TWO PLAYS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

THE SOMETIMES RIVER

NAYANTARA NAYAR

and

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

AMULYA B

eklavya

TWO PLAYS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

THE SOMETIMES RIVER

BY

NAYANTARA NAYAR

And

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

BY

AMULYA B

eklavya

Preface

The plays featured in this book were created for 'Play/Write', an online playwriting residency, conceived by ThinkArts and supported by Parag, an initiative of the Tata Trusts. The residency was for playwrights to engage with writing for young audiences and develop plays specifically for them as the intended audience.

Play/Write was largely driven by the fact that in the last few decades, while a lot of new writing for children has emerged, many of which have the potential to be adapted for theatre, there is nevertheless a dearth of new plays that are written for young audiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an online medium for the residencey, and due to the lack of geographic restrictions, the project could involve participation from experts in Australia and across India. Alongside the four playwrights-in-residence, Play/Write involved Australian playwright, Finegan Kruckemyer, who came on board as a speaker at the launch webinar and to lead an intensive masterclass, as well as dramaturgs, Shaili Sathyu from India and Jennifer Medway from Australia who acted as the mentors for the playwrights-in-residence writing in Hindi and English, respectively. The residency ran from April to August 2021—in this time, the playwrights-in-residence individually worked on the scripts, attended an online masterclass and a webinar, and conferred regularly with the language-specific mentors.

Finegan Kruckemeyer is an award-winning Australian playwright, who has had 98 commissioned plays that have been performed on six continents and translated into eight languages. His work has enjoyed seasons in over 200 international festivals, and in 2018 he was the most-produced playwright of original children's theatre in the US.

Shaili Sathyu is the Artistic Director of Gillo Repertory Theatre, an organisation that specialises in Theatre for Young Audiences. Shaili is a recipient of the

Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and under her leadership, Gillo Repertory Theatre has produced more than 20 plays, staged over 500 shows and reached over 1,10,000 children in India.

Jennifer Medway has been the Melbourne Theatre Company's Literary Associate since 2017 and a practising dramaturg for the past decade. She has previously been the Resident Dramaturg at the Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP), and script assessor and dramaturg for the former new play development company Playwriting Australia, among other roles.

As an organisation working to present high quality arts engagements to children and young people, ThinkArts strives to enable meaningful theatre experiences for young audiences—theatre that considers them as astute audience members or participants who are capable of being highly perceptive and insightful, rather than presenting them with reductive arts experiences. In creating good quality arts experiences for children, ThinkArts has also observed the necessity to work from the other end of this process, that is, with the artists, do-ers, authors or makers who are involved in the various creative stages of this process. Hence, this residency has also been an attempt to initiate opportunities, facilitate support, provide a platform, and value and nurture writers engaged in creating theatre for young audiences.

Writing is one of the aspects of the theatre-making process that was especially suited to this time of limited mobility and introspection, and Play/Write looked to re-invigorate the field of playwriting for young audiences in India during this time.

Reading plays is an important critical engagement for a child. By its very nature, a play compels readers to become active participants instead of passive receptors—it engages their imagination, empathy, critical thinking and innovation. In order to experience it fully, the reader has to envision the setting and the characters that have been laid out in the written play, and through this exercise, engage and sharpen their mental processes. As facilitators, it is of concern that playwriting as a form of literature is not familiar to many young readers. In a survey by ThinkArts, when asked if they have ever read a play, an

alarmingly large number of children replied in the negative. It will indeed be a big loss if the youth are not aware of this beautiful craft that exists across the written word and the stage, incorporating the visual and the vocal.

The Parag Initiative has been focussing on developing good quality literature for children for almost two decades now. Identifying plays as a significant genre and a gap area in Indian children's literature, working towards generating new plays has not only been a joy, but a need-based effort too. Further, it is an attempt towards creating a space for the emergence of new voices by supporting playwrights. While Parag's commitment to the library, library educators, authors, illustrators, and good books has been strengthened over the years, facilitating playwriting has been towards deepening enhancement of the sector. With Eklavya publishing the plays in three languages, Hindi, English and Marathi, we hope that a wide audience can be reached.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have had the opportunity to actualise the project through this collaboration between ThinkArts, Parag and Eklavya. The team hopes that these new plays will be enjoyed by young readers across India, performed by talented theatre groups, and will inspire writers to think about plays for children and young adults, resulting in a robust ecosystem of play-writing, play-reading, play-staging and play-watching!

ThinkArts and Parag

A ThinkArts Webinar Presentation

by

Finegan Kruckemeyer

Thanks to the ThinkArts team, my fellow panellists, and those of you who watched—good luck with your writing projects from here!

Before I was a writer, I was a reader, and I thought that words were things for taking in, instead of sending out. I ate up stories as fast as I could find them, and enjoyed rainy days as much as sunny ones because of this. Which was good, because I grew up in the south of Ireland, and there were lots of rainy days.

Then at age eight, my family and I flew halfway round the world to Adelaide, and started a new life here. There was a new school and new friends and a new park right across the road, and all us local kids played outside a lot, so I started enjoying sunny days as much as rainy ones. But always the love of words remained.

Sometimes their magic was revealed to me by others—like the day someone told me to spell RACECAR backwards and see what it made. It made RACECAR.

Sometimes the magic revealed itself—like the day my wife Essie gave me a card saying 'SEE LEAF FALL'. And I stared at those words for a while, until they'd shuffled around to say: 'FEEL ALL SAFE'. And I did.

Sometimes, you and a friend end up saying exactly the same sentence at exactly the same time, and it makes you both laugh big wonderful laughs.

And sometimes you read a book, and hear an idea about the world explained back to you, in a way that makes perfectly perfect sense. And all you're looking at are some inky lines on a page. And those lines have been stuck together to make letters, those letters words, those words sentences. And that author has

never met you. But somehow those words, those letters, those inky lines, they forget to be as simple as that. Instead they make you put the book down on your lap, lean your head back in your chair and look at the ceiling and think, "Yes. Yes that is exactly the way the world is."

Some people have been so scared of the power of stories, that they've burnt books.

And some others have been so sure of the power of stories that they've remembered them, over thousands of years. They have passed them on without paper or pencil, from the mouth of a grandparent to the ear of a child—so that some stories have lasted longer than the countries they exist in.

It is hard to believe that once upon a time, before words, a thing had to be seen ("there is a stream full of fish") to exist. And if you wanted someone else to know about that thing, you had to take them there and point ("Here is a stream full of fish"). But then along came language, and suddenly a picture in your head could be carried many miles, and then shared with a person ("over those hills is a stream full of fish"). Suddenly, we could be amazed not just by what we could see (because not everyone can get everywhere, to see everything). Instead, we could be amazed by what we were invited to imagine. We could be amazed from afar.

So for all these reasons and a million more, I read, and I write. And sometimes, I teach. And what I teach is that absolutely anyone can become a writer, if they want to. All one must do is love words, and love stories, and decide that the ones they've been reading are good, but that there's also one story slowly forming in their own mind which they can't seem to find in any book they open. If that happens, then maybe it's their turn—your turn—to write it down, and to share those words with people. Because that's the best thing about words—they're great for sharing.

***

And now, arguably more than ever, that act of sharing, of connecting, is crucial.

In so much of the world today, conditions are worrying and stakes are high.

But some things, I believe, endure. And an idea is one of these things. Art is one of these things.

Because a story, strange magic that it is, can be invented by any person in the world. It requires little money and few tools. It may be born of hardship or hope, may be written for an audience of thousands, for one special person, or for you and you alone. Everyone has a right to their story, whether they're loud or quiet, young or old, rich or not so—whether their world's as vast as an ocean, or familiar as an island.

And I do believe that a young person with a story, may ultimately reshape everything—because of the palpable threshold upon which they exist.

On the one hand, they're still a product of the environment in which they were raised. They carry the DNA of their people, the memory of their landscape, the trauma or blessing of their era. They're the youngest and therefore the most hopeful incarnation of many people's histories, all funneled into this one being, in this one moment in time.

But on the other hand, they are imagining something new. They are beginning to recognise the qualities that make them unique. They are considering experiences not yet had, roads not yet travelled. They are conjuring an image of the person they might yet become.

And for me a young person's great power lies in this duality. They've been fashioned from something familiar, and they may use those elements to invent something new—a new way of thinking, of doing, of seeing the world and whatever it becomes once we are gone and forgotten. Emblematically, they're our faith in the past, and our hopes for the future, combined.

Which is why it's such an honour to write stories for them, in their present.

***

A regular struggle in presenting these stories, is one of avoiding the didacticism of issue-driven works so often decided as necessary for children, and instead brokering a more honest, respectful connection for a child viewer. I don't wish my audiences to learn any lessons, because I'm not a teacher. And I don't want

them to go on one particular introspective journey, because I'm not a psychologist. I just want them to see an enjoyable and challenging story, because I write stories. And if they feel artistically satisfied, and emotionally invested, and are part of a collective moment when sitting with others, and have something to remember personally when sitting alone later on, then that in my mind is the value of art, for children or for anyone.

As to questions of sugar-coating, I like writing stories in which protagonists are put through their paces. Whether or not they're children is irrelevant to me—in this story they are the hero, and so must work to prove their heroism. Obstacles should pile up to the ceiling. Goals should be faraway things, specks in the distance. This makes the overcoming of one, and the reaching of another, all the more satisfying. I would wish my heroes to prove themselves great, whether children or adults, whether invented by me or read about in the stories I love.

And outside the works, I want a child audience to be respected also. I want them to be privy to a play with high stakes and three-dimensional characters. Their ability to reason, and invest, and celebrate, and grieve, should be honoured.

***

And the real equivocating pleasure of this form that we all work in… is that theatre doesn't need much.

Yes, we hear about new technologies that could be employed to tell a story, expensive equipment and state-of-the-art effects. But once we commit to a celebration of the means of delivery, rather than the product delivered, we start investing in a different way. It is hinged, for me, on a very simple belief:

> When we watch a complex magic show, we look for the wires, the proof of its falsehood. But when we watch a simple story told, then we look for the allegory, the proof of its truth. One form invites us to be sceptics, and then tries to prove us wrong.

The other encourages us to be believers, and then tries to prove us right.

When a theatre piece, or a moment in time, or a person in life, assures us it will be great, then we become cynical—we look for the humanity, the flaw. But when a theatre piece, or a moment in time, or a person in life, comes to us with hands empty, with palms raised, and says: "I have only a story to share with you," then we will wish for more.

And so together, we play a game of make believe. The commodity then, the thing that is being shared, is empathy—the ability to feel for a foreigner, in a foreign land, as you would for yourself. To see a version of your tragedies and joys in them, and so will them to succeed as you would an externalised version of you.

Entering a theatre, not knowing what awaits, we are all cast adrift in a forested wilderness searching for clues. What we find, we hang tight to. Once we've found a few clues, we work to piece them together. A story is built, both in front of us, and inside of us.

***

And that for me is what theatre affords us—a permission: to believe that the world is magical, that emotions are transferable, that what is amazing to me will be amazing to you also.

And the palpable joy of theatre is that it will sit us side-by-side for the experience. At times we might gasp together, and at times we might curl into our chairs alone, and our memories alone, and at times we might feel nothing at all in the moment and then catch ourselves (one night later as we lie in bed) and fathom it: that image, filtered through our subconscious, answerable to no one, understandable in our bones alone.

And as a writer, I'm often asked if I fear running out of ideas. But I think it's impossible, at least until I run out of wonder—run out of being amazed by the world around me and its quirks and its brilliances and its tragedies and its victories. So long as these are provided, I will feed off them. I will feed them into the plays I try to write. Here then, are just a handful, a small bundle of

favourites picked from a limitless bookshelf of real things—all of them true, but all magical enough to be part of a story:

There is a sailor who put a note in a bottle and threw it in the sea. And when he reached a port years later, in a faraway part of the world, it was he who found that bottle. This is not a lie.

There is an insect that looks exactly like a stick, another that looks like a leaf. There is a human, that looks exactly like a gene wishes it to—the gene engineers the species as a vessel for its transportation, so it will travel, so it will live on. This species is you. It is me. This gene, is just a gene.

There is a man who can learn to speak a language in a week. There is a woman who retains prime numbers like a game. The type of mind they possess to perform these tasks, is called disabled. That's absurd.

There's a record player that's no more than a tiny wind-up car with a speaker on the roof. You just lay your favourite vinyl on the ground and place the car upon it, a stylus between its wheels sitting in the groove. And the car will drive around and around, playing your song for you.

There is a man who once played chess against a giant computer. Who won? It doesn't matter—it was a man playing chess against a giant computer.

There is an ecosystem perfectly formed to hold us. And this is chance. Or this is god. But whatever the cause, it is grand.

There was a woman who refused to move from her seat on a bus. There was a couple that lay in bed for a while. There was a man who sat cross-legged on the ground and waited patiently. They were all just being still. But it was called a movement. But nobody moved. That's ironic.

There is a photo series in a magazine, in which is a man chronicling his son. On the day his son was born, the photographer bought a pair of adult jeans and took the boy home, and took a photo, of an infant lying in a man's pair of trousers. And every year on the boy's birthday, he would lie him in the same pair of jeans and take the same photo, so that over the years—with the photos laid out next to each other—you saw him grow into the jeans.

Until eventually, at about 20, there was a photo of a topless, hairy, smiling man in a pair of jeans his dad had bought for him, many years before. And a few months after that photo, the son was in an accident and died. And the last shot in the series… is of an empty pair of jeans.

There is a fish that needs to lay its eggs on land. It knows, in its being, when this will happen, precisely the night of the highest spring tide, precisely the wave—and on that one wave, a million of its kin will fly from the water and lay their spawn. The spawn, too, will know the time of the sea, and of the moon, and will be ready in exactly two weeks, when that same long wave returns. And as one, they will be born, and catch it, and swim into the sea—as one, they will swim into life. That is a perfect magic.

And that is also, in my mind, the wonder—fragments of a world, metaphors for our lives, touchstones for our emotions. This list is the smallest drop in an endless sea. It is not art in its natural environment, because it's just a thing existing, a thing occurring. But the moment it's interpreted, the moment it's taken in as observation, and released out, as a story shared, a dance choreographed, a song penned, a mood evoked, then it is Art.

And maybe some jaw-dropping method will be employed to share the idea. Maybe some heart-stopping reason will be coined to substantiate the idea. But ultimately what will win us over, is the idea—is the orbit of the wind-up car playing our song, the growing nose of the lying boy, the red apple, the trail of breadcrumbs, the empty jeans, the redemptive fish…

Is the challenge, the struggle and the triumph of the heroine…

Is the considered heart, the simple, poetic What, that (if stripped of all its finery) would still appear resplendent.

28 February, 2021

THE SOMETIMES RIVER

A PLAY

by

NAYANTARA NAYAR

Playwright's note about the location

The entire play takes place in multiple underground locations. I imagined the set as a single piece with different levels, and clever division of space, but I'm sure there are many ways of putting it together. There are some suggestions of what the caves feel, sound, and look like, but a lot is left to the imagination. Natural underground spaces can be both marvellous and terrifying to behold. At once alien and familiar, they stir something in the soul. I hope this play does something similar.

CHARACTERS

MARIAMMA	In her late 50's, Keeper of Stories
REVATHI	17 years old, Digger
PANCHALI	20 years old, Head Runner
AHI	22 years old, Leader
KO	18 years old, Runner
VARUN	12 years old, apprentice to Mariamma
MURALI/GHATAM (Both played by the same actor)	16 years old, Guard/Digger
AALIYAH	25 years old, Head Digger

SCENE ONE

The Gates— large cavern, with a giant, cobbled together gate that protects people from what is outside. A small section of the gate has fallen away, allowing light from the setting sun to spill across the cavern floor. The light expands and grows and as the story is told, its characters dance in this light, the shadowy remains of a dead world.

MARIAMMA: Many years ago, before the earth parched dry and the sun scorched us, before the first of our people came to haunt these caves, the Scrublands (scrubs) were wild and strange, and through its heart ran the wild and strange Sometimes River. This river followed no rules: some years it roared through the scrubs like a herd of angry elephants, some years it played at being a gentle, bubbling stream, and some years it disappeared and left no trace. The creatures of the scrubs—and there were many—had grown used to this. Even when the scrubs were at their driest, they lived on, creatures large and small. Creatures that fluttered, zipped, and scrambled—that scurried, swayed, and pranced. Everywhere life danced. No creature danced as charmingly as the dhole. (*The sound of their whistling howls.*) These

clever wild dogs were led by brave Veeran and wise Mithra, under whom the pack thrived. They knew the Scrublands so well that even when the Sometimes River disappeared, they had no reason to panic. In those hard years they drank from hidden ponds and secret springs and waited. For the river always returned.

Until one year, it didn't. The river went away and did not come back for a year, then two, then three. By the fourth year, the scrubs were withering and many animals left to look for new homes. Mithra suggested their pack do the same, but Veeran had other ideas. He had heard a rumour that the Sometimes River lay deep underground, trapped by the caves of the east, and animals were travelling there to help it escape.

Veeran wanted their pack to go as well. Mithra did not like this plan. The caves Veeran mentioned were in Kannam's territory. Kannam was a dangerous tiger: a huge, yellow and black beast with teeth as sharp as a Digger's pickaxe, and claws the length of a human palm. She and the dholes had fought several times, and the dholes only ever won because of their numbers. But Veeran wasn't concerned about Kannam. "Kannam hasn't been seen in years," he laughed, "She's run away after her last defeat."

So, the dholes set off for the caves in the east. The journey took them several days across the hot and parched Scrublands.When they finally arrived at the caves, it was a relief to get out of the sun. Inside the

caves it was dark, and the deeper you went the darker it got. But dholes, unlike us humans, can see well in the dark. They made their way through the first parts of the caves with ease. But as they went deeper, the caves began to grow tricky and dangerous, as you all know. They found endless tunnels, some that went in circles, others that ended abruptly in sheer cliffs over an abyss, still others that were so unstable a single yell could send the ceiling crashing down. Several times the dholes lost their way, and soon they were tired. When they found themselves in the same cave for the third time they stopped, knowing they had to regroup. The cave had a giant boulder in it, and it was against this boulder that the dholes laid down, exhausted. Just then, an anxious, weak voice echoed out to them,"Who's there? Have you come to help me escape these caves?"

"Who are you?" Veeran called back, "Your voice sounds familiar."

"Is that Master Veeran I hear?" the voice sounded a little livelier, excited, "Of the clever dholes? Don't you recognize my voice? You once lived along my banks. You call me the Sometimes River. Listen carefully and you'll hear me." The dholes listened. First, they heard nothing, but then there it was: the faint drip-drip-drip of water. "We hear it!" The pack cried out in chorus. "Then will you help me?" the voice asked piteously, "Others have tried and failed, but you dholes are clever. Maybe you can set me free." The dholes, sorry for the river, and desperate

for a good long drink of water, eagerly agreed. "There is a tunnel just behind the boulder," the voice explained. "It is not very safe, so make your way one at a time." Wait ten minutes between when one of you goes in and the next one starts."

Slowly the dholes went through the tunnel until it was only Veeran and Mithra left. "See, it was a good idea after all," Veeran said with a grin before disappearing into the tunnel. As she watched him go, Mithra was seized by a sudden dread. Without waiting, she dove into the tunnel. Luckily the tunnel stayed strong, only coughing up a bit of dust here and there. When both dholes emerged on the other side Veeran wanted to ask Mithra why she didn't wait, but was distracted by an odd smell. "What is that?" he asked, "It smells familiar." And Mithra said, "That's the smell of hunted animals—of blood and fear."

Just then, there was a flash of yellow and black, and something was looming over them. The voice, no longer weak, growled "I said one at a time. But two dholes are still easy hunting." With that Kannam attacked, her sharp claws glinting in the dark. Veeran yelled for Mithra to run, and Mithra did. She turned and fled, running faster than she ever had. In mere minutes she emerged at the boulder and saw other animals blinking nervously at her. "We're here to help free the sometimes river", a jackal began to say, but Mithra cut him short, 'We must block the tunnel with this boulder." She said to them, "There's no river

down there! Only Kannam!" And sure enough, there was a huge thud, and then another, and then another. Kannam was climbing up the tunnel! "Hurry!" Mithra urged, "She'll be here soon!" The boulder was huge, but with their combined strength they rolled it into place, and just in time! Kannam let out a roar of fury and rammed against the boulder several times, but that massive rock did not even shudder. Certain that she was trapped, Mithra and the other animals left the caves and agreed to travel the Scrublands and warn everyone of what lay in the Deeper Caves of the east. And for decades, no creature came near these caves for fear of Kannam. That is of course, until we, driven by desperation and a raging planet, ignorant of what lay waiting for us, did.

As the story ends, the light returns to its original size. Some moments later REVATHI enters and sees the stream of sunlight. She is drawn to the light, but before she can touch it PANCHALI enters.

PANCHALI: AHI, she's left the prison for the third day in a row. Murali says she insisted on seeing you. What's the point of putting her in the Pits if he keeps letting her out? (*Revathi and Panchali lock eyes*) What are you doing here? (*She works to close that dreadful breach, careful not to let the light touch her skin*) Are you trying to die?

REVATHI: It was already broken.

PANCHALI: No one is allowed here!

REVATHI: Since when?

PANCHALI: Since I said so. Who are you?

REVATHI: AALIYAH sent me.

PANCHALI: A Digger. What is it now?

REVATHI: I'm to speak to Ahi directly.

PANCHALI: Ahi is busy.

REVATHI: She said you'd say that.

PANCHALI: It's true.

REVATHI: What is Ahi busy with?

PANCHALI: None of your business, Digger. Now, what is it? More of your equipment's gone missing and you want to blame my Runners?

REVATHI: No. Nothing new is missing. But the equipment that went missing three days ago hasn't been returned.

PANCHALI: What is Ahi supposed to do about that?

REVATHI: Your Runners took it.

PANCHALI: So you Diggers keep saying. Got the proof yet?

REVATHI: There've been Runners hanging around the Western Wells for days. And they don't like us. They play pranks…

PANCHALI: I've already heard all this.This idiotic rivalry is not proof—

REVATHI: A rivalry you encourage!

PANCHALI: No proof, I can't do anything. Is that what you wanted to waste Ahi's time with?

REVATHI: Without our equipment, we can't dig. And if we can't dig, you won't get a new well.

PANCHALI: Because you dug so many wells... Tell me. How many new wells have you people dug in the Eastern Caves in the last month?

REVATHI: None. But—

PANCHALI: With or without your equipment, you Diggers are no help. (*Revathi begins to speak*) No, don't complain to me. I am not Ahi, and there's nothing I can do about it.

REVATHI: He's never here! What am I supposed to do?

PANCHALI: I don't know or care. Now get out.

Beat.

REVATHI: The water level in the Western Caves has reduced.

PANCHALI: Again?

REVATHI: It's a meter lower than it was last night… Aaliyah thinks the water is being stolen.

PANCHALI: By whom?

REVATHI: People are thirsty.

PANCHALI: Then guard the wells.

REVATHI: Why should we? Every one of us is digging, and we're still not working as fast as we had hoped to. The Eastern Wells will be used up in a few months—

PANCHALI: Don't say that out loud! Do you want everyone in the caves to know?

REVATHI: Is there anyone who doesn't? People have been complaining about it for da—

PANCHALI: Who?! Give me their names.

REVATHI: …I don't know who. People. Look, we need all our people digging. Aaliyah wants you to send some Runners to guard the wells.

PANCHALI: They're busy.

REVATHI: With what? They haven't gone running in weeks.

PANCHALI: The sun has been at its worst.

REVATHI: It's not like you to send them out when the sun is up, so what does it matter?

PANCHALI: Do I come to your wells and tell you how to dig? (*Beat*) Do I know you?

REVATHI: What? No.

PANCHALI: You just look really familiar. And that expression—disdain for everything I do… it's familiar.

REVATHI: Don't change the subject. If they're not running, why can't the Runners guard the wells?

PANCHALI: I do know you! You wanted to be a Runner!

Before Revathi can reply, enter Ahi, holding/half-supporting KO.

AHI: Help me!

PANCHALI: What happened?

AHI: I don't know. Put him down.

As they lower him to the ground, Ahi removes a bag Ko had slung across his shoulder and keeps it aside. A piece of paper rolls out slightly. Revathi sees it. At some point in the next exchange, she sneaks it back in without anyone noticing.

PANCHALI: Where are Rustam and Sheila?

AHI: I don't know. He just ran into my caves and fainted.

PANCHALI: Did Mariamma see him?

AHI: No. She was already back in prison by then.

PANCHALI: Small mercies.

KO: (*Sits up suddenly, eyes wide, shaking and delirious*)
Ahi, Panchali—yellow and black. Four suns.
An explosion. The face. Ran, ran, ran...

REVATHI: Is that Mariamma's grandson? What's wrong with him?

AHI: Who are you?!

PANCHALI: No one. A Digger with more Digger complaints. Do I have to throw you out?

REVATHI: Did you say Mariamma's in prison?

PANCHALI: Get out!

With a sudden burst of energy Ko leaps up and grabs Revathi and shakes her.

KO: Yes—run! RUN!

Revathi shakes him off, and then runs out.

As Ahi and Panchali try to calm Ko down, the stage goes to black.

SCENE TWO

The prisons, three-meter-deep holes commonly called the 'Pits'. Mariamma and VARUN are trapped in two separate Pits, right next to each other. Varun is trying to see if he can climb the walls. He is not built for climbing. Or any very strenuous activity.

VARUN: That's it. I can't do this.

MARIAMMA: Do what?

VARUN: Climb these walls.

MARIAMMA: Ha!

VARUN: I can climb.

MARIAMMA: You just said you can't.

VARUN: I can't climb these walls. They're too smooth. No one could climb them. (*Pausing*) How much longer do you think we'll have to be here?

MARIAMMA: You didn't have to be here at all! Why did you have to open your mouth? Ahi was happy to think it was all my idea.

Enter Revathi. She does not say anything, but listens.

VARUN: It wasn't all your idea!

MARIAMMA: I told your sister I'd take care of you. But how can I take care of an idiot who asks to be arrested?

VARUN: I couldn't let you go alone—when it was my plan, my research.

MARIAMMA: Varun, I appreciate the loyalty, but I'd have rather been stuck here alone than have to deal with your sister when she's angry.

VARUN: She won't even know.

REVATHI: Yes, she will.

VARUN: Revathi!

MARIAMMA: I tried to keep him safe!

REVATHI: How long have you been here?

VARUN: …three days.

REVATHI: Why didn't you send someone for me?

VARUN: They wouldn't let us.

REVATHI: Nonsense. Mariamma is the slyest woman I know. You've been leaving the Pits to talk to Ahi—

VARUN: How do you know that?

REVATHI: You couldn't bribe someone to come get me?

MARIAMMA: (*Indicating Varun*) He wouldn't let me.

REVATHI: Why?

VARUN: I knew what you'd say. When you found out what I did.

Revathi looks around for the ladders used to navigate the Pits.

REVATHI: What did I tell you before I left?

VARUN: "Stay out of trouble."

REVATHI: What is this?

VARUN: …trouble? But Revathi, you don't understand!

REVATHI: What don't I understand now? I'm never understanding things with you these days.

VARUN: We weren't supposed to get arrested.

REVATHI: Oh that's okay then—

MARIAMMA: It's my fault. I expressed an opinion on the state of the Runners—how they aren't being used properly. And I said—

VARUN: We'll die in these caves unless the Runners start going outside to find water and safer places. Like they used to.

REVATHI: You're surprised you got thrown in here?

MARIAMMA: I've said worse.

REVATHI: During a situation like this? We don't need people to be more scared.

MARIAMMA: I wasn't trying to make them more scared. I wanted them to consider some other options. Options that Varun shared with me.

VARUN: I showed Mariamma the maps we found in our cave.

Revathi goes very still. There is no change in her voice.

REVATHI: You did?

MARIAMMA: Revathi, it's so exciting! All that information, that research, just sitting in a box in your cave, lost to us forever if Varun hadn't accidentally come across it. He said they were mixed amongst your mother's things—I wonder how they got there? I thought all the old Runners' notes were sent to me.

VARUN: I was telling Mariamma what you said. How maybe they belonged to whoever lived in our cave before us?

MARIAMMA: So many different maps, and notes. There are other caves marked! If that's true, we could set up a small shelter there. The Runners could use it to widen their search, study more land, maybe even see whether the things Runners were observing right before the sun sickness were true—the rain clouds, the trees. I tried showing it to Ahi. I even tried showing it to Ko, but they laughed. So you see why we had to tell people? Don't you think we should go look for these places?

REVATHI: I think Varun should have waited for the right time—

VARUN: What better time than now? With the water from the Western Wells, we can actually afford to send people further.

Pause.

REVATHI: Everyone saw the maps? Ahi… everyone at the Rock Banyan?

VARUN: Yes… But they mostly… laughed.

REVATHI: (*Relieved. Then*) You promised to wait, Varun!

VARUN: I didn't promise!

REVATHI: You promised on our mother…

VARUN: I didn't! I said I'd wait till I had finished looking through everything. Which I did… five days ago.

REVATHI: You said you'd come to me when you did, so we could decide the right time—

VARUN: You just keep pushing it… You didn't even want to tell Mariamma.

REVATHI: Because I knew something like this would happen! On my way here, I heard a dozen stories, and they all had one thing in common. Everyone thinks she was trying to start a rebellion. And that you were helping her. You'll both be left to rot in here!

Revathi finds a ladder. Ties one end to the stakes outside Varun's pit.

MARIAMMA: I won't let that happen to him Revathi. I'll talk to the council—

REVATHI: The council is saying you've gone mad.

MARIAMMA: Mad?!

REVATHI: You've been kicked off the council. They think you're so intent on your books and stories, you don't see how things really are anymore... And you fought with your grandson didn't you?

MARIAMMA: We're always fighting.

REVATHI: He's the one who told everyone you might be going mad… You have enough to sort out Mariamma. I'll take care of Varun. (*Tossing the ladder down*) Climb up.

VARUN: The maps and journals we found—they can really help people.

REVATHI: You said they laughed at you.

VARUN: Panchali has them so scared of the outside, but if they think about it a little—if they saw the map properly, or heard Adnan the Runner's notes about the rain clouds he saw in the western sky, they might think differently.

REVATHI: And what about when they hear it was also Adnan who insisted it was safe for people to leave the caves? That he was the reason the council sent more people from the Western Caves outside? The reason nearly half the people in the Western Caves died of sun sickness?

VARUN: That doesn't mean he didn't see the rain clouds.

REVATHI: But it doesn't make him very reliable, does it? People won't listen to that. Climb up. We have to hide you.

VARUN: What about Mariamma?

REVATHI: What about her?

MARIAMMA: Varun, you've proved your loyalty. Go.

VARUN: I'm not leaving you.

REVATHI: Varun, either you come with me willingly, or I will carry you out.

VARUN: Don't treat me like a child!

REVATHI: When you act like one—

VARUN: You always do this! Just because you're older.

REVATHI: No, because I know better. Now come up.

VARUN: Get Mariamma out.

MARIAMMA: Varun, I really don't need to go anywhere. They'll put me back in here anyway.

VARUN: I won't come out unless you let her out too.

Pause.

REVATHI: You are in so much trouble. (*She ties a ladder and throws it down for Mariamma*) There, come up. (*Varun does. So does Mariamma, albeit slowly*) Alright, she's almost out, come on.

VARUN: She's coming with us.

REVATHI: No, she's not.

VARUN: Yes she is.

REVATHI: Enough! Mariamma, climb out, go to the Gates. Your grandson is there, sick with something. Happy? Come on.

MARIAMMA: What?! Revathi—wait!

As Revathi pulls a protesting Varun out, MURALI the guard enters.

MURALI: You aren't supposed to be here—Ow!

REVATHI: Get out of my way, or that happens again.

Murali scrambles out of the way. The siblings exit.

MARIAMMA: Murali, come help me.

MURALI: (*As he rushes forward*) Mariamma, you promised! No more leaving the Pits. Ahi is going to be so mad.

MARIAMMA: I won't let him yell at you.

MURALI: He doesn't yell. He never yells. He just goes… really quiet.

MARIAMMA: I know, I know. But don't worry. He wants me to go to the Gates. He sent her.

MURALI: Ahi said—

MARIAMMA: Murali, are you going to throw me back down there? Because I'm not climbing back down. Now hurry up. No time to waste.

She sweeps out imperiously and Murali hurries along behind her with many objections.

Stage to black.

SCENE THREE

A little later. The Gates. Ko is still awake, raving like a lunatic, and hard to control. Ahi and Panchali are at their wits end.

PANCHALI: It can't be sun sickness.

AHI: What else could it be?!

PANCHALI: He hasn't been outside in three weeks!

AHI: Are you sure?

PANCHALI: He would never go outside this time of the year. He knows the rules!

AHI: I know you like to think the Runners are firmly under your control, but Ko visited me every day for the last month with some crazy plan.

Mariamma runs onstage, a small bag in hand.

MARIAMMA: Where is he? Ko!

AHI: MURALI!

MARIAMMA: I told him to wait outside. So don't bother yelling. Now step out of the way. Let me see Ko. (*Panchali does not move*) I'm his Paati!

AHI: The last time you spoke you told him that anyone as stupid as him couldn't possibly be your grandson!

MARIAMMA: I meant it! He was being stupid, and so were you. But none of that matters. If he is sick, he must be treated. Why aren't you taking him to the clinic?

KO: (*More clearly*) Water. Water!

MARIAMMA: Get him some water!

PANCHALI: We've been trying to. He keeps pushing it away.

KO: So much water.

MARIAMMA: He's feverish.

KO: Four suns. The explosion. Yellow and black—

MARIAMMA: And that's a rash.

KO: A face. Horrible face. Ran. Must run. Ahi, run!

MARIAMMA: Yes dear. You'll run. (*Aside, furious*) He's raving. How did this happen? How did he get the sun sickness?

PANCHALI: That is council business. You are not on the council anymore.

MARIAMMA: Ahi, you tell me. Did she send him outside? During the day?! That's forbidden. You know—

AHI: Can you treat him, or not?

MARIAMMA: I need medicine, some hot water… he would be better off in the clinic!

AHI: He can't go to the clinic. If you want to treat him, it will be here. Murali will get what you need. Well?

Mariamma glares, then walks out to Murali.

PANCHALI: What are you doing... if she finds out...?

AHI: Do you know how to nurse someone who has the sun sickness? I don't.

PANCHALI: Then let's take him to the—

AHI: If anyone finds out what's happened, it'll be chaos, Panchali. You are the one who keeps saying we're hanging on by a thread.

Mariamma returns.

MARIAMMA: He'll get me what I need. Now help me. He does need to drink water. Half of this raving is from thirst.

They manage to make Ko drink some water. After struggling some more, he calms down.

Pause.

MARIAMMA: What is going on Ahi?

AHI: Ko was on a secret mission. I sent him. That is all I can tell you.

MARIAMMA: You sent him?

PANCHALI: N—

AHI: Yes.

MARIAMMA: You haven't been to a council meeting in months.

AHI: I've been busy.

MARIAMMA: Yes. And the caves have been sliding into chaos.

AHI: The caves are always in chaos.

MARIAMMA: Before—

AHI: I was leader, everything was fine. Please, I don't need this lecture again.

MARIAMMA: No. Everything was fine when you actually led! Now you barely step out of your cave. You agree to anything Panchali says. You threw me off the council!

AHI: You tried to start a rebellion.

MARIAMMA: I was trying to make you… do something. ANYTHING! You've done nothing for your people in months! Now I'm expected to believe you just suddenly decided to send Ko on a mission outside? During the day? (*Beat*) What is really going on?

AHI: If you want to stay, stay. But you'll keep quiet about this. Believe me when I say it's Ko who will be in the most danger if anyone else finds out.

MARIAMMA: Ahi—

AHI: This has been an exhausting day. Panchali, give me the bag. (*Panchali hands it to him. Ahi looks inside casually*) You're in-charge of her. Tell me when Ko is bett… Where's the paper? (*Beat*) Don't stand there like an idiot! There was a piece of paper in the bag when I brought it here. I threw the bag there, where that Digger was standi… (*Pauses. Then stares hard at Mariamma*) How did you know about Ko?

MARIAMMA: I have my ways.

AHI: Where is your loyal follower?

MARIAMMA: You don't need Varun. He's safely out of the way, he won't bother you anymore.

AHI: I doubt that. Where is he?

MARIAMMA: With his sister—

AHI: Revathi the Fierce? She was the Digger in here? (*Beat*) I wish I had known. After all the stories I'm a fan. Well? Where are they? (*Ahi waits for a moment. When Mariamma says nothing else, he sighs*) Panchali, I'm taking some Runners. Stay here.

PANCHALI: (*Aside*) What was on the paper?

AHI: I think it was a map.

PANCHALI: Of—

AHI: Yes. I can't be sure. I couldn't read it, but if she can...

PANCHALI: Then you have to hurry. Ahi, that Digger can't be trusted.

AHI: What do you mean?

Panchali starts to speak, but then notices Mariamma listening and pulls Ahi aside to whisper. When she is done, Ahi looks thoughtful and then leaves with a nod.

MARIAMMA: If I am doing this, I'll need my books.

PANCHALI: Why?

MARIAMMA: I have notes from the last sickness. You want Ko to live? Get me my books.

Panchali glares at her, then leaves too.
Stage to black.

SCENE FOUR

Revathi is in a small cave, a lantern burns steadily. There's one bag packed, and she's almost done with the second. She has everything one would need to survive—bottles, food, a compass. She's putting away some maps when Varun enters.

VARUN: Okay, I picked my favorite books like you said but if you burn them as punishment… What are you doing?

REVATHI: Five? Varun. Pick one and put it in your bag.

VARUN: What are you doing?

REVATHI: I wanted to wait for the cooler months, but I have almost everything we need. We'll hide out in one of the abandoned caves closer to the entrance for a few days. Once they've stopped looking for us, and the Gates are clear, we'll slip out at night and follow the maps.

VARUN: This is why you wanted me to 'wait' before telling people what I'd found? You were planning this?

REVATHI: It takes a while to gather everything you might need to survive out there.

VARUN: You never wanted to tell everyone.

REVATHI: I knew what everyone would say… I guessed we'd have to do it alone.

VARUN: We won't survive out there by ourselves.

REVATHI: We will. I'll make us. I've studied everything in the journals. I know the maps by heart. I won't let anything happen to you.

VARUN: But it's not just me! There are a thousand other people here—

REVATHI: You think we're like the dholes in one of Mariamma's story? That we're all a pack who look out for each other? There's no pack. You and me? We only have each other.

VARUN: I'm not leaving.

REVATHI: Varun—

VARUN: I'M NOT LEAVING!

Enter Ahi.

AHI: No, you're not.

Revathi lunges for Varun but Ahi grabs him.

REVATHI: Let him go.

AHI: Give me the paper you stole.

REVATHI: (*Pulling it out and grabbing the lantern*) I'll burn it.

AHI: You're in enough trouble.

REVATHI: It won't matter if I destroy this then.

AHI: Wait-wait. Give me the map, I'll let him go.

REVATHI: Let him go first.

Ahi does. Varun runs to Revathi's side.

REVATHI: Good. Now get out of my way.

AHI: Why did you even take it? You can't use it—

REVATHI: It looked like a map. Ko looked like he had sun sickness. I thought it would be useful out there.

AHI: So it's a family obsession to die out in the Scrublands?

REVATHI: Let us leave, or I'll burn this map of… (*She looks at the paper for the first time and trails off*) That's not the Scrublands.

VARUN: What is it?

REVATHI: (*To Ahi*) Even ***you*** aren't this stupid.

AHI: You can read it?

REVATHI: It's a map—of course I can read it. You sent the Runners to the Deeper Caves?!

VARUN: What? It… looks like squiggles?

REVATHI: That's the Eastern Caves. The furthest parts of Eastern Caves. And beyond that, I don't know any of it. And I know every inch of these caves.

AHI: You could you find your way down there? Using that?

REVATHI: There's a path marked.

AHI: Then I have a… plan. You can help me solve my problem, and I'll help you solve yours.

REVATHI: What's your problem?

AHI: A few days ago, I sent three Runners down to the Deeper Caves. They were looking for the Sometimes River. Ko has come back sick and I need to know what he found, and where the others are.

VARUN: They're mush in Kannam's stomach.

AHI: I was going to send more Runners, but this is better. You can read that strange map.

REVATHI: It's a very normal map.

AHI: I know how to read a map.

REVATHI: A normal cave map. They're different from maps of the Scrublands.

AHI: So you can read that and you're a Digger which means you know things about the caves. And most importantly, you're not going to stab me in the back.

REVATHI: I'm not?

AHI: Your brother could be in the Pits for the rest of his life, or you can do this and then you both can leave.

VARUN: We are not leaving—

AHI: Fine. You can stay then. You can yell about rebellion from the Rock Banyan every day, and I'll let you. (*Revathi is unconvinced*) I could make you a Runner.

Pause.

VARUN: Revathi is a Digger. She doesn't want to be a Runner.

AHI: But you tried for the Runners, didn't you? Three years ago? Or did Panchali get it wrong?

VARUN: She never did that! Revathi hates the Runners.

AHI: Jealousy does that.

VARUN: Is he right?

AHI: Of course I am. You can see it on her face. That's what you really want? To be allowed to run up there, in the Scrublands?

Pause.

REVATHI: I go down to the Deeper Caves, find these Runners, check if they found the river and come back. That's it?

AHI: Simple.

VARUN: Revathi, you can't—

AHI: Shhh... your sister is thinking.

REVATHI: What if they're dead? The others?

AHI: Not your problem.

REVATHI: If they found nothing, no river?

AHI: They found something.

REVATHI: The river dried up years ago.

AHI: Like your brother, who so fervently believes that 'somehow' there's water up there, I believe there's water in the Deeper Caves. Except of course, I have proof.

VARUN: What proof?

AHI: The water in our wells comes from somewhere, Varun. I think Ko and the others found exactly where that was.

VARUN: Or they found Kannam.

AHI: If it's between the sun that kills us, and Kannam, I pick Kannam. If she's real, she's either dead or very old. What do you say Revathi? Go find the others, find the water, survive a possibly decrepit tiger-monster, then Varun's free and you're a Runner.

Slowly, Revathi nods. Varun grabs her and pulls her aside.

VARUN: Was he right? About you wanting to be a Runner?

REVATHI: I'm fast… I tried it. But that's not why—

VARUN: That's the only reason you're agreeing.

REVATHI: I'm agreeing to keep you safe! (*She grabs her packed bag and starts to empty it. More quietly*) I'll be careful. And if I do this, maybe I can find those places in the Scrublands and help—

VARUN: Don't lie. You didn't care about that before and you don't care now.

REVATHI: I couldn't sit around and wait for everyone to realise we might have no other choice but to leave. But if I'm a Runner then—

VARUN: Just go then! I don't care if you get eaten. I'll save everyone myself.

REVATHI: (*She tries to hug him, he doesn't let her*) Varun, don't be angry. I'll be back. I promise. Just stay safe, and don't leave here

She takes the bag and exits.

AHI: I don't need to tell you to keep this a secret. Anyone finds out and …well, we're all in trouble, your sister included.

Ahi exits. Varun is silent for a moment, then he takes a bottle and throws it the way Ahi went. He looks around at all his books and then makes a decision. He takes some of his journals and packs his own bag. Then he runs out.

Stage to black.

SCENE FIVE

A little later. The Gates. Mariamma is sitting with Ko who sleeps fitfully. Panchali enters, followed by Murali who is carrying three bags of books. Panchali looks disgruntled.

PANCHALI: Here. Place them here.

MURALI: Got everything you wanted, Mariamma. You have a lot of books.

PANCHALI: Oh, get out.

MARIAMMA: Thank you Murali. (*As he exits*) Don't be nasty.

PANCHALI: He's an idiot. You're just being nice because he does what you want. (*Pause*) Are all these about the sun sickness?

MARIAMMA: The first bag.

PANCHALI: Then why did you make us get the other two?!

MARIAMMA: I might get bored. Nursing involves a lot of waiting.

PANCHALI: (*Picking up the other two bags up*) I'm going to throw these right—

MARIAMMA: They're also work! My work. Panchali, put them down.

PANCHALI: Work. I bet half this stuff is useless. (*Drops it unceremoniously, some clipped papers spill out of a bag*) These aren't even books.

MARIAMMA: They're scientific papers about the stars. They're very valuable!

PANCHALI: What about the stars?

MARIAMMA: Each paper is different.

PANCHALI: What does… that one say?

MARIAMMA: You haven't been practicing your reading?

PANCHALI: Are you going to tell me or should I toss them all out?

MARIAMMA: 'In 2019, Virgo under the influence of Jupiter will be more prone to eating unwisely and making poor romantic decisions.'

PANCHALI: That's… science?

MARIAMMA: People were interested in all kinds of things that might seem strange to us now.

PANCHALI: More useful if they'd been interested in the fact that the world was ending. (*Pause*) This is your work?

MARIAMMA: Yes! I'm keeping our culture alive, Panchali! Rewriting stories that are crumbling. Like… look at this. This is the only copy of the story of the dholes and Kannam that we have!

PANCHALI: It isn't even the best version of that story. If I wanted to scare people into keeping away from the Deeper Caves, I'd tell them other story. About the first explorers who went down there.

They were a big party studying the Deeper Caves. (*Varun sneaks in*) They were down there for days before it started happening. The disappearances. One by one they went missing, until there were only two left. They were brave, or stupid, or both, because they decided to hunt the monster instead of running away. They followed its tracks to a huge cave, deep in the Earth. At its centre was the monster. It was worse than anything they could have imagined. A horrible mess of limbs and faces. A giant screaming pile of human remains held together by pure evil. The explorers were so repulsed, so terrified, they stood rooted to the ground even as this thing came towards them. Then one of them, overcome, fainted. The creature pounced on him, and while it feasted, the other managed to regain enough sense to escape. He made it back here, but the monster had got him too in a way… He went mad you see? The horror of what he saw never left him. For the rest of his life he only ever said three words 'The Endless Ones. The Endless Ones. The Endless Ones…'

MARIAMMA: You'd have made a good story keeper, Panchali.

PANCHALI: (*Flattered, but unwilling to be so*) My father likes telling that one. It's all nonsense anyway. Nothing is immortal.

VARUN: Bowhead whales live over 200 years. Maybe the monster has a long lifespan. But why 'The Endless Ones'? How did he come up with that name?

PANCHALI: What are you doing here?!

MARIAMMA: Because it ate all those people and absorbed their lives.

VARUN: Ehh, good name, but weak reasoning.

PANCHALI: Get out of here!

VARUN: You think it's The Endless Ones who made Ko sick?

PANCHALI: What are you talking about! (*Grabs him*)

VARUN: Ahi pretty much admitted he sent Ko and the other Runners into the Deeper caves. After Revathi roughed him up a bit of course.

MARIAMMA: WHAT?!

PANCHALI: He's lying.

VARUN: Am not! Ow. Ow! Okay, a little. Revathi didn't rough him up.

MARIAMMA: Panchali, let him go!

PANCHALI: No, he deserves to be put back in the Pits. For being such a liar.

VARUN: You deserve to be put down there yourself! You broke our law! Ow, stop—let me go! Let me go or I won't tell you where Ahi and Revathi have gone!

PANCHALI: Ahi wouldn't trust that Digger—

VARUN: He needs her! She can read the map.

MARIAMMA: What map?

VARUN: Ko had a map of the Deeper Caves. The other two Runners are still down there. Ahi is sending Revathi down there to find them!

MARIAMMA: This is true? You sent people down there?!

PANCHALI: Sent? Your grandson went behind my back to Ahi and got him to agree. I banned it.

MARIAMMA: Ko knew the dangers—he might be a Runner now, but he's studied with me.

PANCHALI: Ko doesn't believe a single thing you say, even the things he should.

MARIAMMA: This is your fault, your influence!

PANCHALI: Your sister agreed to this?

VARUN: Ahi promised her he'd let me free…

PANCHALI: And… There's something else?

VARUN: He said he'd make her a Runner.

Pause.

PANCHALI: (*To Varun*) They went to the Eastern Caves?

VARUN: I guess. I don't care.

PANCHALI: Come here—did they go to the tunnel?!

VARUN: They must have, I didn't follow them.

PANCHALI: Murali! (*Enter Murali the guard, hesitant*) The both of them aren't allowed to leave here. If you let them, I will skin you alive. You understand?

MURALI: Yes! Yes Panchali.

VARUN: Where are you going?

PANCHALI: To stop this nonsense.

Panchali exits.

Stage to black.

SCENE SIX

The entrance tunnel into the Deeper Caves in the Eastern Caverns. Ahi and Revathi enter.

AHI: That took too long.

REVATHI: It's a lot harder to steal—

AHI: Borrow.

REVATHI: —from the Diggers with you making more noise than a collapsing cave.

AHI: You tripped over the bucket.

REVATHI: Because you said left instead of right.

AHI: You went left instead of right. I said right.

REVATHI: Just give me that.

AHI: What are you doing?

REVATHI: Packing it.

AHI: It's packed.

REVATHI: I'm not carrying two bags.

AHI: You're not.

REVATHI: I'm not.

AHI: Yes?

REVATHI: So?

Enter Panchali.

AHI: What are you doing here?

PANCHALI: You can't send her down there! It was bad enough you let the others go—

AHI: Someone has to find them.

REVATHI: Yeah Panchali, don't you care about your Runners?

PANCHALI: You might think Ahi'll make you a Runner after this, but I know what you are, and you won't run with my people.

REVATHI: Good. They'd slow me down anyway.

PANCHALI: See? See what she is? I won't have it!

AHI: Panchali, calm d—

PANCHALI: I won't have her go down there by herself to find my Runners. She can't be trusted.

REVATHI: Calm down. I'm not going to do anything to your Runners.

PANCHALI: You can't be trusted to bring them back. At the first sign of danger, you'll turn tail and—

REVATHI: I am not a coward.

PANCHALI: You are selfish. I remember you at the Runner trials. How you failed—

REVATHI: I won.

PANCHALI: Won?! No one has ever failed that badly.

REVATHI: I was the fastest/but you didn't like that I was a Digger/because you were angry because about what happened in the Eastern Wells.

PANCHALI: That wasn't the test/I didn't know you were a Digger/ Of course I was angry! Who wasn't angry about that! They refused to give water from their well to the sick and the dying.

REVATHI: Not all the Diggers were a part of that!

PANCHALI: The rest didn't help.They made a selfish decision. And you failed the test because you did too.

REVATHI: You said that the first three back to the caves passed. I was the first—

PANCHALI: The first TEAM of three!

REVATHI: You didn't say that.

PANCHALI: It was what I meant.

REVATHI: Is it my fault that you weren't clear?

PANCHALI: This is who you want to send to rescue my people? All she wants is to go up there. (*To Revathi*) You want it so badly—I saw it on your face then, and I saw it again today. Gaping at a beam of sunlight like it was a bucket of water. If I had let you become a Runner, you'd have been out there looking for some make-believe paradise until the sun roasted you and peeled the skin off your flesh. Till it bleached your bones, and the scrubs ate what was left of them.

And you'd have taken my Runners with you. (*To Ahi*) We can't trust she'll even look for them. She's not going alone.

AHI: She's not. I'm going with her.

Silence.

PANCHALI: You can't!

AHI: I can. I even brought a second bag for myself.

PANCHALI: You're the leader!

AHI: So what I say goes?

REVATHI: … Can you even… do anything?

AHI: Excuse me?

REVATHI: Climb? Run? … Walk?

AHI: Thank you. For your brutal honesty. I can do at least two of those things.

PANCHALI: You can't leave.

AHI: Why not? You heard Mariamma. I barely lead anyway. No one will miss me.

PANCHALI: They'll ask me where you are and—

AHI: Tell them I'm eating babies or whatever it is everyone thinks I'm usually off doing. Only one light?

REVATHI: You never said you were coming along.

AHI: Too late to get more now. We'll manage. Come on.

REVATHI: Wait. We can't go in together.

AHI: Why not? It's wide enough.

REVATHI: It isn't stable.

AHI: The others managed.

REVATHI: If we go one at a time.

AHI: That'll take too long.

REVATHI: Better than it collapsing on our heads. Look at the cracks. Ko and the others were lucky. If we aren't careful, it'll collapse and bury us in dust and rock. You stay. Wait, alright? Ten minutes, like in the story.

PANCHALI: That's where your Digger expertise comes from? From Mariamma's stories?

REVATHI: Her stories probably have more things right than we'd like.

Revathi proceeds into the tunnel.

PANCHALI: She will not run with me.

AHI: If this works out, none of that will be a problem. Think about it. If Ko found that river—

PANCHALI: He didn't say—

AHI: "Water. So much water." He didn't want a drink, Panchali. He was telling us what he saw.

Pause.

PANCHALI: Are you doing this because of what Mariamma said? She's angry at being kicked off the council. She's never cared about you missing meetings when it meant she could do what she wanted.

AHI: No. It isn't about that. It is my… responsibility.

PANCHALI: It was Ko's idea.

AHI: And I said yes. I'm not being noble—you know me. Not a noble bone in my body. I just think it'll be faster if I go. I can see how things are and we can make plans.

PANCHALI: I know Ko didn't believe in the monster, but he fell sick, which makes no sense. What if… what if there is something down there? What if that's what has the others?

AHI: If Ko saw a monster he'd be raving about that, instead of talking about four suns, and water.

PANCHALI: But he did say…

AHI: What? What did he say?

PANCHALI: Run.

Silence.

AHI: Any monster we meet, Revathi the Fierce will scare off. Have you seen her glare? (*Panchali doesn't laugh*) Just go back. Keep things in order. I'll see you soon.

He exits through the tunnel. Panchali watches and when he is properly gone, she lets out this sound—like a frustrated… boar. Then, as if the caves are answering her frustration, a deep, dull rumble reverberates through the cave. Then the slow and ominous sound of earth just pouring down. Dust billows onto stage. Panchali turns slowly to look at the tunnel.

Stage to black.

SCENE SEVEN

Later. The Gates. Varun is sitting down, helping Mariamma by going through accounts of the sun sickness from six years ago.

VARUN: I think he's looking better.

MARIAMMA: The medicine is doing something then… so it must be sun poisoning. But I don't understand how he got it. Keep looking. If there's something that could help him, let's find it.

Pause.

VARUN: I thought you were still angry at Ko. Especially after he arrested us.

MARIAMMA: I am.

VARUN: And he's still angry with you.

MARIAMMA: Definitely.

VARUN: So if he wakes up…

MARIAMMA: When he wakes up, we'll have a good loud fight.

Pause.

VARUN: I… yelled at Revathi.

MARIAMMA: It happens between brothers and sisters. You're worried about her.

VARUN: Yes, but I make her worried all the time. She never yells at me.

MARIAMMA: Things worth aspiring to.

VARUN: I don't think it's a good thing. She does it because she thinks… I'm delicate, because I was sick. She doesn't like me doing anything because of it. Last year when I said I wanted to be a Digger, she said 'no' and made me your apprentice instead.

MARIAMMA: Thank you.

VARUN: I'm glad she did but… I wish she'd treat me like she did before. Before Mamma died. (*Pause*) I've been meaning to ask… do you have any books on dreams?

MARIAMMA: I can't remember one, but you could check. Why?

VARUN: Just a thing I'm interested in.

MARIAMMA: I always encourage you to read widely. Or as widely as we can anyway. What's the project?

VARUN: You know how some people in the caves believe that dreams are messages—warnings for the future?

MARIAMMA: I've heard that.

VARUN: I've been dreaming a lot about my mother lately.

MARIAMMA: We all dream of the people we've lost. There's nothing odd about that.

VARUN: It's strange because I never see her face in the dream, but I know it's her. We're walking, but not in the

caves, up there in the scrubs. It's bare and hot, but Mamma is saying something important.

MARIAMMA: What does she say?

VARUN: She says there is a place in the east, near where the sea was. That was where our people came from before the world ended. She says it was a hard, dry place, no better than the scrubs, but her people had lived on it, turned it green and thrived.

She says her great grandfather, who was among the first people to come to the caves, brought bags of seeds with him and they fed our people for decades. She says that one day Revathi and I will make the land green too… Before I can ask her how, before I tell her we have nothing to plant, we see this thing in the distance coming towards us.. Mamma watches it, unworried, and when I say we should run, she takes me by the shoulders and says "Varun of the winds and the waters, do you see?" And she holds me there so I can watch as this thing keeps coming, getting bigger and closer. I shut my eyes, because I'm scared, and when I open them… well, Revathi is there because I'm yelling in my sleep again and she had to wake me up. (*Beat*) It's silly.

MARIAMMA: Why?

VARUN: The first time I had it was years ago, right after Mamma died. And I think—I thought she was in my dreams to say goodbye. Revathi had this funny look when I told her. She thinks I made it up.

MARIAMMA: You've been having this dream a lot lately?

VARUN: Yes. But sometimes it's me telling Revathi all this, sometimes it's Revathi telling someone else, sometimes Mamma is the thing running towards us, and sometimes, it's me… It's stupid.

MARIAMMA: I have read a lot of books Varun, heard a lot of stories. And more people have those kinds of dreams than you think.

VARUN: Really?

MARIAMMA: People dream about those have passed, about things that we have never known, lives we could never live…

VARUN: How?

MARIAMMA: I don't know. The mind is an amazing thing.

VARUN: You think my mind made it up?

MARIAMMA: Maybe. Or maybe your mother's very last thoughts did reach you. Maybe… they're still reaching you, echoed through these caves, breathing out at you, through the earth, to which we all belong… Whatever it is, you see how it isn't stupid?

Pause. Enter Murali.

MURALI: Aaliyah's second, Ghatam, was asking for Panchali.

VARUN: Tell him Panchali isn't here.

MURALI: I said Panchali went to the kitchens. But he'll be back soon. Because she isn't actually there. I lied.

MARIAMMA: If this Ghatam comes here, or worse Aaliyah herself, they'll see Ko, and they'll know something is wrong.

VARUN: And they might discover what's happened. (*Beat*) I can go get Panchali, and the others. They must still be in the Eastern Caves.

MURALI: Panchali said you aren't allowed to leave.

VARUN: To cause trouble. Now I'm trying to help her. So, she won't mind. Right Mariamma?

MARIAMMA: Right.

Varun runs outs.

MURALI: I don't want to be skinned.

Stage to black.

SCENE EIGHT

Later, the Deeper Caves. It's dark. Revathi is nowhere to be seen. Ahi lies, face down, covered in dust. He has a few small cuts.The cave is quiet, barring cave music: that echoey oddness one feels more than hears. Ahi awakens with a gasp, and then scrambles up. He looks around, scared, off-balance, and in some pain. There is an awful sense that something is waiting in that quiet silence. Suddenly, a rustling sound, ominous, and magnified by the cave. Ahi remembers the one light he clipped to his belt and struggles to turn it on even as he pulls out a knife. Then...

REVATHI: (*Quietly*) Want some?

Ahi drops the light with a yelp.

AHI: What is wrong with you?! You scared me!

REVATHI: I'm not the one waving around a knife.

AHI: What are you doing?

REVATHI: Eating. Quietly. So, I won't catch anything's attention.

AHI: Did you see something?

REVATHI: You can feel it, can't you?

AHI: There's something here?

REVATHI: Listen.

AHI: We have to be ready.

REVATHI: I already took some precautions.

AHI: Good.

REVATHI: I left a decoy.

AHI: Smart. Distract it. Where?

REVATHI: Right, there. (*Points to where he was lying down*)

AHI: Where? Oh, very funny.

REVATHI: If you could go lie down again, just in case the monster comes by—

AHI: Shut up. (*Beat*) What happened? I remember crawling in after you—

REVATHI: Too early.

AHI: —and then everything was shaking and there was dust and rock falling everywhere… The tunnel collapsed!

REVATHI: Because you were too early. Now we're stuck here.

AHI: Panchali will clear it.

REVATHI: The Diggers could do it. Will she ask them for help?

AHI: Panchali? No, of course not. But it's hauling dirt, she can handle it.

REVATHI: But will she? She doesn't like me. And I think she wants your job. Officially.

AHI: And she needs me to give it to her.

REVATHI: (*Mildly curious*) Does she?

AHI: You should know this—a leader has to be recommended by the previous one and then elected by the council.

REVATHI: Why would I know that? I'm not on the council.

AHI: They pick the leader according to the people's wishes.

REVATHI: Huh? Funny, I don't remember wishing for you.

Pause.

AHI: Did you drag me all the way from the tunnel?

REVATHI: Yes. Had to roll you a few times too.

AHI: Explains why everything hurts.

REVATHI: No, everything hurts because you started too early, caused a collapse and had a small mountain of rock and dirt fall on you. But you're standing. It can't be that bad.

AHI: Is that Digger wisdom? Because 'standing' seems a poor marker of health. (*Winces*) You... couldn't you have carried me?

REVATHI: You were too heavy.

AHI: I thought you could carry boulders ten times your size like they weighed nothing, Revathi the Fierce? (*Revathi chokes*) Did you really save ten Diggers from falling into an endless pit?

REVATHI: No, of course not!

AHI: Too bad. That would have been useful. This seems like a place with a lot of endless pits.

REVATHI: Varun told you his… stories?

AHI: He and Mariamma escaped and saw me every day of their imprisonment.

REVATHI: That guard should really be changed.

AHI: The Pits don't usually need guarding. Most people know there's no point escaping. I mean, where would they go? Mariamma is just stubborn. And you… well, you're crazy. (*Beat*) You'd have really taken the risk and gone out there?

REVATHI: Why not?

AHI: You could die? (*Revathi keeps eating*) He's your only family?

REVATHI: We don't need to… make conversation. We can just walk. In silence.

AHI: (*Beat*) So, is he?

REVATHI: Yes. I studied the map and I don't think they went very far. Two or three hours from here at most.

AHI: I have no idea what you're pointing at. Is that where we are?

REVATHI: No, we're here obviously. See?

AHI: What's so obvious about that?

REVATHI: We started in the Eastern Caves. This is east, that's west, that's north and that's south. Like on any map. We're going west.

AHI: What're those… squiggles?

REVATHI: These squiggles?

AHI: No.

REVATHI: These?

AHI: No.

REVATHI: These?

AHI: Those! Those squiggles!

REVATHI: The whole map is squiggles. And those are… uh… they're...

AHI: You said you could read it.

REVATHI: I can. I just… don't know what those are.

AHI: It looks like water to me. See how they all lead here? Maybe that's the river's path and it all collects there.

REVATHI: That makes no sense. The river doesn't start there.

AHI: How do you know?

REVATHI: Because we're standing right now in what used to be the river.

AHI: This? This was a river?

REVATHI: This is all river bed. When there was a river it used to flow east to west. So if those squiggles were the river, we'd be seeing water here too.

AHI: How do you know the river went past here?

REVATHI: Because of that.

AHI: It's shiny. What is it?

REVATHI: An underground beach. The river once flowed past

here so fast, it left behind sediments, and broke these rocks down to give us that. Sand.

AHI: Digger expertise. Very impressive.

REVATHI: I'm pretty sure everyone knows what sand is.

AHI: Yes, but not how it's made. Geology was not my best subject.

REVATHI: Considering we actually live in the earth it really should be.

AHI: Rocks. Magma. Sedimentation.

REVATHI: Do you know what any of that means?

AHI: …That's a rock.

REVATHI: Definitely no conversation needed. Let's get moving. And put the knife away. You can't stab the monster to death.

Revathi exits.

AHI: I can try.

He follows.

Stage to Black.

SCENE NINE

The Rock Banyan, Aaliyah waits. Enter Ghatam.

GHATAM: What are you doing here? I was just coming to tell you—

AALIYAH: Our people can run a dig without me. Probably better than I could run it. Was Panchali there?

GHATAM: I think so. I heard voices. But that idiot Murali wouldn't let me see her. Said that the entire area was closed off by Ahi's orders. And he said Panchali was in the kitchens.

AALIYAH: The kitchens? That makes it three. Someone said she was at the Gates, someone said she was seen going to the Eastern Wells, and now someone says she's in the kitchens?

GHATAM: Maybe she misses running.

AALIYAH: Undoubtedly, but she's not the only one who seems to have been in multiple places. Someone told me, just before I left, that they saw Revathi near our dig. With Ahi.

GHATAM: That would make it the first time he's left his caves

in days. You didn't find them there?

AALIYAH: No. What is going on? We go on a dig for a few days and everything is mixed up. Panchali is hiding out, Ahi is inspecting wells… what next?

GHATAM: Mariamma and her apprentice were arrested.

AALIYAH: Why?

GHATAM: Rebellion.

AALIYAH: There's a thousand of us. Who would rebel against who?

GHATAM: Diggers against Runners?

AALIYAH: Like I want the headache of Ahi's job.

GHATAM: Runners don't think things through really.

AALIYAH: Okay, you go back and… well I'd say oversee the dig, but they're doing fine. Maybe check on the idiots we caught stealing water.

GHATAM: Oh yes. Drunk, all of them.

AALIYAH: We don't have enough water to survive, but people found a way to make alcohol. Our priorities never fail to astound me. Make sure someone's guarding the wells too. Once I pin Panchali down, I'll make her send some Runners to do it.

Before Ghatam exits, enter Varun.

AALIYAH: You—aren't you Revathi's brother?

VARUN: Yes...

AALIYAH: Have you seen your sister?

VARUN: My sister? Revathi… uh isn't she at the dig? (*Aaliyah tries to reply*) Would love to chat but have to run. Mariamma's… sick.

AALIYAH: I thought she was in the Pits. I thought you were too.

VARUN: No—all a misunderstanding. Cleared up now. Have to go—

AALIYAH: Have you seen Panchali?

VARUN: Right! That. She went to the kitchens. Bye.

Varun exits, running. Aaliyan watches him go, and exchanges a look with Ghatam. Gestures for him to follow her. They exit. When she is offstage Varun reappears, looking pleased.

VARUN: Varun the Sly, misleading people left, right and centre…

He exits in another direction towards the Eastern Caves.
A few seconds after he leaves, Aaliyah reappears with Ghatam.

GHATAM: Future Keeper of Stories?

AALIYAH: The wisdom comes with age. He's going to the Eastern Caves.

GHATAM: Could have nothing to do with any of this.

AALIYAH: But he told us Panchali was in the kitchens too. She doesn't even know where the kitchens are.

GHATAM: She must.

AALIYAH: Why?

GHATAM: It's the kitchens.

AALIYAH: Yeah but the Runners have their rations taken to

them don't they?

GHATAM: I still think she'd know.

AALIYAH: You're on. Half a ration packet and your board of snakes and ladders.

GHATAM: Fine, but you aren't getting the dice. And if I win, I want the Ghalib.

AALIYAH: Deal.

GHATAM: He's going pretty fast.

Aaliyah sets off in pursuit. Ghatam exits in the opposite direction.

The rest of the scene is a series of moves, very quickly between various locations. Options for the Deeper Caves include fantastic stalagmite formations, a cave with a giant, seemingly endless hole in the centre, a section with rocks that dazzle the eye.

The lights flicker. The Deeper Caves.

AHI: Will you look at this?

REVATHI: Hurry up.

AHI: You have no appreciation for beauty. Ooh—

REVATHI: Don't.

AHI: I'm just looking.

REVATHI: I will not save you if this cave collapses. (*A strange rumbling sound*) Ahi!

Lights change. Later. The Eastern Caves. Empty, but a rumble from the wings. More dust everywhere. Panchali rushes out, shovel in hand, coughing.

PANCHALI: I'm going to quit. When he comes back, I'm quitting and… maybe I'll start cave art. People find that relaxing. (*Pause*) Ugh! Die, you stupid tunnel! (*She rushes back into the wings, shovel raised like a weapon*)

Lights change. Later. The Gates. Mariamma and Murali are trying to build a wall of books around Ko.

MURALI: We are… building this wall to protect Ko?

MARIAMMA: Yes.

MURALI: In case someone comes in?

MARIAMMA: Yes.

MURALI: But… if I came in and saw a wall of books, I would go straight to it.

Pause.

MARIAMMA: Just keep building.

Lights Change. Later. The Deeper Caves.
Ahi is looking down into a deep hole, fascinated. Revathi considers pushing him in, then shakes her head regretfully and exits.
Lights Change. Later. The Eastern Caves.

Panchali is having a meltdown.

Lights change. Later.

Varun runs across the stage, panting loudly. Aaliyah follows not too far, walking without having broken a sweat.

Lights change. Later. The Deeper Caves.

Ahi is picking up and dropping rocks, making a lot of noise, pocketing a few. Revathi is tense, catching the bricks he's throwing before they hit the ground.

REVATHI: WILL YOU BE QUIET?! Do you want Kannam to find us?

AHI: You believe that story?

REVATHI: You don't?

AHI: I've just noticed that whenever Mariamma is unhappy with someone on the council—usually me—she tells that story at the Rock Banyan. You see, right. You see it, right? She's wise Mithra, I'm foolish Veeran, the dangers of the caves are Kannam…

REVATHI: You're not Veeran.

AHI: Is that a compliment? From the fearsome sister—

REVATHI: You're Kannam.

Ahi glares and then walks off first this time.

REVATHI: That's how to get him to shut up.

Lights change. Later. The Gates. The book wall is finished and not effective.

MURALI: Why are we hiding Ko?

MARIAMMA: It is very complicated.

MURALI: I see.

MARIAMMA: It started with—

MURALI: I don't like complicated things. I will go stand guard now.

As he is leaving Ko sits up and topples all the books.

KO: (*Laboured*) Where is Ahi?

Lights change. Later. The Eastern Caves.

Enter Varun.

VARUN: Panchali! Aaliyah is looking for—what—what happened?!

PANCHALI: The tunnel collapsed.

VARUN: Where are they?

PANCHALI: Where do you think?

VARUN: You said you'd stop them.

PANCHALI: I couldn't.

VARUN: And now they're trapped?!

PANCHALI: I've dug a lot of it, and I haven't seen a… body.

VARUN: So keep digging!

PANCHALI: I'm tired—

VARUN: They could be trapped!

PANCHALI: Stop yelling at me!

Enter Aaliyah.

AALIYAH: What is going on? (*Silence*) Who is trapped in the tunnel?

PANCHALI: What are you doing here?

AALIYAH: What are you?

PANCHALI: It's council business.

AALIYAH: So if I went to them, they'd tell me why you're in my caves trying to clear out clear out a tunnel we've

been hoping ***would*** collapse for decades? (*When neither says anything*) Okay. I'll ask them.

VARUN: Wait! Wait. We'll tell you.

PANCHALI: We will not.

VARUN: She's a Digger. She can help.

AALIYAH: Help with what?

VARUN: Clearing the tunnel.

AALIYAH: And why would I do that?

PANCHALI: See, I told you—the Diggers don't want to help anyone.

AALIYAH: The Diggers don't want to help anyone? That's rich. Where are my guards Panchali?

PANCHALI: What gua— Oh. For the wells.

AALIYAH: So Revathi did find you?

PANCHALI: She said something, but there was an emergency—

AALIYAH: An emergency that sent her to the Western Wells with Ahi, around the same time more of our equipment went missing?

PANCHALI: I have no idea. She left. Ahi wasn't there. And I'll send the guards—

AALIYAH: You will. You will send two Runners to the wells where the water level has risen. And two more Runners to escort the thieves we caught stealing water. My people don't have time to deal with their drunken nonsense—

VARUN: They're drunk?

AALIYAH: Apparently. Now I'll ask only one more time, what is going on?

Pause.

PANCHALI: One of your Diggers is stuck on the other side of that.

Silence.

AALIYAH: I see. Would this Digger happen to be your sister? (*Varun nods*) And since you've never been very concerned about Diggers, would I be right in guessing that our fearless leader is stuck there with her? (*Panchali nods*) And… the council does not know anything about this? (*They both nod*) Then all of this was… whose idea?

PANCHALI: Mine.

AALIYAH: I find that hard to believe.

VARUN: It was Ko's.

AALIYAH: Easier to believe.

PANCHALI: I take responsibility.

AALIYAH: The blame will go where it should. And since you've allowed this nonsense, you'll get your fair share without needing to take on Ko's.

VARUN: So, will you… help?

AALIYAH: Why did you sister go down there?

VARUN: …For me.

AALIYAH: To get you out of the Pits?

VARUN: Yes.

AALIYAH: Which you were put in for starting a rebellion?

VARUN: We were just trying to tell people to ask some questions.

AALIYAH: Nothing wrong with that.

PANCHALI: If you'd heard it—

AALIYAH: I would have agreed most likely. You can't surely think Ahi's ways are working? Just sit here and hope things get better?

PANCHALI: That's not his plan—

AALIYAH: He avoids the rest of us, the council, refuses to tell us the real extent of our rations and water… You can't be surprised if people have questions.

PANCHALI: Now isn't the time for questions. We need to stay together, not bicker—

AALIYAH: And we would have stayed together if you had told us what was happening. For instance…. Why did Ko and Ahi decide to go to the forbidden, Deeper Caves? (*Silence. Varun looks like he might answer but Panchali glares him into silence*) If you want to know how to actually clear that tunnel, you will tell me. (*Varun nods*) Panchali?

PANCHALI: You just want an excuse to take to the council—

AALIYAH: Right now, I wouldn't need an excuse to take to the council—our leader is missing, you won't answer any questions, people have broken our first rule and gone into the Deeper Caves… they'd beg me to take charge.

PANCHALI: I knew it! You've always wanted to take control—

AALIYAH: I don't want to, but someone has to do something. You could take me out of the picture by just going to the council yourself. Tell them your side, and do what you've been doing for the last few months anyway—Ahi's job. I don't like you, but I know you could be good at it.

VARUN: But the tunnel—

AALIYAH: Here's what we'll do… You will send your Runners to the Western Wells like I asked. In that time Varun and I will start fixing this. And he will tell me everything he knows. When you come back, you can tell me everything you know. When we are done, we will all go to the council. How does that sound? (*They nod, Panchali, reluctantly*) Yes, that's really a mess… Why didn't you just ask a Digger to begin with?

VARUN: Diggers don't help Runners. Or the other way around. Everyone knows that.

AALIYAH: This is what your Mariamma is teaching you?

VARUN: It's what we all see.

AALIYAH: You can unsee it right here. Because I am going to help her, and she is going to help me. (*To Panchali*) Hurry up, we'll need you to help too. Varun, there's buckets and shovels two caves down, on the right. Go get some.

Varun exits one way for the buckets. Aaliyah exits the other way for the tunnel, Panchali stays as the stage goes to black.

SCENE TEN

The Deeper Caves. A still-offended Ahi, an unrepentant Revathi.

REVATHI: Slow down. (*Silence*) Ahi, be careful. (*Silence*) Walk carefully, test the ground with your foot and—

AHI: I know how to walk. (*Ahi trips*) That was not my fault! It's wet.

REVATHI: What?

AHI: I said it's wet… It's wet!

REVATHI: That's water. Well, wet earth.

AHI: Give me the map! (*Pause*) Look-look! We passed by this—that was the one with the hanging rocks. And these were the shining ones. And this—the big hole. Which means we're here.

REVATHI: Where the squiggles begin.

AHI: Ha! And you said it couldn't be the river.

REVATHI: Do you see a river?

AHI: It must be further down… that way.

REVATHI: Turn the light back on. (*Pause*) What is it?

AHI: I think it's broken.

REVATHI: Then fix it.

AHI: I'm trying. But I can't see anything… because I have no light!

REVATHI: Will you be quiet?!

AHI: Why? Nothing has got us yet—

REVATHI: Do you want it to?

AHI: It would be quicker.

Pause.

REVATHI: What?

AHI: If it finds us, we can take care of it.

REVATHI: If it finds us, we're running.

AHI: If it finds us, I'm killing it.

REVATHI: Oh really, how? … With your stupid knife? (*Beat*) Wait, you've been… making all that noise? Walking like we were on a vacation—

AHI: A what?

REVATHI: Walking slowly! You want it to catch us! Is that why you sent the others down here?

AHI: No, but if we find the monster, I think we should kill it.

REVATHI: You said, "Find the missing Runners. Find the water." That's what I agreed to.

AHI: And that's all I want you to do. I'll deal with it.

REVATHI: Why do you want to kill it?

AHI: Why do you think? So, we can use the water.

REVATHI: What WATER?!

AHI: We just found—

REVATHI: Damp earth! That's not a river.

AHI: Don't you want there to be water?

REVATHI: Even if there is, what—you're going to carry it back up two bottles at a time?

AHI: Or let people come here.

REVATHI: Here?

AHI: With the monster dead, we could move people here permanently. We might never have to go to the surface again.

REVATHI: What about the Runners?

AHI: There'll be plenty to do down here. You can still be one.

REVATHI: I want to run.

AHI: You can run down here. Look at all this space.

REVATHI: Up there! OUT THERE!

AHI: Why? There's nothing up there for us. Here, it would be safe, we would have water…

REVATHI: Do you really think that? That we shouldn't try to go back out into the world?

AHI: Yes.

REVATHI: The world isn't dead.

AHI: Yes it is.

REVATHI: Why aren't we dead then? You realise we're not some… alien species who happen to live here. We're a part of the planet. We survived.

AHI: We're probably the last people left alive. A thousand people, out of hundreds of thousands.

REVATHI: There'll be others somewhere—it's a big planet.

AHI: And our people destroyed all of it.

REVATHI: But before the sun sickness, the Runners said—

AHI: Revathi, let me stop you right there. My father was a Runner. Two of my brothers too. I was a Runner in training. Specialised in tracking—useless: no animals to track. And in astronomy—less useless, but still pretty useless. All the Runners, my family included, said the same thing. Earth is healing. I believed it too… And then they died. They were wrong. They're dead. There's nothing for us up there.

REVATHI: There's nothing for us DOWN HERE!

AHI: My way at least we all survive a few more months, maybe even years. What do you and your brother think we should do? Everyone dies in days. (*Pause*) At least I'm finally doing something.

REVATHI: This isn't doing something. It's giving up. You're just giving up on… the world.

AHI: It's human tradition I hear. (*Beat*) Where are you going?

REVATHI: To find your Runners and get out of here. I don't want any part of your plans for us. And I'd be too tempted to push you into an endless pit at this rate.

Revathi exits. Ahi follows.

Stage to black.

SCENE ELEVEN

The Gates. Ko is awake, ignoring Mariamma.

MARIAMMA: How are you feeling now? (*Silence*) You should rest. (*Silence*) I don't know when Varun and Panchali will come back. (*Silence*) Ko… you have to talk to me at some point.

KO: I do not.

Pause.

MARIAMMA: You know, I should be angry at you too. You had me arrested.

KO: That was your own fault.

MARIAMMA: You went into the Deeper Caves!

KO: To save our people.

MARIAMMA: And have you? Have you found the river and now are we all saved? (*Silence*) What happened down there? (*Silence*) You saw something? (*Silence*) You fell sick Ko: sun sickness without any sun—admit it, something is down there. A monster? (*Silence*) Tell me!

KO: Yes, okay! I saw something down there—it was a mistake going. We should have stuck to night runs like you said. Are you happy?! You are always right, I am always wrong!

MARIAMMA: You could have died Ko, died. How would that make me happy?

KO: You'd have been right—there's nothing you love more.

MARIAMMA: What?

KO: You've been waiting, just waiting to show me that becoming a Runner was a bad idea. Here it is.

MARIAMMA: I have… not. (*Beat*) Okay, a little. But you just abandoned me. You spend the first ten years of your life learning about my work, and then one day you tell me you're going to be Runner. No discussion, no warning, and you just leave.

KO : I tried telling you a hundred times. You always had some excuse—you didn't want to hear me. You never listened!

Pause.

MARIAMMA: Maybe I didn't. And yes, I've been angry at you. I've wanted you to admit you made a mistake deciding to be a Runner but—

KO: My mistake didn't get half our people killed.

Pause.

MARIAMMA: I was going to say that I don't want you to come tell me that anymore. (*Pause*) The council decided to

send those people outside. Do you really think it was my fault?

KO: … No.

MARIAMMA: We thought it was safe.

KO: Paati— (*Varun enters*)

VARUN: You are better! Well, a little better. He's still pale… Mariamma? You're a little pale too.

KO: Where is Panchali?

VARUN: With Aaliyah. No, it's okay. They're clearing the tunnel to the Deeper Caves.

MARIAMMA: Together?

VARUN: I wouldn't have left them alone, but Panchali was being… polite. In fact, just before I left, they were agreeing.

KO: About what?

VARUN: How to punish some water thieves the Diggers had caught at the Western Wells. And oh, how you're a menace. Panchali said she'd give you to the Diggers as an apology.

KO: She did not.

VARUN: Mmm, she's considering it. So, go on. Tell us.

KO: What?

VARUN: Everything. What happened? How did you get sun sickness? Where are the others? And was there a monster? Tell us the story…

KO: I'm not here to entertain you!

VARUN: You have to tell us anyway, so what if we're entertained? Come on. My sister is stuck down there. Once the tunnel is clear, I'm going to go in after her.

KO: You mustn't.

VARUN: I might look small but—

KO: No one must go down there. That place is evil. (*As the lights shift*) You wouldn't know it at first. It's just more of… this. Caves, rocks. But emptier. Quieter. They went west, so we too went west, and I mapped it all. We tried to hurry, but we got lost a few times.

It was the in middle of the second day that we found water. Just a few small streams of it. No thicker than my arm. We followed them. And then, about an hour away, we found it. ***(Across the stage, Ahi and Revathi walk onto the stage. Their light is still not working. Ahead of Ahi and Revathi is a huge body of water)*** A lake.

AHI: **I told you. It's—**

KO: —beautiful. We walked to it and put our hands in. It was—

AHI: **Cold.**

KO: A little sweet—

AHI: **—with a metallic aftertaste.**

KO: Freshwater in a lake so large—

AHI: **—we can't even see where it ends.**

Revathi has been trying to fix the light. She gives it to Ahi.

REVATHI: **I don't think we're alone. Fix the light.**

AHI: **You're being paranoid.**

KO: It seemed empty except for us.

REVATHI: **Where are the others?**

KO: They got into the water.

AHI: **Maybe they went on?**

KO: I went on. To explore.

REVATHI: **We have to see where this goes. There's a sort of a bank along that cave wall—**

KO: It was just wide enough for one person to walk on it at a time.

REVATHI: **Fix the light, we'll go slowly.**

KO: Slowly, I made my way.

AHI: **It's very quiet.**

KO: Even the sound of Rustam and Sheila in the water sounded far away, though I could still see them. My head was feeling heavy by then. But I had to stay alert. The bank suddenly narrowed.

REVATHI: **It's getting very narrow there, grab the wall for support.**

KO: I held on tight and kept moving.

AHI: **It's really narrow Revathi. Wait till I fix the light.**

REVATHI: **I'm just going a little forward.**

KO: My head began to spin and when I reached for the wall, my hand slipped and—***(Revathi nearly slips***

and falls into the water, but Ahi grabs the back of her shirt in time and pulls her back to safety) I nearly fell in.

AHI: **Are you alright?**

REVATHI: **The wall, it has...**

KO: The wall had changed.

Ahi and Varun, simultaneously.

AHI: **Changed!**

VARUN: Changed?

REVATHI: **It's… smooth.**

KO: Not natural.

REVATHI: **Manmade.**

AHI: **Or…**

VARUN: Monstermade?

REVATHI: **Very funny.**

KO: I was feeling funny by then. My vision was soft around the edges. Like I was… drunk.

REVATHI: **There's something there.**

AHI: **Wait, the light is almost back—**

KO: I managed to study the wall.

AHI: **I've nearly got it.**

KO: I lifted my light—

AHI: **There!**

Light floods the part of the stage with Revathi and Ahi and shows a dirty concrete wall with symbols painted on it: Nuclear Waste, Biohazardous Waste, Skull and Crossbones (possibly, the 'SCREAM' face).

REVATHI: **The four suns.**

KO: The explosion.

AHI: **The face.**

REVATHI: **Yellow—**

KO: —and black.

AHI: **There's something here—**

KO: Underneath it.

REVATHI: **A message.**

MARIAMMA: What did it say?

REVATHI: **'This is a cemetery.'**

KO: A dump yard.

AHI: **Made for monstrous things.**

KO: It was built in the year 2050 CE, but what was buried there won't die for tens of thousands of years.

AHI: **To us, they are eternal… Endless.**

REVATHI: **We have done our best to protect others.**

KO: They are deep in the earth where nothing can reach them.

AHI: **Do not dig them up.**

REVATHI: **They can harm your body.**

KO: Cause sickness.

AHI: **If you are reading this, you are already too close.**

REVATHI: **We do not know how you found this place.**

KO: But leave now and seal the way you came in.

AHI: **'You do not belong here.'**

Silence.

VARUN: 'The Endless Ones.'

MARIAMMA: What happened to the other Runners?

KO: I don't know. I think I looked for them, but I don't remember—I was so sick, I… left them there. In that place… (*Ko's voice starts to fade out here, and the lights at the Gates*)

REVATHI: **Ahi. Look. (*Pause*) Don't—they're dead.**

AHI: **Look at their skin.**

REVATHI: **Sun sickness.**

AHI: **The worst kind.**

REVATHI: **This place is poison. We have to leave. (*Silence*) We can't do anything for them. (*Silence*) You can't possibly want to bring people here—there's nothing here for us. This is your monster, and we can't kill it. (*Silence*) What are you doing?!**

AHI: **I feel… strange.**

REVATHI: **You drank the water? We have to get back to the tunnel. Fast. Where's the map?**

AHI: **I thought you had it.**

REVATHI: **No, you did.**

AHI: **It must be here—wait. I'll just sit down and look for it.**

REVATHI: **No, leave it. I can find our way back. Just, move. Move!**

Their section of the stage blackouts as they start to move.

The Gates light up. Everyone is silent.

VARUN: This means the sun sickness… isn't sun sickness. It's been this thing in the Deeper Caves all along?

MARIAMMA: How did it reach us? From down there? They said they trapped it in rock.

VARUN: The water obviously. Ko drank the water, so did the other Runners…

KO: It makes sense. Six years ago, how many people from the Eastern Caves fell sick?

MARIAMMA: I… don't know. No one I can remember. But no one from the Eastern Caves went outside either.

VARUN: Ko travelled westward down there. The Western Wells might be right over that lake, or at least drawing water from it. And Runners get more water.

MARIAMMA: What do you mean?

KO: Oh, you're brilliant! Runners drank more water, fell sick faster, and died first.

VARUN: I fell sick weeks later, near the end. My water ration was tiny. And then what happened? Just before the sickness stopped?

KO: The Western Wells dried up.

VARUN: We have to stop the Diggers. They might be in danger.

MARIAMMA: I can't leave Ko.

KO: Go. I'll be fine. (*Beat*) Take some Runners with you, tell them Panchali sent y—

VARUN: The Runners won't listen to us. As far as they know, we were arrested.

KO: (*Getting up*) They'll listen to me.

MARIAMMA: You can't be walking—

KO: Varun can help me there, and bring me right back. Come on.

Ko, Varun and an anxious Mariamma exit.

Stage to black.

SCENE TWELVE

Revathi and Ahi, lost.

AHI: Stop… Revathi. (*Panting*) Need to stop.

REVATHI: Just a little further.

AHI: You said that before.

REVATHI: I think I recognise the tunnel—

AHI: You said that before too. We're lost.

REVATHI: I'll find our way back. I said I would.

AHI: Just stop. Please. Rest.

They stop. Ahi sits down. Revathi looks around her, trying to remember the way.

AHI: 'There's a monster in the Deeper Caves.' I must have been… four or five when I first heard that.

REVATHI: I think I was younger. (*Pause*) If someone came here, and saw that—then they knew what we had settled on top of. Why didn't they tell us?

AHI: Maybe they did.

REVATHI: They told us stories of tigers and endless monsters.

Why not say, "Our ancestors weren't happy killing the world above. They also buried poison below?"

AHI: What would have happened if they had?

REVATHI: We could have left, found somewhere else. Why did they stay?

AHI: Because there was nowhere else to go. That's the thing you keep forgetting. They were stuck. We are stuck.

REVATHI: We are not stuck here.

AHI: Oh yes, I was forgetting. Fearsome Revathi can survive anything—even heatwaves and a poisonous sun. You and your brother can be the last of us. It'll be fitting.

REVATHI: If you'd actually looked at what Varun was trying to show you, you'd have understood. We could leave these caves.

AHI: Good. You do that. If we ever make it back, you do that.

REVATHI: No, don't just... Get up! You're not falling asleep and then dying here. AHI—GET UP!

AHI: I'm up. No, don't make me stand. Just five more minutes.

REVATHI: How were you ever training to be a Runner? (*To self*) How are you our leader?

AHI: I tried you know? At the start. I tried my best.

REVATHI: That doesn't matter if you give up now.

AHI: People like you are why I don't leave my cave any more.

REVATHI: People who want you to do something?

AHI: I was 16 when they made me Leader. 16!

REVATHI: And I was 11 when my mother died and I had to take care of Varun. At least you wanted this—

AHI: I didn't want this! Who wants this job?

REVATHI: Then why did you take it?

AHI: For a hundred years, our leader has been a Runner—I was the last Runner. I had been out there… five times. I didn't know anything about anything. In my first year I had to stop a riot. I had to stop people dying of sun sickness. I had to find a new council, stop people stealing supplies… hundreds of other things. But I managed. I calmed everyone down, I found Panchali and made her train new Runners. I got the Diggers to work on new wells in the east…

But all the problems I solved? More just took their place. Wells ran dry, people were stealing from each other. It got hotter outside, our food was nearly contaminated… Think, Revathi? Nothing ever actually gets better for us, does it? It's relentless. Everything wants to kill us, no one likes each other, and now we learn there's been poison under our feet this whole time. How do I do it, Revathi? How do I lead people, when these are the choices? When I know this is the end of the world and we're just the last to go?

Pause.

REVATHI: I'm not going to feel sorry for you.

AHI: I don't want you to. (*Beat*) I'm telling you I'm a bad leader—

REVATHI: To make me feel sorry for you. To shut me up.

AHI: I think I'm very sick.

REVATHI: Don't try that— (*Beat*) You look sick.

AHI: You think it's the poison? From the water?

REVATHI: I don't know—you're looking feverish.

AHI: I feel feverish.

REVATHI: What do we do? Do you have… medicine?

AHI: No. The clinic has medicine. Do you think, if someone from the clinic told everyone I was mad, they'll let me stop being leader?

REVATHI: Ahi. Stay focused. You are not that sick. We weren't there for long.

AHI: But I drank all that water. Water from the poison place. Ohhh.

REVATHI: What?

AHI: My head feels… strange. It hurts, but also feels light.

REVATHI: You're fine.We'll get to the tunnel, and to the doctors—

AHI: You go. No, listen. (*Points to self*) Worst leader. (*Then to her*) Less worse person. Save yourself. Thought… would you tell them I died saving you? It's a little true. And it would be nice. To save someone.

REVATHI: Ahi, shut up.

AHI: You don't have to feel guilty. The world is ending. We all have to make hard choices. Are those stars?

REVATHI: Sit back down—that's the poison talking. If you just sit—

AHI: No, look.

Ahi switches off the light. Starlight pulses down through an opening at the very top of the cavern ceiling. They are in a doline.

REVATHI: That's, that's outside.

AHI: The stars are still very shiny.

REVATHI: I've never seen them before.

AHI: Very shiny.

REVATHI: Ahi, come back—

AHI: Revathi. Revathi, Revathi, Revathi. Did you know you were named for a star?

REVATHI: Yes.

AHI: Smart, capable Digger. They should make you leader. If you're so smart, tell me, what does Varun mean?

REVATHI: Of the water and the wind.

AHI: Oh… do you know what every name means?

REVATHI: No.

AHI: You knew yours.

REVATHI: My mother told me.

AHI: You knew your brother's.

REVATHI: My mother told him.

AHI: Before she died?

REVATHI: In a dream. Ahi—

AHI: Ahi's a terrible name. Sounds like a sneeze that's ashamed to be a sneeze. What does it mean? No idea. Not good with names. I just studied the stars and tracking. No animals to track though.They're all dead. You don't seem the kind of person to be named after a star.

REVATHI: I know.

AHI: Until you realise a star isn't that shiny thing in the sky. Oh, I know something you don't. Did you know the sun is a star? (*Revathi shakes her head*) Ha! Well, all the stars are like the sun—big balls of fire. One day it might kill us all. Like you. I thought it was already killing us, but maybe it isn't? Maybe the sun won't kill us for some time. (*Pause*) Maybe the stars can save us.

REVATHI: What are you talking about?

AHI: There! They're still up there.

REVATHI: That stars… yes, but—

AHI: The north star. If you climbed up there you could just run back to the Gates. It would be easy. Keep that shiny little thing—the brightest star in the sky. And so reliable. Always in the north. And west is probably that way. No—that way. That way. You

keep that in your head. And run till you see these weird mounds of earth just going into the sky. They're called hills. The Gates are somewhere there.

REVATHI: That… sounds half sane, but you can't climb.

AHI: Yes I can!

REVATHI: That's just… what? 15 meters? I've climbed down deeper wells. Maybe I can tie the rope around the both of us, and show you where to put your hands and feet as we climb? You aren't that feverish yet. Come on.

AHI: Coming!

Beat.

REVATHI: Get up.

AHI: Coming!

REVATHI: Ahi, get up.

AHI: I want to. But my legs don't work.

REVATHI: You can't stay here.

AHI: This is a very nice cave. With a view and everything. Panchali would like this cave.

REVATHI: We'll bring her back here. Get up.

As she tries pulling him up and he resists, there's a faint whistle that echoes down to them.

AHI: Ooh do you hear that?

REVATHI: Not this again. Get up.

AHI: No, I heard something.

REVATHI: You're imagining it.

AHI: I could be. I'm really sick. I'm going to sleep now.

REVATHI: Ahi, Ahi! Wake up.

The sound again, but louder. Several more such cries, getting closer and closer until... where the starlight falls on the cave floor, a shadow appears. Revathi looks around nervously. She picks up a big rock. It looks like some strange moving figure until it sharpens. The dhole. It cries out again, and more gather, looking down into the doline. One cries out, seemingly to her. Revathi looks uncertain and then whistles back at them. They pause, curious. Revathi starts to scramble up the wall without even thinking about it. Revathi is a few feet off the ground when she stops. She looks up at the waiting dholes, then at the sky. She looks back down at Ahi.

Stage to black.

SCENE THIRTEEN

The Eastern Wells. Panchali and Aaliyah are sitting. Exhausted.

PANCHALI: That will really hold?

AALIYAH: Yes. You need to clear out a little more.

PANCHALI: I'm exhausted.

AALIYAH: How long have they been gone now?

PANCHALI: Almost a day and a half?

AALIYAH: What will you do if they don't come back? Send more people down there?

Pause.

PANCHALI: You said you're going to the council—

AALIYAH: If it were up to you.

PANCHALI: I… I would go down. Ko knows the way. He can tell me the way. Maybe come with me, if he's better.

AALIYAH: And we'd have four experienced Runners lost down there instead of just two.

PANCHALI: I can't send my people. Not again.

AALIYAH: You could not send anyone.

Pause.

PANCHALI: I can't leave them there. Two of my Runners, Ahi, your Digger—

AALIYAH: Those caves are not safe. Being leader is about making difficult choices. We aren't many to begin with Panchali. We can't lose more people.

PANCHALI: We haven't lost them yet. They are down there. All four of them. We can't abandon them. (*Pause*) I thought the Diggers never left anyone behind?

Pause.

AALIYAH: We don't.

PANCHALI: Neither do we. (*Beat*) I'm going to finish that. If you need to go to the council, do that. I won't… run away or anything.

AALIYAH: I don't think you will. I'll help.

They get to work, and move between the stage and the wings as they do.

AALIYAH: I've thought for a long time that Ahi should step down. But I never wanted him to do it, because I knew, he'd pick you to replace him. I thought you'd bring more of the same… or worse.

PANCHALI: That's fair.

AALIYAH: I think I was wrong. (*Pause*) Oh, and do you know where the kitchens are?

PANCHALI: Uh yes?

AALIYAH: Ghatam—(*Enter Ghatam*) That was strange. Ghatam, you'll be happy to know you won the bet. She knows where the kitchens are.

Ghatam attacks Panchali. Aaliyah manages to pull him off eventually.

AALIYAH: STOP!

GHATAM: The Runners attacked us at the wells.

PANCHALI: What?!

GHATAM: Don't pretend you didn't know. You lured Aaliyah here, while that Ko and your Runners tried to take the wells.

AALIYAH: You said Ko was sick. From being down there.

PANCHALI: He is. He was—

AALIYAH: Was all that a lie?

PANCHALI: No! No, I swear—

AALIYAH: What happened?

GHATAM: Her Runners came in, led by Ko, and they brought their prisoners—

PANCHALI: Prisoners?

GHATAM: Mariamma and that boy.

AALIYAH: Why?

GHATAM: They said the water was poisoned. They wanted us to stop digging. We refused.

PANCHALI: And they attacked you?

GHATAM: No. Mariamma's boy, he saw the water thieves and started talking really fast. He tried to tell us they were poisoned too. He said we were in danger. Some Runners tired to take our tools… then the fighting started. They tried to take our equipment, pull us out of the wells—it was like before, Aaliyah—but we didn't do anything! We are working for everyone—

PANCHALI: Ghatam, I do not know what happened, but no Runners want to take over the wells.

GHATAM: More lies. Poisoned water? And even if it was true, since when do the Runners care about us? Aaliyah, arrest her, and take her and all the Runners to the council!

PANCHALI: Aaliyah, I swear, I know nothing about this. I'll come with you to the council. I'll take responsibility. If my Runners did what he says, I'll make sure they make it right.

GHATAM: You?! You're a—

AALIYAH: Ghatam. Stop. I am coming. So is Panchali.

Enter Varun, out of breath.

PANCHALI: What have you done?!

VARUN: What—I haven't done anything!

PANCHALI: Did you use my Runners to start a rebellion in the Western Wells?

VARUN: Not purposely!

AALIYAH: What is this about poisoned water?

VARUN: It's true. Ko found water in the Deeper Wells, he drank it, and it made him sick. And that water, it's gotten into the water in the Western Wells. The water thieves are sick—

GHATAM: With sun sickness!

VARUN: They're the SAME THING! Mariamma was trying to tell them, but they didn't listen—

AALIYAH: It sounds ridiculous.

VARUN: There's a whole story—and there were these paintings on a wall, and a sign and—

AALIYAH: Panchali, do you believe him?

VARUN: Panchali—I'm telling you—it's all true.

PANCHALI: I… (*Pause*) Do you hear that?

A strange sound offstage. Everyone freezes.
It sounds like yelling, or maybe horrible groaning.
It's coming from the tunnels. Everyone reacts on instinct.

GHATAM: That's the entrance to the… to the… Kannam! That's Kannam!

PANCHALI: Get behind me—

VARUN: No, you don't understand! There's no monster—it's them! (*He rushes to the tunnel*)

REVATHI: (*Staggers forward pulling a half delirious Ahi along with her*) He's sick. You have to take him to the clinic.

PANCHALI: Rustam and Sheila—where are they?

REVATHI: I'm sorry. We couldn't help them.

Silence.

AALIYAH: Revathi, how did he fall sick?

REVATHI: What are you—

AALIYAH: Tell me how Ahi fell sick.

REVATHI: There was this cave, with some poison buried there. He drank the water in that cave.

GHATAM: It's true?

VARUN: I told you! Go! GO! I'll take care of Ahi. I promise. Aaliyah, Panchali, make them stop fighting.

PANCHALI: You can't carry him—

REVATHI: I'll take him. I have that much strength. Just need… a break. (*Panchali does not move*) I brought him all this way when I could have left him there. I won't let him die now. Just go. Stop… whatever is happening.

AALIYAH: Come on.

Aaliyah, Ghatam and Panchali exit.

VARUN: Should I give him something? He's very feverish.

REVATHI: At least he isn't raving anymore. No, we'll go. I just need a minute.

Silence. Then abruptly Varun hugs Revathi.

VARUN: I'm sorry-I'm sorry.

REVATHI: Don't be stupid. You've got nothing to be sorry about.

VARUN: I'm sorry you had to go down there for me.

REVATHI: I'm not. And let's be honest, I did it for me too.

VARUN: I… didn't think.

REVATHI: What?

VARUN: About what you might have wanted. I'd forgotten about how all you wanted before… Mamma died, was to be a Runner. I never really thought about what you gave up to be a Digger, so we could survive.

REVATHI: I didn't give up anything. I had no choice, Varun—I failed the trials. I'm not a hero. I know you think I'm Revathi the Fierce because I chased away mean children and found a way to survive the worst of the last six years, but I'm not—

VARUN: No… you aren't. I see that now… but you could be so much more. You already have been—for me. And I think you could be for other people too. Like you were for Ahi. You brought him back.

REVATHI: So Panchali wouldn't kill me. So, I could be a Runner.

VARUN: We could have always run away like you had planned to. You brought him back because you didn't want him to die.

REVATHI: … maybe. Come on, I did bring him all this way. Let's not have him die here.

VARUN: I'll do it.

REVATHI: He's heavy.

VARUN: I can manage. If you saw how much I ran today. And I shovelled earth too. I was very active.

REVATHI: You were?

VARUN: So much to do.

REVATHI: Like what?

VARUN: Tell me what happened down there first.

REVATHI: I saw a dhole.

VARUN: What?

REVATHI: I saw a dhole. A lot of dholes actually.

VARUN: Did you drink any of the—?

REVATHI: It was on our way back. We got lost, but there was a cave that opened out into the sky. I heard their cry and when I looked up, there they were. And then they called out to me like…

VARUN: Like what?

REVATHI: An invitation. Like they were saying (*Pause*) the world isn't dead.

Stage to black.

SCENE FOURTEEN

The Gates. Mariamma enters supporting a near-exhausted Ko.

MARIAMMA: I never should have let you go.

KO: It's done now.

MARIAMMA: Rest.

KO: I want to.

MARIAMMA: Have some of this.

KO: You always give me the worst medicines.

MARIAMMA: And you always get better. Come on. Sleep now.

Pause.

KO: Paati?

MARIAMMA: Yes?

KO: I don't think I can sleep.

MARIAMMA: You have to sleep.

KO: Tell me a story.

Pause.

MARIAMMA: Let me think… Oh I have a good one. Okay—it starts with a very stubborn Runner who makes a very stupid decision.

KO: I don't like this story.

MARIAMMA: No interruptions. He makes this very stupid decision and puts himself in danger, but ends up accidentally saving a lot of people.

KO: And everyone lives happily ever after?

MARIAMMA: It's not quite that easy.

KO: It never is in your stories.

MARIAMMA: But people start talking to each other again, and being less scared, and… they're trying.

Varun enters.

VARUN: Okay, here we are. Where's everyone else?

Panchali enters.

PANCHALI: They're on their way.

Aaliyah enters.

AALIYAH: Where's your sister?

VARUN: She'll be here.

PANCHALI: She didn't already go outside, did she?

VARUN: Why would she do that?

PANCHALI: Because she's an idiot.

AALIYAH: I convinced her to wait. Till we were properly prepared. You have the maps, Mariamma?

MARIAMMA: (*Joins them*) Varun, you better not be thinking of going too.

KO: Like we'd let him. He'll talk us to death.

VARUN: I resent that.

Ahi enters.

AHI: He's not wrong.

MARIAMMA: Why are you here?

AHI: I thought everyone was allowed to watch? Do our new leaders object?

AALIYAH and PANCHALI: No.

KO: You're going back? Down there?

AHI: Varun seems to think we should try to seal it up.

PANCHALI: And I agree with him.

AHI: I don't think we can, but I'm not the boss any more.

Revathi enters.

REVATHI: And how relieved we all are.

VARUN: Be nice.

AHI: Your sister doesn't know how.

KO: Open the Gates. Before they start fighting.

They do and as it opens sunlight spills across the cave floor.
They step into the light, one after the other.

VARUN: It's so bright.

PANCHALI: I still think it looks dangerous.

MARIAMMA: Nonsense.

KO: I can run in that.

AALIYAH: It's been a long time since I've seen the sky.

REVATHI: It isn't what I thought it would be. The sunlight.

AHI: I'd forgotten.

REVATHI: It's warm.

The stage goes to black.

The End.

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

A PLAY

by

AMULYA B

CHARACTERS

In order of appearance:

THE MAN (MANJU)

THE WOMAN (ABBALIGE)

BOY

NAGAPPA

KIDS

YOUNG MANJU

YOUNG ABBALIGE

SARALA

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

MOTHER

ASHA

PROLOGUE

THE GREAT FLOOD

The errors in the multiples
will return as terrors and tears
Sure, that's clear, clever seers
did not know how to read
the signs
and dug the mines
and sowed the seeds
for an inevitable eventuality.

Let every free-flowing river
be dammed and damned
The pursuit for power
is our destiny.

Will there ever be a mutiny?

SCENE 1
MUSEUM OF LOST OBJECTS

While the stage is still in darkness, there is the sound of something being wound up.

As the light slowly fades in, a middle-aged man sits in the middle of the stage with a toy in his hand. A butterfly, the size of his palm. With every turn of the key, it suddenly lights up, only to go dark again.

With every turn, he stops briefly, as though to inspect everything is alright and he hasn't broken anything by mistake.

Around him, there are multiple shelves. Many of them are filled with a variety of trinkets, from globes and telephones to bricks, fountain pens, earrings, shoes etc.

A woman enters.

THE WOMAN: You need to make it tighter.

She comes closer and takes the butterfly from his hand. She puts in the crank and turns it twice confidently. The butterfly lights up and takes a small flight before landing back in the man's hand.

THE MAN: You were always braver than me.

THE WOMAN: How is it bravery when you know the exact outcome? So, will you let it go?

THE MAN: (*Looking at the butterfly in his palms*) No, this is not ready yet.

THE WOMAN: Yes, it is!

THE MAN: It looks ready, but it isn't ready.

THE WOMAN: So, you won't?

THE MAN: No, I won't.

The Man carefully takes the butterfly and keeps it on the nearest shelf.

THE WOMAN: Till when?

THE MAN: Until I'm a 100% sure that they have enough strength to fly for hours without interruption. Like real butterflies.

THE WOMAN: You can never compare a living thing with millions of years of evolution on its side with a man-made thing.

THE MAN: … who also has evolution on his side. I mean look at us… Look at us… haven't we as a species, technologically evolved at an incredible scale? I'm making sure its battery will not run out, even if it encounters weeks without proper sunlight, which… is a real possibility.

THE WOMAN: Whatever you do, it will never interact with its environment like a living thing does…

THE MAN: It will… that's what I'm doing here. It will perform all the functions that a real butterfly would have done. Maybe these butterflies will not roost like the real ones. But they will pollinate.

One day, all the lost plants submerged under the water will be back. I know that my butterflies would have played a big role in that. Mark my words...

Hey, do you hear a knocking?

THE WOMAN: No.

But... a butterfly is not born, is it? It becomes one. It has to undergo the process of metamorphosis. From caterpillar to pupa and then adult. Without going through these stages your butterflies will remain what they really are: mini metal drones.

The man slowly wipes the dust off the butterflies on the shelves.

THE MAN: What do you want?

THE WOMAN: Why do you think I want something?

THE MAN: You're needlessly cruel when you want something from me.

THE WOMAN: Not true.

THE MAN: Then let me get back to work before you start yelling again. Wait a minute…

The Man's attention is completely focused on the butterflies on the shelves. He senses that something is wrong.

THE WOMAN: The woman with the broken wrist called again. Are you listening? Yes, you're right, I want something. Hello!

THE MAN: I think, we are missing some.

THE WOMAN: What?

THE MAN: I think we are missing some.

THE WOMAN: Where? What? One of the lost objects? Many of the lost objects?

THE MAN: The butterflies, I'm sure there were more.

THE WOMAN: Your butterflies? I'm trying to tell you something important here…

THE MAN: With a single glance I can tell, we are missing some. Should I count? I think I'm going to count.

The Man begins to count.

THE WOMAN: Anything can be an excuse for not cleaning the cupboards…

THE MAN: Or if they are switched on, I can check the GPS, yes!

The woman stops him.

THE WOMAN: I wish you paid the same attention to REAL, LOST objects as you do to your butterflies. You know what happens when the lost objects start gathering dust, right?

THE MAN: Yes, yes, the people who have lost them might forget about them. But, seriously, we are missing some butterflies.

THE WOMAN: When you forget about something…?

THE MAN: What? Oh…It's as good as permanently lost.

THE WOMAN: So?

THE MAN: I need to pay equal attention to all the objects here. You tell me this every week, so don't torture me now.

THE WOMAN: Because every week, instead of cleaning, you end up sitting with your butterflies.

Now, as I was saying… the woman—

THE MAN: Why don't you help me then? All you do is complain.

THE WOMAN: Ah, would you like to deal with the clients then?

The Man shakes his head as if terrified at the prospect.

THE WOMAN: Ah, I thought so. You deal with these objects here and I will deal with the seekers of these objects. Isn't that what we agreed on?

THE MAN: It's just that I don't know how to react when people…

THE WOMAN: Cry?

THE MAN: Yeah… I feel uncomfortable when they do not find their lost objects here and start pestering us to go find them. We are not detectives!

THE WOMAN: I would rather be outside hunting them down, if I knew how to find them. I don't know how you sit within these walls all the time.

THE MAN: It's easy. With all these objects around from different times, I feel timeless.

THE WOMAN: Yet, you have very less time for any objects other than your precious butterflies.

THE MAN: You know why.

THE WOMAN: You can wipe them as much as you want. You can make them as nearly perfect as the real thing. But, no one is going to come and claim them.

THE MAN: But they are lost too.

THE WOMAN: They are not lost. No one owns them. Even you, who built them, do not own them. Because you built them from the memory of the real things. You want to make them as perfect as the real things. You want

them to move as the real things. Perform natural functions as the real things.

THE MAN: Since these butterflies are only close to the real ones, they do not belong here—is that what you're saying?

THE WOMAN: All I'm saying is that, treat them as what they are. Objects—replicas of lost species of butterflies. Nothing more. Once you realise that, you will be ready to let them go.

THE MAN: I can feel every lost object here trying to connect with its seekers. With people to whom they belong. Right? You feel it too, I know.

Same with the butterflies. I can feel them trying to reach their seekers. What if they are missing because someone is calling out to them?

THE WOMAN: Or maybe these seekers whom you feel are none other than our own clients begging you to let them use the butterflies.

On that note, as I have been trying to say this whole morning, that woman with the broken wrist, Asha? She called again. I did not receive the call of course, knowing what she was going to ask. But, I won't be able to ignore her calls for much longer. We run this business on trust, and if she starts bad-mouthing us then… (*Beat*). Why can't we try sending the butterflies...

THE MAN: Because they are mine. I built them. From my memory. I will decide what to do with them and when they are ready to venture out.

THE WOMAN: She is desperate. She just wants to know if there is anything left… that's all. It will take hardly a week. You just have to put in the location and the butterflies will do the rest. They will look around, record if there is anything or is it just wa…

THE MAN: It is just water! Everywhere! You know that. You think I don't know that you check the satellite images every day?

THE WOMAN: That's different. Satellite images may miss things. They tend to do that.

THE MAN: I can't just give the butterflies away…

THE WOMAN: What are you saving them for, if not to see whether there's any hint of vegetation left? For some invisible force to seek them? This is an opportunity for all those who are looking for life post-The Great Flood. Even for you this is a great opportunity, don't you think?

THE MAN: I know how much she would have liked to find something more: a tree, a building, even just the remnant of that dam built by her grandfather. The man, the legend, the reason we are in the state we are!

THE WOMAN: Don't. Don't do this.

THE MAN: Why, even I would have loved to find just a piece of the bench where my father and I used to sit and look at the backwaters. Or even a piece of that red Mangalore roof tile that our school was roofed with. Or even a single leaf of the plants grown from the seeds that my mother saved from the first submergence.

But, nothing. Nothing exists anymore. Thanks to her grandfather.

Please tell that woman… sometimes all you get is a half-broken piece of brick and she is lucky than most others for having got that.

Beat.

THE WOMAN: There is nothing wrong in being hopeful. You know that. Your butterflies can give her some hope. If they, with their small and nimble bodies which can surveil the entire water mass, can't find any proof of past life there, she would admit defeat, I think. She can then have closure… but only if you let them out.

THE MAN: You are back at it again. Even if I keep my personal feelings aside, the fact remains that it is not our job to find lost objects. We are safe inside these walls. Outside these walls, we are not. We are not finders. We are not a search party. We are just mediators between the lost objects and their owners. We do not search for things, we do not search for the owners of the things we have. What we do is we keep ourselves ready. To give a home to objects that are lost until their rightful owners come and find them. What they do with them after claiming them is none of our business. Things turn up. People who claim to own them turn up. They talk to each other. We are just the hosts for both groups.

THE WOMAN: Where in this equation do your butterflies fit? If you're not going to use your butterflies to help someone, then don't keep them here. It irritates me.

THE MAN: The butterflies? What have they ever done to you?

THE WOMAN: They tell me that I can never return home because you're stubborn.

THE MAN: You don't need the butterflies to tell you that.

THE WOMAN: Let them be free, let's take a chance. They may tell us what is out there.

You know, I was reading this post on the internet, that the water is slowly receding… and… and… small patches of land mass are now visible… You have to go look during this one week in April… you know, even many extinct birds are being spotted…

THE MAN: (*Looking at the shelves*) I don't even think I have the authority to make that decision anymore…

THE WOMAN: What do you mean?

THE MAN: It may be nothing… but you know how sometimes we can feel something happening with the lost objects…? As if they are getting ready to be reunited with whom they belong…

I feel the same way with the butterflies…

THE WOMAN: But, they don't belong to anyone… whom will they return to?

THE MAN: That's what… but anyway, this is just my feeling… We need to get back to our weekly cleaning session. I can feel these lost objects losing hope of ever being found.

THE WOMAN: Maybe it's the people who need them.

THE MAN: Huh?

THE WOMAN: People who have lost something. Maybe the butterflies are getting ready to meet them—those people can use the butterflies to find what they have lost!

THE MAN: Oh.

THE WOMAN: Do you remember that day, when everything we knew was gone? Before we came here? So far away from the land below?

Both of them try to look through the nearest window. With disappointment on their faces, they turn away.

THE MAN: I don't even know how the soil feels anymore. What the colour brown looks like.

THE WOMAN: When they airlifted us, all I could see was water and all I could hear was the deafening sound of the blades of the helicopter: turning, turning, turning. No villages, no trees, no forests. I went numb.

You were crying so much… Your cheeks had turned coarse because of the dried tears. You cried, but not out of fear… Everything we knew was gone in an instant, and you were crying for things lost.

Later, when the officials visited us, you asked them for your home back as they stood there in stunned silence.

(*The Woman picks up a butterfly, puts a small key in a shaft in the hind side of the butterfly and turns it twice*) What a brave boy you were! Brave! I don't think you remember him any more.

(*As she speaks, the butterfly flies from and lands on the hands of a boy no older than 13 years old, standing*

in the corner of the stage with a backpack. The Boy stares at the butterfly in his hand) Who is that?

THE MAN: Hey boy, how did you come here?

THE WOMAN: Where are your parents?

THE BOY: (*He lifts up his head from the butterfly to look at them*) I think I'm lost.

Lights off.

SCENE 2
WHAT'S IN A NAME? EVERYTHING!

As the light fades in, The Boy stands near the table where The Man was working, inspecting the toys. The Man and The Woman stand on the other side of the stage, occasionally looking at the boy.

THE WOMAN: This hasn't happened to you before, right?

THE MAN: Why are you asking as if this concerns only me? You are not new. You have always been here. Since the beginning.

THE WOMAN: I know. But, this is…

THE MAN: To tell you the truth, I have often wondered.

THE WOMAN: About what?

THE MAN: Why we always deal with lost objects. Why not lost humans? Even humans get lost, don't they?

THE WOMAN: Yes, especially children.

THE BOY: Do you have something to eat here?

THE MAN: (*A momentary pause, as if flabbergasted. Pointing off stage*) The fridge is inside.

The Boy exits.

THE MAN: Is this what you meant by saying more and more things are getting lost? That we need more space? Because if that's the case, space will not be the only problem. We will have to stuff our fridge too.

THE WOMAN: Have you been checking the kind of emails we get now? Lot of emails from worried parents… whose children have suddenly vanished into thin air... they call, they mail asking the same thing: whether their children have ended up here.

THE MAN: Just a minute…what's that knocking?

THE WOMAN: What knocking? I don't hear anything…

THE MAN: I swear I heard something.

THE WOMAN: Anyway, it seems we may have to expand our line of business. We may not only be the Museum of Lost Objects anymore. We may become a Museum of Lost Children too.

THE MAN: Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?

THE WOMAN: Honestly, I did not take it seriously. I was not sure until this boy…

The Boy enters with a bowl in his hand.

THE BOY: You should sauté it first.

THE MAN: Sorry?

THE BOY: You have just mixed rice and curd. That is not curd rice. You have to sauté the sesame seeds, red chilies and then pour the mixture into the rice and the curd, then mix it thoroughly. Didn't your parents teach you?

THE MAN: Our parents? Where are *your* parents?

THE BOY: So this is where lost objects like me end up…

Tries to touch the objects in the shelves.

THE MAN: Don't touch them!

THE BOY: So, speaking as a lost object… how will I know?

THE MAN: How will you know what?

THE BOY: When my mother is going to be here.

THE MAN: So, you live with your mother?

THE BOY: Yeah, in one of the towers like this in…in Sag- or Sam- or something from 'sa'…

THE WOMAN: It's okay, don't worry if you don't remember.

THE BOY: Is it normal to forget like this?

THE WOMAN: Normal? I don't know what that means anymore. What is normal, according to you?

THE BOY: Being anywhere but in a creepy place like this.

THE MAN: Hey!

THE BOY: … and always remembering who you are and where you come from. Clearly, this is not normal.

THE WOMAN: Do you remember your mother?

THE BOY: I think so… She is not too tall, not too short. Maybe medium height. She tells me that soon I'm going to grow so tall that she will have to look up… She can cook really fast! Once, she made this light saaru using one of the raw seasonal fruits in precisely 6.5 minutes. I timed her, so I'm not lying. She also drapes

a saree in precisely 2 minutes 45 seconds! Isn't that impressive? She likes the colour black and her hand... no, her face…

THE MAN: Why are you asking him whether he remembers his mother?

THE WOMAN: The sooner we find his parents, the quicker he will leave. Or are you planning to keep him here forever, like some of these objects?

THE MAN: Yeah… I'm just not used to lost objects talking about their seekers… or for that matter, even just talking…

THE BOY: Seekers?

THE WOMAN: Yes, in order to be found, every lost object has to have a seeker.

THE BOY: So you are saying that my mother needs to come and find me first. I cannot go and look for her.

THE WOMAN: Technically, you can. But, this is how things have been working here till now.

THE MAN: Again, you are the first living lost object to end up here. So I don't think those rules apply to you anymore.

THE BOY: What about these butterflies then? Are they too lost objects?

THE MAN: In a way, yes. But, they are replicas. Of real lost objects.

THE BOY: Has anyone come for them?

THE MAN: No.

THE BOY: Will anyone come for them?

THE MAN and THE WOMAN: We don't know.

THE BOY: Do you think someone will come for me?

THE WOMAN: What's your name?

THE BOY: Name? I don't remember.

THE WOMAN: What do you last remember?

THE BOY: Just my mother…Her hand…her face….

THE MAN: (*To the woman*) Don't you think he is hiding something?

THE WOMAN: (*To the boy*) Why don't you finish eating? We will talk after that, okay? There should be some fruits too in the fridge.

While The Boy brings a bowl of food from inside, sits and eats, The Man and The Woman talk at the other end of the stage.

THE MAN: Don't look at me.

THE WOMAN: I'm not saying anything.

THE MAN: He is lost, that's for sure. He has ended up here, that is also true. But…

THE WOMAN: What?

THE MAN: I get the feeling that he is hiding something.

THE WOMAN: Do you doubt that he is lost?

THE MAN: Not at all! That's one thing I'm certain of—that he is lost.

THE WOMAN: You do understand why, right? (*Beat*) Do you remember, how we too forgot our names… when the village was submerged?

THE MAN: That was different.

THE WOMAN: How?

THE MAN: We got our names back.

THE WOMAN: But how many people use it? We don't even call each other by those names.

THE MAN: That's okay because I know what my name is, and you know yours.

THE WOMAN: Names are supposed to be used mainly by others… to recognize us, identify us and to call us… so that if we are lost we can hear them and find our way back, by using the sound of our names like a map! We have no one to call us by our names—what if we lose our names like this boy one day?

THE MAN: Names do not rust just because you stop using them. They can spring into life at any time! I'm sure when he is found, he will know his name again.

THE WOMAN: We were able to save our names because we saw it coming. The Great Flood. Waves that were taller than the tallest tree we knew. We saw it coming. Maybe not consciously. Maybe not in the way that it did. But we saw it. Those who live next to danger always anticipate danger. They always know, danger is just a second away, lurking.

THE MAN: What use is knowing, if you can't prevent bad things from happening.

THE WOMAN: Your mother really saved a lot of herbs and trees… that sustained us you know... for however short a time it was… people were really grateful to her.

THE MAN: What use did that do. The Great Flood inevitably came. Washed everything away. Including people's memories of her. Who is she anymore? She knew about the first submergence, she still died. Everyone knew that something like The Great Flood would come. No one survived but us, to look at this aftermath: where we live closer to the sky than to the ground, which is where we come from and where we need to return as humans.

THE WOMAN: Her heart was too soft. It beat for every creature alike—human or otherwise.

You know the herb I keep near the window sill? It is one of hers. If not for her, if she hadn't moved it from the island to the village before the first submergence, we would have lost it. Seeds from that plant grew into more plants, and looking for these new plants came the insects. With all of them came the stories. Thanks to the seeds from that plant from the island, so many were able to make a new home.

THE MAN: Since the first submergence, countless more have occurred and I'm sure are still occurring in some other part of this nation.

THE WOMAN: But we still remember our names:

MANJU, ABBALIGE

MANJU, ABBALIGE

MANJU, ABBALIGE

MANJU, ABBALIGE

We need to hold onto our names. I'm scared, Manju. What if we too lose our names like The Boy has?

THE MAN: That's not possible. Because we are not going to get lost again.

Because we are not stepping out.

THE WOMAN: Even if there is a chance of going back home?

THE MAN: The butterflies will tell us if it is safe first. So there's no chance of us getting lost. Also, the boy will be found, don't worry. He will have his name back soon.

THE WOMAN: Manju, the mist. Abbalige, the firecracker flower. Our names are our anchors.

What kind of names do they give children these days? They don't know about the western mountains. They don't know about the animals and plants that once lived. Before the freshwater and saltwater became one. Do you think their grandparents would have told them?

What kind of names do they give children these days? Key? Door? Sky? Sky's a nice name, actually. The sky is always here. Even if they get lost they can look up and no sooner they will be home. I don't think children named after the sky or even the sun will ever get lost.

THE MAN: What do we do with this lost one now? I cannot put him on a shelf and forget him.

THE WOMAN: We should do what we usually do. Let him be. Until a seeker, his mother comes.

The lost objects decide how they want to be found.

THE BOY: (*Enters with something in his hand*) What is this

fruit? Is it a fruit?

THE MAN: Wait, you need to peel it.

THE BOY: Oh, but it tastes fine with the peel.

THE MAN: Then eat it.

THE WOMAN: Do you want me to wash it for you?

THE MAN: He can do it.

THE BOY: I'm not a child. I can do it.

THE WOMAN: Of course. The sink is…

THE BOY: Next to the fridge, I saw. (*The Boy turns to leave, but turns back immediately*) Can you peel it for me, please?

THE MAN: You said you wanted to eat it without peeling!

THE BOY: I never said that. I just said it doesn't taste bad.

THE MAN: You can peel it yourself.

THE BOY: But, I'm a child. I don't know how to use knives to peel.

THE MAN: A child? You just said… How old are you anyway?

THE WOMAN: Let me do it.

The Woman takes the fruit from The Boy's hand, and asks The Man whether he wants it. The Man nods and The Woman exits, smiling. The Boy starts exploring the space—THE MUSEUM OF LOST OBJECTS.

THE BOY: What is this?

THE MAN: A butterfly.

THE BOY: What is its name?

THE MAN: *Pachliopta pandiyana*.

THE BOY: Pach…What?

THE MAN: *Pachliopta pandiyana*.

THE BOY: This?

THE MAN: *Papilio liomedon*.

THE BOY: This?

THE MAN: *Horaga viola*.

THE WOMAN: Just tell him the common name, for God's sake! (*She comes closer and picks up the butterflies that he had pointed out earlier*) This is the Malabar rose. This is the Malabar banded swallowtail. And this is my favourite… the brown onyx!

THE BOY: This is… plain, boring.

THE MAN: She likes things which are not flashy.

THE BOY: But I like it.

THE WOMAN: Yeah? You know why I like it? This speck here. It is like a drishti bottu.

THE BOY: Drishti bottu?

THE WOMAN: Yeah, do you know what that is? (*The Boy shakes his head*) It's a dot to evade the evil eye, especially drawn on cute or pretty babies. Didn't your mother do this to you, when you were younger?

THE BOY: Maybe, I don't remember. Maybe I was not a pretty baby.

THE WOMAN: Every baby is a pretty baby.

THE MAN: Not true, I have seen many ugly babies. And even more ugly children.

THE BOY: Are you calling me ugly?

THE MAN: We used to have this proverb, where we came from—'Kumbalakayi kalla andre…'

THE BOY: What's a kumabalakayi?

THE MAN: It's a vege- fru-… never mind.

THE WOMAN: When I was young, I could spot a brown onyx because of this speck. I used to think that God put this on the butterfly's wings so that it can evade the evil eye of children like us… who would otherwise catch it, and kill it… just for fun. Children can be really cruel at times…

THE MAN: It did not save it from going extinct though.

THE BOY: All these butterflies here are extinct?

THE MAN: Yes, they became extinct in The Great Flood.

THE BOY: Yes, I know The Great Flood! 'In 2028 AD, the union government approved the 17th hydroelectric project to dam the river Shyamala to benefit countless…'

THE MAN: We don't want to listen to that.

THE BOY: Why not?

THE MAN: Just because.

THE BOY: Why not?

THE MAN: Why should I?

THE BOY: I want to know.

THE MAN: You already seem to know everything from your textbooks.

THE BOY: Then I will continue. 'Many anti-national and anti-development forces came together, bombing the dam, killing millions of people in over hundreds of taluks across 4 districts…'

THE MAN: Everything you read in textbooks is not true.

THE BOY: You mean the bursting of the dam? It wasn't true? Are you one of those conspiracy nuts who believes that a government-sanctioned illegal quarry blast cracked the dam and caused the avalanche effect? Or do you believe that the continuous thunder and rain that had been going on for weeks was what caused the dam to burst? Or was it both? I didn't take you for a conspiracy nut at all. But now it all makes sense. Why you're so agitated all the time. It must be sad being a conspiracy nut—because no one believes you, and so you are sad all the time.

THE MAN: How? How can a 10-year-old speak so much!?

THE BOY: I'm not 10.

THE MAN: Then how old are you?

THE BOY: That's rude.

THE MAN: Why is that rude?!

THE BOY: You shouldn't ask young boys how old they are. Isn't there a proverb about how you should never ask someone's age.

THE MAN: THAT PERTAINS TO YOUNG WOMEN! AND NO ONE FOLLOWS THAT ANYMORE!

THE BOY: Oh, but I think it applies to young boys too.

THE MAN: No, it doesn't!

THE BOY: I think it should!

THE MAN: PROVERBS DON'T WORK LIKE THAT!

THE BOY: Aunty, did you both live during The Great Flood? Is that why he is angry with the textbooks?

THE WOMAN: It's just that… what we saw was different.

THE BOY: Whoa, so you did live during The Great Flood! How old are you people?! Ah, since you look after lost objects that can take decades, if not years, to be found, and you need to be here—so you are stuck here!

Am I right? Am I right? Whoa, this is fun!

THE MAN: Not for us.

THE WOMAN: You have to agree the boy is smart.

THE BOY: Wait a minute, if I spend more time here, will I too become stuck in time?

THE MAN: See, not so smart.

THE WOMAN: Even though you are in a space where time is a little bit wonky, your internal clock is running perfectly.

THE MAN: So, I hope you don't decide to stay here, because you will still age.

THE BOY: Why would I? I know my parents will find me. (*Beat*) Aunty, do you think I will be found? Or will I be lost like the butterflies?

THE MAN: Do you want me to prepare a shelf for you? We can, just give us some time. But once you are in there,

the refrigerator will be out of reach.

THE WOMAN: Not everybody here is lost. Lots of people come here to retrieve their lost objects. It's as if the objects call out to whomsoever they belong. So, if you too do that, if you really wish for your mother to come and collect you, she will surely come.

THE BOY: Oh, for that she should know that I'm truly lost, right?

THE WOMAN: Why, is your mother so clueless that she won't even notice that her son is gone?

The Boy doesn't reply.

THE MAN: (*To The Woman*) Didn't I tell you, I think he is hiding something.

THE WOMAN: Hey, did I tell you about this lost boy here?

THE BOY: (*Pointing to The Man*) Him?

THE WOMAN: Yeah.

THE BOY: Him? He doesn't look like the lost kind.

THE MAN: Why? Do lost people have peculiar features? Like a horn or a tail or a mole on the face?

THE WOMAN: Let the boy be.

THE BOY: Hahaha! That would be really fun! But, that's not what I meant. You just seem like someone who would not get lost.

THE MAN: Oh, I did, alright. Quite often. No one could find me at all—at least for some time.

THE WOMAN: Only for some time.

THE MAN: Still, I hated being found. I didn't want to be found. If I was an object here, no one would ever find me.

Music starts playing. The stage slowly transforms from a closed space of the museum space into an open space of nature—green trees, blue sky and brown earth. A makeshift bus stand is nearby.

THE BOY: Why didn't you want to be found?

THE MAN: Because I loved being outside, then. Especially during the monsoon.

Light fades, music becomes louder.

SCENE 3

WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

Lightning and Thunder.

Hailstorm.

A group of kids with school bags hanging across their shoulders enter. Colourful umbrellas. Joyful atmosphere.

CHILDREN: It's the man on the white elephant
Who never arrives on time.

It's the man on the white elephant
Who always makes trees smile.

School is closed, teachers are long gone
Without the motor, our crops are being hosed!

Phone lines are out
and so are we!

No power in the sockets
but so many candles in our pockets!

When the man on
the white elephant arrives.

None of us stay inside
but ride, ride and ride.

This slippery land,
this silvery sand,

Let's go!
We gotta be outside!

It's the man on the white elephant,
who leaves as he comes:

Suddenly, he's here,
Suddenly, he's gone!

THE BOY: Whoa! Is this a real place? The leaves are so so green! And the water..! Are we here after The Great Flood…? Are there villages and islands under this water?

THE MAN: Not yet, this is the reservoir. Though there are quite a few villages under this. Including the one I was born in.

THE WOMAN: Can you see the dam?

THE BOY: Whoa, that's huge!

THE WOMAN: So, all this water goes through there, through turbines to generate electricity.

THE BOY: I know, but this does not look like a river at all.

THE MAN: Because the river is meant to be in flow. Here, it's not. There are no currents underneath… just lost homes and memories.

THE WOMAN: Look here, it has been raining for a few weeks now and you can see the reservoir has reached its limit. The gates are going to be opened.

THE BOY: I wish we were on the other side. Why are we here again?

The children resume playing, a man with a black umbrella—Nagappa—arrives.

NAGAPPA : **Oh, where has this boy gone! Why can't he come home straight… Isshii …how can this be the April rain! This boy needs to be taught a lesson… can't he see his father is no longer young? He can't run around the whole town looking for him.**

Oye, makkale, have you seen Manju anywhere?

THE BOY: (*Interjecting*) Wait a minute, your name's Manju?

THE MAN: Why does that surprise you? Did you think I had no name?

The BOY: No, but I did not think that you would have such an… ordinary name.

THE MAN: Ordinary? Ordinary?

THE BOY: Yeah, also very old-fashioned. Who names their kid Manjunatha anymore?

THE WOMAN: Those who are fond of gods or grandfathers.

THE MAN: My name is not Manjunatha though. It is Manju! Manju! MANJU!!!!!

CHILD 1: **Uncle, we really don't know.**

CHILD 2: **It's better you look closer to the viewing point.**

CHILD 3: **I think he was swimming.**

NAGAPPA : **Swimming?! What is with this boy! Why does he come to play here?! It's dangerous.**

A boy around 12 years old, with an untucked shirt and foggy, wet glasses enters.

YOUNG MANJU: **Oh, oh, who is it yelling my name like there is no tomorrow?! Can't even pee in peace, what is it, what is it you duffers?! (*Manju removes his foggy glasses and wipes them using the hem of his untucked shirt. As he wears them, the other kids push him forward, and run away. Young Manju almost bumps into his father*) Appa!**

NAGAPPA: **I told you, I told you to come straight home, you know how worried I was.**

YOUNG MANJU: **Sorry Appa, sorry Appa, I was… I was… coming toward home only…, but…**

NAGAPPA: **Home? Home is in the other direction.**

YOUNG MANJU: **Yes, Yes, but, but I got lost Appa, ask anyone…**

NAGAPPA: **Who? Your friends? Not here anymore. You're coming with me.**

THE BOY: I like your father.

THE WOMAN: He was very likeable.

THE BOY: (*Pointing to The Man*) This is him getting lost?

THE WOMAN: Uh-huh.

THE BOY : Unimpressive.

THE MAN: Huh.

THE BOY: When you are really lost, no one can find you that easily. If you're found easily, then you were not really lost.

THE MAN: Did you pick this up from some daily quote app or something?

THE WOMAN: I know it does not look like it, but he was still lost in a way. So was his father.

THE MAN: We were?

THE WOMAN: You were.

THE BOY: So, this story has not ended.

THE WOMAN: Not at all. (*Holds his hand*) Let's go.

THE BOY: Where are we going?

YOUNG MANJU: Where are we going?

NAGAPPA: To the DC office and you are coming with me.

YOUNG MANJU: But, but… the bus will be sticky and dirty… I won't get a seat to sit…

NAGAPPA: You should have thought about that before getting caught miles away from home roaming like a vagabond! Now, come on!

YOUNG MANJU: But, won't the office be closed, because of rains?

NAGAPPA: (*Sarcastically*) You'd think it would be, that they'd have better things to do. Come and stand here, don't get wet.

YOUNG MANJU: (*Murmurs under his breath*) He can spend hours staring at the water, but if I do that... or just take a dip…he gets all…

NAGAPPA: What did you say?

YOUNG MANJU: Nothing, nothing Appa, nothing at all.

As Appa and Young Manju stand in front of the bus shelter with their umbrellas in their hands, lights fade. The sound of rain continues to grow.

SCENE 4

A GIRL'S WORLD

The sound of rain from the previous scene continues. Surrounded by water everywhere, a girl of around 12 years old sits on a raised platform, playing with a set of wooden animals. There are different kinds of plants and trees surrounding her, especially the Crossandra infundibuliformis whose reddish orange flowers are everywhere, and most visible amid all the foliage.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Maara, Kariya, Pacche.

Once upon a time, the three friends set off on a journey... armed with nothing but the knowledge of navigation. Maara knew how to trace and follow the invisible trails of animals in the air. Kariya always found a way with the help of stars in the sky. Pacche could follow the roots of the trees that spread in the underland.

THE BOY: Whoa, this place looks like the museum! But more…

THE WOMAN: Colourful?

THE BOY: Yes! Also, it's very wet here… and sticky.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Have you ever seen a butterfly sit?

THE BOY: Are you talking to me?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: (Looking at The Boy) Yes. Maara wants to know.

THE BOY: Maara?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Yes, this is Maara.

THE BOY: Oh, okay… you are playing with dolls. Aren't you a little bit old… (*The Man nudges him*).

THE WOMAN: It's okay… I was a peculiar child… who sought comfort in making up stories… Stories in which the heroes always managed to find their way...

THE BOY: Sit? Butterfly? No, I don't think so. They are not common where I live… not anymore.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: They open their wings, only to close them again. As if to hide their beautiful and intricate patterns from the world.

THE BOY: Do you think they fear the world?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: I think they still think of themselves as caterpillars—ugly, afraid to be crushed. Even when they become butterflies, they still carry that fear and insecurity. That's why I like moths better than butterflies. Moths are not afraid of night. Actually, I don't think they are afraid of anything. They willingly go toward light, only to burn to the ground.

THE WOMAN: That's stupidity, not bravery. I do not know where I got such ideas from.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Who do you think is more free? The moth or the butterfly? Who do you think the friends should follow?

THE BOY: Is this you asking?

Nagappa enters with Young Manju. At the other end of the stage an office

environment comes into view, the sounds of rain are now overpowered by the sounds of typing, loud laughter and rustling paper.

NAGAPPA: Abbi, why are you here alone, where is your mother?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: I'm not alone.

NAGAPPA: Manju, stay with her okay.

Nagappa goes inside the DC office.

YOUNG MANJU: You're weird.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: You are also weird.

YOUNG MANJU: How am I weird?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: How am I weird?

YOUNG MANJU: Are you just repeating what I'm saying?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: No, it's Kariya, he is tired. He can't see the sky because it is cloudy.

YOUNG MANJU: Yes, because it is raining.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: He is worried.

YOUNG MANJU: Why?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Because last night he saw the rain star off its position. He doesn't think this rain will stop.

YOUNG MANJU: Then Kariya is mistaken. Didn't we learn about rain last year?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Yes, I know about the water cycle. But, they don't. Shh… What?

YOUNG MANJU: What happened? (*Chiding*) Are your dolls saying something?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Maara says the animals are shrinking, Pacche says the leaves of the trees are becoming broader.

YOUNG MANJU: That's not…

Rain starts pouring heavily.
On the other side of the stage Nagappa, DC and Sarala are talking animatedly.

DC: I knew the rain would not bother you at all, Nagappa! But still I was hopelessly hoping that you wouldn't come! I'm just joking, of course. (*Laughs*) Don't mind, okay!

NAGAPPA: It is bothering us, saar.

DC: What?

NAGAPPA: The rain.

DC: Ahh!! (*Laughs*) Of course, of course. It bothers all of us!

SARALA: Before it never used to— we could predict it. Now rain is a stranger to us, who arrives when he wants to and leaves a trail of destruction. You should come and see our crops, DC saar.

Beat.

DC: I have told you both again and again, once the money is released, it will reach you.

NAGAPPA: It's been six years since the compensation was announced. And now we hear one more hydropower plant is going to come up. How many more villages are going to be submerged again?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Father got it for me the last time he came. From the city.

YOUNG MANJU: And you named them?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: No, they told me their names were Maara, Kariya and Pacche.

YOUNG MANJU: (*Trying to look inside the office*) Are they shouting at each other again?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: No more than usual. I don't think this can be called shouting. It is arguing.

YOUNG MANJU: How do you know?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Amma told me.

YOUNG MANJU: Don't you know parents lie?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: My mother doesn't.

THE BOY: Aww, you both were cute… Lost, but cute.

THE WOMAN: We were then living in a place that had a real possibility of being lost…

THE MAN: Every year many scientists would come… They would discover new species of frogs, spiders, snakes… These were the common critters we had seen growing up. None of us knew that they were unclassified and unidentified by science.

THE WOMAN: But, the more they found, the more we lost every year. Our world was disappearing in front of our own eyes.

THE MAN: For some of us, it was not slow. In an instant, our whole world disappeared.

DC: It was really sad what happened to your wife, Nagappa. But you can't blame that on the dam.

SARALA: DC Sir, please. Let's not get into that. We are here for the compensation money that was promised. Nagappanna, I have no idea about another power plant and honestly, I don't want to know also. I need to send Abbi to high school. I need that money.

NAGAPPA: I understand Sarala, but there is an imminent danger of history repeating itself if we let one more plant be built. Who knows, they may wish to shift us again…

SARALA: Shifting again? Who is shifting again. Let them try, I say!

DC: Whoa, whoa, hold your horses there Nagappa. Nothing has been decided yet. We don't know how much land is going to be submerged, where exactly the plant is going to come up. There is no blueprint as of yet.

NAGAPPA: But, the papers are saying…

DC: Who cares about papers, they say things like this all the time. But, nothing has been decided yet, okay? Go home, it is going to be a difficult night for all of us, let the rain god have mercy upon us.

THE BOY: What happened to…

THE MAN: My mother? Ah, she died, in the first submergence.

NAGAPPA : Sarala, can you do me a favour, can you look after Manju for some time?

SARALA: Of course, Anna. Abbi, Manju, come on, I will make you some hot-hot jackfruit chips!

(*To Nagappa*) Make sure you don't get drenched okay?

THE MAN: Do you remember the crossword that used to come on the last page of that…?

THE WOMAN: The children's supplement with the newspaper?

THE MAN: (*Speaks as if distracted*) Living with my father was... like a long crossword that looked temptingly straightforward and easy at a glance… but on a closer look, impossible to solve. I don't know whether he was any different when my mother was alive…

Beat.

THE BOY: I like crosswords too!

YOUNG ABBALIGE: (*Looking at her dolls*) They also like crosswords!

THE MAN: Why is that I'm the only one hearing this knock… noise… or whatever it is!

Suddenly, a sound akin to the burst of crackers is heard and everyone including The Man is startled.

THE BOY: Whoa, what is that?

YOUNG MANJU: Whoa, what is that?

THE MAN: This isn't the noise I was referring to!

YOUNG ABBALIGE: That's abbalige.

YOUNG MANJU: You mean, you? It's you who made the noise?

SARALA: No, no, that's the abbalige plant Manju, don't you know it?

Young Manju shakes his head.

SARALA: That's the plant Abbi is named after. Actually, it was your mother who suggested it.

YOUNG MANJU: My mother?

SARALA: Yeah! The abbalige seed pods burst as if to signal the arrival of rains. Since this one was born on a night when the abbalige seed pods were bursting like anything, your mother named her after the flower, abbalige.

THE BOY: It looks like your father chose your name.

YOUNG MANJU: It looks like my father chose my name. Where is he?

THE MAN: The viewing tower near the backwaters. Staring at the waters. As if our sunken village is going to emerge like amrita, thanks to his gaze. With it, my mother.

SARALA: Your mother. Your mother named you too. If I think about it… she was quite good at it. Giving the right names to people. Do you want to know about yours?

YOUNG MANJU and THE BOY: Yes!

SARALA: Abbi, do you want to?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: No, I want to play.

SARALA: Why?! You love stories!

YOUNG ABBALIGE: I want to play with Maara, Kariya and Pacche.

SARALA: You can do that too, come on let's go and get home before the rain gets worse.

Come on, let's go, go, go! But, slowly, slowly…

Sarala, Young Manju and Young Abbalige exit. A muffled sound that is somewhere between a pod burst and a knock is heard in repeated intervals.

THE BOY: What is that?! Abbalige!

THE WOMAN: I'm not doing anything.

THE BOY: No, is it the plant? The pods?

THE MAN: So, you hear it, you hear it too!

THE WOMAN: Is this the sound you have been going on and on about since morning?!

THE MAN: Yes, yes! Finally—so I was not imagining it. Where is it coming from? Where is it?

THE BOY: (*Pointing to the shelves*) It's from there.

SCENE 5

ALL LOST THINGS WANT TO BE FOUND

The Man, The Woman and The Boy are standing next to different shelves, looking at different objects.

THE WOMAN: Why do you think one of these things are responsible?

THE MAN: They desperately want to be not lost. They want to be found. Maybe they sense that they can escape and find their seekers themselves. I don't know… I don't know…

THE BOY: I think…

THE WOMAN: But, have they ever done something like this? Have any of the objects tried to escape?

THE MAN: They haven't. Because they trust the finders. Those responsible for them. Those who care for them. Those whom they belong to. You have seen the way they fit so well! The lost objects and their seekers. We open the shelves and even before we touch them, the objects are already in the hands of their seekers. There is a power at work here. Something like horizontal gravity!

THE WOMAN: But, nothing has moved, has it?

THE MAN: No—the clocks are intact… so are the bones… the knives... bayonets…

THE BOY: (*Standing next to the butterfly shelves*) Uhh… I…

THE WOMAN: Can they be…?

THE MAN: Wait a minute.

They rush towards the butterfly shelf, where all the butterflies are in disarray, but motionless.

THE MAN: I told you, there were many missing.

THE WOMAN: But, they are not really lost... they shouldn't be going anywhere. It's as if a piece of wood is being attracted by a magnet… Maybe it's the power of seekers... like that woman with a broken wrist.

THE BOY: Woman with…?

THE MAN: Just one of our clients…

THE BOY: Oh… but you need to…

THE WOMAN: Then why do you think they have disappeared?

THE MAN: Someone, something… is calling out to them… not the seekers… Something that was dormant… but has now awoken…

THE WOMAN: You know how you sound?

THE MAN: What happened to you, you used to believe in all sorts of things? Remember your three friends who navigated using nature's clues? Maara, Pacche… and the other one.

THE WOMAN: They were dolls about whom I made up stories.

THE MAN: That's not what you told me.

THE WOMAN: I was a child, Manju.

THE MAN: Aren't you happy? The butterflies are moving! Isn't that what you wanted?

THE WOMAN: No, what I wanted... what I want, is to go home. You want to make excuses not to go because you're scared!

THE BOY: Hello! ABBALIGE! MANJU! CAN YOU JUST LISTEN TO ME?!

THE MAN and
THE WOMAN: WHAT?

THE BOY: Look! Here!

(*The Boy points at the shelf where the mechanical butterflies are kept. The Man and The Woman peer through the glass doors of the shelf. Suddenly, the remaining butterflies start twitching and flapping…*)

THE BOY: They are dying… they are dying. Please do something!

The Man opens the shelf, and as he reaches for one butterfly it flaps around furiously for a few seconds and then stops moving.

THE BOY: Is it okay? What happened?

THE MAN: I'm looking.

THE BOY: You can bring it back to life, right? Right? You can bring it back to life?

THE WOMAN: Hey boy, look at me. It's okay, it's okay. It hasn't died, it is not going to die. It is not alive. Nothing here is alive.

THE BOY: Not even me? You think I will die like this butterfly? Will I die because I ran away from home?

THE WOMAN: You ran away from home?

THE BOY: My mother, she got hurt because of me… So, I ran away… but…

THE MAN: …You changed your mind and wanted to go back home, then you couldn't find your way back.

Beat.

SARALA: (*Well into the story she was telling Young Manju and Young Abbalige*) They couldn't find their home back.

YOUNG MANJU and YOUNG ABBALIGE: Why?

SARALA: Because, everything was gone.

YOUNG MANJU: Everything?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: The island?

YOUNG MANJU: The butterflies?

SARALA: For the dam to be built, the island had to go under. With the island went the home of the butterflies. For years I saw butterflies flutter along the backwaters trying to search for their home. Every year they returned. "This year, my home will be there. This year, I can finally come home." But, no… They couldn't find their home.

The lights became brighter, though. More dams came up.

Next it was fishes' turn. To not be able to swim up the river to their homes. Many died getting stuck in the turbines. Many fish saw the blades of the turbines cut the fins of other fish. But they still came. Again and again and again…

Such is the tug of home: it prods you, it pulls you. But never leaves you alone.

THE BOY: I want to go home. Before I forget my mother. I want to go home, before it is gone.

YOUNG MANJU: I want to go home now.

SARALA: First, you are going to eat the chips I made for you. …Let's see whether they have cooled down.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Is it going to rain now?

YOUNG MANJU: It already is raining.

Sarala enters with a plate of chips, lights go off.

SARALA: Oho! What use is it living next to a power generator? The lamp's underside is always in darkness!

YOUNG MANJU: Maami, I need to see Appa.

SARALA: (*To herself*) He should have come by now.

YOUNG MANJU: Where is he?

THE BOY: Where is he?

THE WOMAN: The viewing tower near the backwaters. Staring at the waters. He was there when…

A loud blast is heard, and everything shakes as if they are in the middle of an earthquake. Abbalige, Manju and Sarala huddle together.

THE MAN: The viewing tower near the backwaters. Staring at the waters. He was there when… the dam burst.

Song from the prologue repeats:

THE GREAT FLOOD

The errors in the multiples
Will return as terrors and tears
Sure, that's clear, clever seers
Did not know how to read
the signs
and dug the mines
and sowed the seeds
for an inevitable eventuality.

Let every free-flowing river
Be dammed and damned
The pursuit for power
is our destiny.

Will there ever be a mutiny?

Lights off.

SCENE 6

SUCH IS THE TUG OF HOME

YOUNG MANJU: As the water broke through the concrete walls, its gravitational potential energy became kinetic energy…

THE MAN: …and it took every name, place, animal, thing with it.

THE WOMAN: For a while, we forgot who we were.

YOUNG MANJU: Mass, acceleration due to gravity, height.

THE MAN: We forgot where we were…

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Half mass times velocity square.

YOUNG MANJU: The Great Flood came.

THE WOMAN: We sat there for how long? Minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years?

As the Young Manju and Young Abbalige huddle together in a small piece of land, a figure appears sitting next to them.

YOUNG MANJU: The water is salty.

MOTHER: But, you don't need this water…

YOUNG MANJU: (*Looks up, sticks out his tongue*) This works?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: (*Imitating him*) This works.

YOUNG MANJU: Amma, will we be able to find our way back home?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: I'm asking Maara, Kariya and Pacche.

YOUNG MANJU: What else do you have in your pocket? Anything useful?

MOTHER: Don't be cruel, never be cruel Manju. You need to take care of each other.

YOUNG MANJU: ***You*** were supposed to take care of me. Where were you? Why did you go back, when you knew the village was going to be submerged at any moment?

MOTHER: There were things that I had to collect. Things I could not leave behind.

YOUNG MANJU: All non-human things.

MOTHER: Does that make them inherently less valuable? Less worthy of saving? I did not know at that time that the animals we had shared our lives with everyday for years would be abandoned like they were nothing... just because they were old and had no value.

You remember Gange? She was so protective of you when you were a baby—once she broke out of the shed when she saw you crying in the arms of your uncle, whom she had never before seen. She might have been a cow, but she was ours.

On that day, when I heard that all the domestic animals had been just abandoned, I knew… I took the old ferryboat to save as many as I could—cows, buffaloes, dogs. They stood there waiting... as if thinking, "Someone is going to come, someone is going to take us back with them…"

YOUNG MANJU: And none of you made it back. Did you think of me at least once, when you set out on that foolish journey?

MOTHER: Of course, I did. I knew you would be safe with your father. You did not need me at all.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Maara cannot see any creature. Kariya cannot see the stars. Pacche says there are no trees left anymore…

YOUNG MANJU: We will wait, like we always do. Someone will come.

MOTHER: When the rain stops, the mist clears, help will arrive. Then you will be able to see clearly.

YOUNG MANJU: Are you leaving…

MOTHER: No, I cannot leave, because I do not arrive anywhere to leave. When you need me, I will be here. Because I'm here (*Touches his chest*). And also here… (*Opening her arms out to hug him*).

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Where do we go Manju? Maara cannot see any creature. Kariya cannot see the stars. Pacche says there are no trees left anymore… Where do we go?

MOTHER: You were named after manju, the mist. The mist that blocked me from taking the road that would have led to both our deaths on the day you were born. You knew your way around…

You were named Manju, after the mist. The mist that settled as droplets on my skin, soothing me as I gave birth to you in the middle of nowhere.You knew your way around. You will always know your way around.

The sound of something turning quickly, cutting through the air.

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Do you hear that?

YOUNG MANJU: What?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Abbalige.

YOUNG MANJU: You?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: No, listen, the seed pods…

YOUNG MANJU: It is going to rain?

YOUNG ABBALIGE: Maybe not everything is lost…

The sound of helicopters, water rushing.

THE BOY: Did you find your way back home?

THE MAN: Yes, but not the home we knew.

THE WOMAN: But, a new home—up above—between land and sky.

THE BOY: Here?

THE MAN and
THE WOMAN: Here.

SCENE 7

NEW BEGINNINGS

THE BOY: Since then you have been here.

THE WOMAN: Yes, since then we have been here.

THE BOY: You volunteered. To be stuck in time.

THE MAN: So that we could go back home one day.

THE WOMAN: It has been decades since—I don't think we ever will.

THE MAN: But we continue to wait, without stepping out, living within these walls.

Once again, a bang, a knock is heard.

THE BOY: Look, the butterflies… See, I told you… I told you…

THE MAN: What do they want now? Wait a sec… (*He checks his tablet*) Three of them are on their traditional migratory routes back to the western mountains… Where their species are naturally found!

THE BOY: Oh really, show me! They are going home!

THE WOMAN: We should have let them go long back.

THE MAN: Then it wasn't the right moment. Now is the right moment because they have answered a call. If it's too early or too late, they will collapse like the metal contraptions that they actually are.

A woman with a broken wrist enters.

ASHA: I'm sorry, I have been knocking but no one answered, and I heard voices…

THE WOMAN: Oh, Asha, you shouldn't be here. It's a bad time actually, I have been trying to convince Manju about lending you the butterflies, but he is being…

ASHA: I'm not here for that… I have been calling because…

THE BOY: Amma…?

ASHA: Shashanka?

THE WOMAN: Shashanka? This boy's name is Shashanka?

THE BOY: Your hand…

ASHA: Yes, it's almost healed now. Please, please don't run away. I beg you.

THE BOY: But… Amma …Amma (*Starts crying*).

ASHA: Please, please don't run… It's okay… It's okay. I know you think this is your fault. But, it's not your fault child…

THE MAN: You said you ran away from home... was it because you were hurting your mother…?!

THE BOY: I started forgetting who I was and who she was. So, I would try to escape and she would stop me. I would climb down through a window just like this… And she would stop me. She hurt her wrist repeatedly…

THE WOMAN: You thought it was your fault that she was getting hurt.

THE BOY: It eventually became a cycle..I would see her broken wrist and immediately know it was my fault. So I would try to run again and she would get hurt

again… I never gave the wound a chance to heal.

ASHA: You don't know anything about where you come from, about the story of you.

Of course you are going to feel lost. Of course you will try to run. And of course, I will try to catch you and sometimes... accidents happen, okay? Don't worry about it…

Please don't run anymore, huh? Come here?

THE BOY: I'm sorry. I wanted to return as soon as I left. But I couldn't find my way back, Amma. I forgot who I was. I didn't even remember my name. Whenever I closed my eyes, all I could see was your blurry face and… your arm wrapped in bandages and a cast.

ASHA : It's okay paapu. It's okay. I named you Shashanka but I did not expect you to get lost on a new moon day.

THE MAN: Shashanka, that's a really nice name.

ASHA : I'm sorry for…

THE MAN: It's clearly okay, he wasn't that big a trouble anyway.

ASHA: No, not that. For asking you to part with some of your butterflies. I was desperate. I wanted to know my grandfather. I wanted to hear stories about him. That I could pass on to Shashanka, so that he would stop feeling so lonely and rootless. So that he would not think of running away. But, in pursuit of my treasure, I ignored what was yours. I'm sorry again.

THE WOMAN: It's alright. I'm glad the impetus for them to leave came from somewhere else. They have been there for some time now. It was time for them to leave. The time has come for them all to leave.

Once again the butterflies on the shelves start to move around, banging against the shelves.

THE WOMAN: Okay, that's it.

The woman opens the doors of the shelves and the butterflies take flight and fill the room.

THE MAN: What are you doing?

THE WOMAN: You were about to, I know. So calm down.

THE MAN: But, where do they want to go this badly? Are they following the other three along their traditional migratory path?

ASHA: If that's the case, then we are going to follow them!

THE BOY: We are?!

ASHA: Of course! I'm not going to tie you up anymore. I need to learn about my grandpa too. So, let's see till where we can go before the water stops us.

THE MAN: Then take this. (*He hands over the tablet*) I'm sure you will figure it out. If not you, Shashanka will.

ASHA: Are you, are you sure?

THE MAN: Yes, I held on to them for so long for what purpose I don't know. But, now that I see them fly towards the island, their home, I realise this is the purpose. We are all moving in the same direction, towards the same destination. We may arrive a little late though.

ASHA: Thank you, thank you, really, both of you!

THE MAN: Please, don't forget to tell us if you find something… of our home.

THE WOMAN: We will then follow you.

THE BOY: You will step out of this place then?

THE WOMAN: Of course, when we find our home, we will be ready to step out into the world again.

THE BOY: And you won't be stuck in time—time will start running again.

THE WOMAN: Yes!

THE MAN: Okay, it was nice meeting you. Don't get lost again and end up here.

THE BOY: Why?

THE MAN: We might not even be here.

THE BOY: What if I want to see you both?

THE MAN: Why would you want to see us? We are adults, go make friends of your own age.

THE WOMAN: Manju!

ASHA: We will leave then, thank you for all your help.

Asha and Shashanka exit with swarms of butterflies following them.

THE WOMAN: Suddenly, everything seems empty.

THE MAN: Suddenly everything seems peaceful.

THE WOMAN: You did not finish cleaning, did you? Look at the dust over there… These objects will never be found. They are lost in time, I know.

THE MAN: How short-lived that peace was.

THE WOMAN: What did you say?

THE MAN: Nothing. I hope the butterflies will remember me… I hope they will come back …bearing gifts.

THE WOMAN: I hope they do.

The End.

THE SOMETIMES RIVER
and
REMEMBER REMEMBER

Story: The Sometimes River — Nayantara Nayar

Remember, Remember — Amulya B

Design: Kanak Shashi

Editing: Vinatha Viswanathan

The Sometimes River: Nayantara Nayar, November 2022
Remember Remember: Amulya B, November 2022
The text is licensed under the Creative Commons license Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) as in https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

You may use the text in this book and share it with others for free distribution under a similar Creative Commons license as long as you credit the author and the publisher. The text cannot be changed in any way or used commercially. For any kind of permission for commercial use, you may contact the author through the publisher.

Developed as part of the ThinkArts Play/Write Residency.

Developed with financial support from the Parag Initiative, Tata Trusts.

First Edition: November 2022 (1000 copies)

Paper: 80 gsm Maplitho, 220 gsm FB Board (cover)

ISBN: 978-93-94552-28-9

Price: ₹ 300.00

Publisher: **Eklavya Foundation**
Jamnalal Bajaj Parisar
Jatkhedi, Bhopal - 462 026 (MP)
Phone: +91 755 2977770/71/72/73
www.eklavya.in / books@eklavya.in

Printed at: Adarsh Pvt Ltd, Bhopal (MP), Phone: +91 755 255 5442

Nayantara Nayar

Nayantara Nayar is a playwright, researcher, and storyteller from Chennai, India. Her research interests include urban spaces, memory, and ecological crises. Her play "The Lottery " was short-listed for The Hindu PlayWright Award, 2018 and workshopped by the Rage Theatre, Mumbai and Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh for The Fringe in 2019. Her play "The Body" was commissioned by Rage Theatre and Enacte Theatre, California for their 2021 New Writing Festival. Her ongoing projects include the performance + visual art project Limits of Change. A part of this project, titled "Chicken Run" was presented at the Chennai Photo Biennale 2021-22 and a playscript centred on concepts of control and freedom for the India-Ireland Writing Without Borders programme.

Amulya B

Amulya is a journalist, writer, translator and a theatre enthusiast based in Karnataka. She has an MA in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths, University of London. Amulya has worked with various theatre troupes of the state like Vijayanagara Bimba, Benaka, Abhinaya Taranga, Rangasiri, Ninasam etc in various capacities. She was part of Bhasha Centre's Playwriting Course 2019-20. In 2021, she became the first and the only winner to have received both the Toto Funds the Arts (TFA) for Creative Writing in Kannada as well as English in the same year.

THE SOMETIMES RIVER

In a world of extreme heat, where surface water has run dry, only a small band of humans survive. They live in the complex cave systems beneath the Scrublands, and send Runners out to hunt for food, and Diggers to tunnel for water below ground. When sunlight starts making them sick and their underground wells dry up, they are in trouble Just when it looks like this last outpost of humanity won't last for long, their leader Ahi and the Digger Revathi try to put everything right, but they have challenges to overcome, including death itself.

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

Manju and Abbalige were the sole survivors from The Great Flood. They now lived in a space between land and sky, manning The Museum of Lost Objects, hoping to return to their land one day. Their job was to take care of lost things till those seeking them came to claim them. Manju also made mechanical replicas of butterflies that had become extinct. They lived like this for a long long time till one day the toy butterflies started moving on their own, and for the first time, a lost child came to them...

eklavya

ThinkArts

parag
AN INITIATIVE OF TATA TRUSTS

Price: ₹ 300.00

9 789394 552289