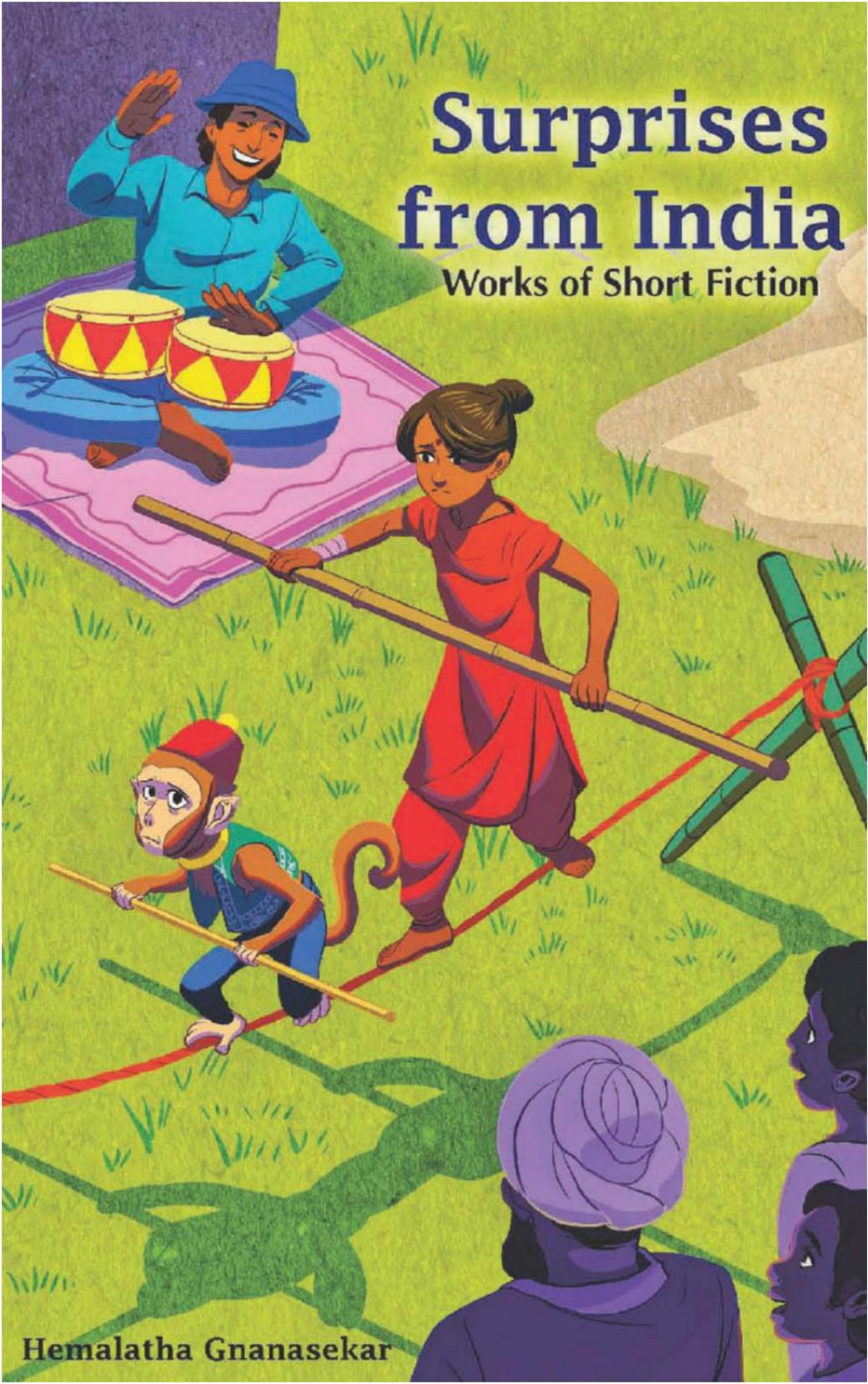


Surprises from India

Works of Short Fiction



Hemalatha Gnanasekar

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Published in India by Prowess Publishing,
YRK Towers, Thadikara Swamy Koil St, Alandur, Chennai,
Tamil Nadu 600016

ISBN: 978-93-89097-00-9

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

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Take it Easy

Priyanka peeked into each room one last time to confirm her mother had left for the temple. Not finding her around, she was happy and went about looking for the bureau keys. Though her father was at home, she was not bothered by his presence, for he was engrossed in a cricket match on television and had forgotten the world around him. She opened the bureau and took all her jewels and a few silk sarees and put them into a bag and covertly walked out the back door toward the auto stand. She got into an auto and asked the driver to take her to Central Station. She requested he hurry for there was hardly half an hour before the departure of the train to Madurai. Wiping away the beads of perspiration that dripped from her forehead, Priyanka was suddenly struck with the worst kind of fear and doubts as to what would happen if Vinod was not waiting for her at the station. Was it worth taking a risk for a man she'd known for only five months; a man who advised her to run away from home? Then she pondered the reason behind her decamping. She was endangering her life for the sake of a dying woman, and the thought gave her some solace and she began to relax.

Priyanka remembered the day. The scene floated before her eyes and it seemed as if the incident had taken place only yesterday. She was sitting in the bus reading the notes for her examination. Just then, the conductor came up to her, and she

started fumbling inside her bag for her purse. To her dismay, the purse was missing and the rude conductor was in no mood to listen to her excuses. He whistled for the bus to stop, and as Priyanka got up to leave, Vinod—who was standing close by and watching the whole thing—intervened. He asked Priyanka to go back to her seat, and he bought a ticket for her. The next day, Priyanka spotted him in the bus and returned the coins to him. But Vinod refused to accept them, with a casual remark, “These days, courtesy and generosity are out of people’s mind and I just wanted to remind the impolite conductor about that!” Though Priyanka had seen him in the bus several times, it was after that brief encounter that she learned his helping tendency. In fact, she was so carried away by his kind gesture and appealing looks that she immediately became infatuated. Thus began their rendezvous. Priyanka could not bear to go, even for a day, without seeing him.

But a few days before the final year examination, Vinod tried to put an end to their meeting. He advised her, “Look, now is the time to work hard and finish your papers! I would like you to concentrate on your studies and don’t dally around until your exams are over. However, I shall come to your college on the last day of examinations, and we shall then have a gay time!” Priyanka had obeyed him. Day and night, she crammed for her lessons and performed exceedingly well in all the subjects, and on the last day of the examination, she was dying to meet him. Vinod was waiting for her outside the college gate and she ran up to him with a broad smile on her face. But the smile faded as she neared him, for Vinod was not his usual self and he was looking downcast.

When Priyanka questioned him, as to why he was in low spirits, he came out with his pathetic tale. “Three days back, I received a phone call from my neighbor. She informed me that my mother had suffered a massive heart attack and was immediately rushed to the hospital. The doctors have given up hope and her days are numbered. My mother had always been worried about my marriage and wished to see the girl I was

going to wed, before leaving this world. I was much perturbed about my mother's illness. In order to please my mother, last night, I rang my neighbor and informed her that I was coming to see her tomorrow with the girl I was going to marry. Further, I have also booked two tickets to Madurai for tomorrow night." Seeing the intimidated look on her face, he continued, "It is only now I realize that, I should have not done so, without consulting you!"

As he was narrating his story, Priyanka's body trembled and suddenly she became speechless. Though she longed to accompany him to see his dying mother, she wondered whether her parents would agree to this. In fact, Vinod was giving her such short notice and Priyanka was not sure what to do! When she finally revealed her confusion to him, he said, "Well, I apologize that I am putting you to a lot of trouble! If only you could cooperate a little with me and secretly run away from home tonight, without your parents' knowledge, I shall be highly grateful to you all my life! I am sure, later on things will definitely fall in line! After all, you will have a hell of a time convincing your parents about our love affair and explaining to them the necessity of leaving the house without seeking their permission. But you will perhaps appreciate that my mother has hardly a few days to live. You can return from Madurai immediately after seeing my mother and explain everything to your parents! They will definitely forgive you! For nowadays, parents are too understanding and give in to their children's demands. And if by any chance, you don't accede to my request, I have no other option, but to let my mother die unhappily without fulfilling her last and only wish!"

Priyanka was swept away by a wave of pity. Since she was deeply in love with him and intending to marry him in the near future, she did not wish to hurt his feelings. For a moment, her life partner in distress was of greater concern to her than her own parents. Without giving any thought to the repercussions of her action, she deftly carried out her plan as advised by Vinod. As she approached the railway station, her heart began

to beat faster and she clenched her bag, that held the jewels and silk sarees; she remembered how Vinod had warned her to come lightly attired, without makeup or jewels, to avoid suspicion. However, he had advised her to carry the same along with her so that she could dress and present herself well in front of his mother.

After paying the auto fare, Priyanka walked straight toward the reservation counter where Vinod had promised to wait for her. She was only half way through when he appeared before her and, holding her hand, they scurried across the platform, as the train would leave shortly. Once inside the compartment, Priyanka sat down beside him and heaved a sigh of relief. She looked pale and frightened and Vinod tried his best to allay her fears, by assuring her that things would work out in their favor. After a long while Priyanka's mood calmed and her heart stopped thumping. From time to time, Vinod treated her to hot refreshments that were available inside the compartment. Though she kept refusing them, Vinod forced her to eat. Soon they got into a playful mood and their conduct attracted everyone's attention.

An elderly woman, a retired school teacher, sat opposite them. She was going to see her daughter, whom she had not seen for almost a year. On seeing Priyanka, she was reminded of her granddaughter, who resembled her. Since the elderly woman was traveling alone, she relieved her boredom by clandestinely watching the passionate indulgence of the young couple in front of her. As she silently admired the young girl, her eyes suddenly fell on her feet. The metti (toe ring), worn by ladies after marriage was missing. She examined her neck and forehead and they were also bereft of the thalli (holy thread around neck) and the vermilion mark (red color powder worn by married women along the part of their hair). Immediately stray thoughts assailed her mind. She wondered what the pretty girl was doing with a young man beside her. However, she did not wish to dwell on it and she stopped her mental comparison of her with her own granddaughter and tried to occupy her mind. As night

fell, the warm atmosphere changed and a cool wind started blowing. The rattling of the train lulled her and she closed her eyes and went to sleep.



As soon as Priyanka's mother returned, she started looking around for her daughter, to give her the Prasadam (sacred food) which she received from the temple. Not finding her in the house, she thought that Priyanka would have gone to her friend's house in the neighborhood. It was 9 p.m. and when her daughter did not return, she went to phone her friend, and suddenly her eyes fell on the keys dangling in the bureau. Her heart skipped a few beats for it was not her habit to leave the keys carelessly on the bureau. On checking the bureau, she found that a few costly silk sarees were missing and so were all the jewels. She was shocked and suspicious that her daughter had left the house with them. There was no trace of Priyanka until 11 p.m. Both parents were confused and did not know what to do. Finally, they realized that Priyanka would probably have eloped. Priyanka's mother sat on the bed and started to cry. "How could she betray us like this," she wailed.

But her father was cool and he consoled his wife, "Take it easy, my dear! Don't cry and make a scene now! All our neighbors will learn of the fact from your cries!"

This infuriated her and she shouted, "How could you be so relaxed and not bother to rush to the police station."

"But this is nothing new in our society. Our daughter has grown up and fallen in love with somebody. On the very day I was blessed with a daughter, I also knew that I was going to miss her one day or another for she would get married and go to her in-law's house. Hence, I had developed a strong mind and had been prepared for this separation, which was to take place eventually. And so, you better stop crying and feel happy that our daughter has saved us her marriage expenses!" After pacifying his wife, he went out and watched the cricket match on the TV.

The thoughtless manner in which her husband had taken the issue rubbed sand on her sore. Stunned at how it was possible for him to take things so lightly, she continued to sit by the window, hoping that her daughter would return!



It was 3 a.m. and the old woman on the train was sleeping soundly. Suddenly she heard a shrill noise and thought that she was dreaming. But when the screams got louder, she jerked out of her slumber. Priyanka was sitting in front of her, crying at the top of her voice and surrounding her were a few people, demanding she answer numerous questions. At once, she guessed that something sinister had happened, for the man who had been sitting beside her was missing. Beckoning the girl toward her, she requested she stop crying and tell her what happened. Priyanka, who had not opened her mouth so far, confided the truth to the woman.

Seeing Priyanka stifle a yawn, Vinod asked her to lie down and have a good sleep. It was 10 p.m. and everyone in the compartment had already fallen asleep. When Priyanka asked him if he was not getting sleep, he told her jovially that it was not his habit to go to bed until midnight and he started thumbing through the pages of a magazine. After handing over the bag to him, she lay down comfortably resting her head on his lap, and closed her eyes. Early in the morning, a cool wind blew and Priyanka started shivering. Unable to bear the chillness, she sat up, securing her dupatta (a long scarf) closely over her body. She looked around for Vinod, to inquire if he was cold too, but he was not to be seen anywhere in the vicinity. Rubbing her eyes from the glare of the lights, she walked unsteadily toward the toilet. The doors of the two toilets at the rear end of the compartment were closed and she patiently waited outside, wishing that Vinod would come out soon. After a while, what seemed to be an eternity to her, she saw a man emerge from one of the toilets. She continued to linger on, expecting that Vinod was probably in the other toilet. She turned around swiftly on hearing the creak of the door, and was shocked to see only

a stout lady emerging. Suddenly, her heart began to beat faster and her mind raced with wild thoughts. When the truth finally descended on her, she almost lost consciousness. Vinod had taken advantage of her ignorance and the infatuation resulting from her youth, and he had beguiled her.

After hearing Priyanka's story from beginning to end, the elderly woman was exasperated, rather than feeling sorry for her. She lashed out at her, "You have in fact committed a blunder in running away from home, without informing your parents. You have acted in haste without any consideration for your parents' feelings. You should have trusted them and confessed your love affair to them. Instead, you have acted in a very disloyal manner. After all, it was they who brought you into this world. They have provided you with food, clothing and shelter unasked for. They drained their hard earned money to send you through the best school and college. And could you not be patient until they found a suitable husband for you? Since you found one yourself, you could have at least told your parents about him. With their experience in life, they would have definitely guided you in the right path. These days, parents go by the words of their children and wish to be in their good graces forever. You have been so faithless to them!"

Priyanka sat in silence, lamenting the outcome of her reckless action. God had indeed punished her enough. All her jewels and costly silk sarees were gone. She had no money to return home. Madurai station was approaching and the train rattled at a low speed and finally squealed to a sudden halt. Everyone was picking up their baggage to exit the train. Priyanka joined the crowd unsure of her next move. As she stepped onto the platform, she felt a hand over her shoulder and was taken aback. The old lady was standing beside her. She opened her purse and took out a few notes and placed them in her hand and said, "Well, forget everything now! I know that the swindler had taken all your belongings and you are left with nothing. However, you must be thankful to God; for you are still fresh and a virgin. The material things can be replaced later on. Now,

boldly return home and confess everything to your parents and humbly ask for their forgiveness!”

Priyanka’s eyes welled up and she at once bent down to touch the feet of the old woman as a mark of respect and gratitude. But the lady immediately lifted her up and said, “Give me your phone number and I shall phone and talk to your parents and apprise them. This will ease their stress and alleviate your discomfiture!” Thanking her profusely for her kindness, Priyanka walked toward the ticket counter with an air of rejuvenation!

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