in the sunlight that filtered through kitschy, almost-opaque windows painted green, Shrinivas had realized that being in Chacha's debt meant owing him a favour. Almost like Chacha was buying his silence, for embezzlements past and future. Years later these misgivings were being justified.

"We may soon have to declare bankruptcy. And these bills.... Remember, God rewards gratefulness, Shrinivas. Do what you think is best. Do not forget this old woman who has not rarely fancied herself a mother to you."

And so the welfare money came back as he had expected it to. He could have the bill forgotten. His colleagues embezzled larger amounts in an offhand quotidian manner. But on principle he would not steal.

He had been bitter, as a college-goer, that he was there on a scholarship. Once when he joined a protest against the management, he was later called in alone. They wondered how a good student could get involved with such rabble. Especially because the college had done so much for him. He should be honoured. This ungrateful behaviour hurt on a personal level, they said.

Confused, Shrinivas had walked out with his head bent. True, the institution had given him innumerable opportunities. He was thankful for that. But did that mean he could no longer protest against bad food? Against professors who sat behind their desks and refused to teach? He wished he could return all the money he'd used—others' money. But the sources were so diffused, so numerous, he barely remembered them. He could not help it, he was a child of welfare, with all the lifelong baggage of gratitude that accompanied this position.

It was then he'd resolved to return Chacha's money, to be rid of the plaguing worry that someday he would be asked for a favour he could neither refuse nor grant in good conscience.

And now that unreturned money had come back into his life, asking him to forget his morals and bitterness and pay back in kind a loan he'd been prevented from repaying in cash.

Gratitude dictated he should stop thinking of his ideals and do what Chachi asked. It would not cost him anything. Or maybe it would. Any time those embezzling colleagues got into trouble he would be a convenient scapegoat. Or someone would blabber, some overenthusiastic RTI-toting citizen. Truth was, he could find as many reasons not to help as he could find to lend assistance.

Shrinivas jammed a toffee between his teeth and went out for a short stroll. He thought of his job. He thought of his quiet existence. The humiliations, perceived and otherwise, of being a

welfare child. Came back, sat at his desk. *We aren't a welfare state any longer.*

He was a government officer. Opening a file cabinet, he put the envelope at the bottom of a stack of papers he'd stored there. People in his profession were famous for practised ignorance, and Shrinivas was only happy to stick to the status quo.

He got a glass of water, put his lips to the rim, drank, and wiped his moustache with the back of his hand. Patted the bust of Shivaji affectionately. Checked again the date and time on an invitation he'd received to someone's wedding. The boy from E-7, he remembered. Dinner was settled, then. He sat back in his chair, combed his hair with his fingers, and went back to work.

Umbrellas, he remembered. That's what the holes in plastic tables were for. He laughed to himself. *How horribly moralistic*, he thought. *Always save for a rainy day.*