

## The Homecoming

The narrow road wound unendingly and sunlight filtering through dense leaves lit up the idyllic backdrop of the Brahmagiri hills.

Pravin drove distractedly, dodging the potholes and occasional bullock cart he came across. When he crossed familiar landmarks, he drew in sharp breaths, as if trying to control his pain. His eyes flicked often to the rear view mirror of his car and he glanced at the back seat lovingly.

He slowed down as he passed a temple ...his eye lingering on the statue of Lord Ganesh adorned with bright yellow marigold. He glanced back over his shoulder and murmured "Remember this place Matty? We had stopped here on the way to Manathavady from Kalpetta a few years back, hadn't we? You said you couldn't go past a Ganesh temple and not pay your respects. Do you think I ought to have stopped. Anyway it's too late to turn back now. Let's go on."

Pravin hastened to cover the last few miles to Thirunelli, their final destination accessible only by road. Matty (short for Madhavi) and he had been married for 15 years and they had migrated to New Zealand 6 years back .

She loved Auckland, but had been insistent about this *homecoming*. He had endured the long trip from Auckland to Bangalore with her and after a brief rest overnight, had started on the last leg of his journey, driving deep into the forests of Wynad in north Kerala eager to finish what he started out for. The flight reminded him of the years of travel Matty and he had made between New Zealand and India. She flew only *Cathay Pacific* and said to him often "When it comes to flying, it will be no other than the best."

Yes, Matty knew what she wanted. And it was her persistence that made him promise that he would make this journey with her.

Pravin wound through the hairpin curves and finally reached the little village that housed the famous temple of the valley. Matty had once told him that Lord Brahma, the creator and the first member of the Trinity in Hindu mythology had himself installed the idol of the presiding deity Vishnu who was the preserver of all he created.

He parked, took a deep breath, opened the rear door and scooped Matty up in his hands. Holding her carefully, he walked down the steps to 'Papanasini' the river that Matty so often spoke of. As he walked down, the granite steps scattered with white flowers and pollen from the overhead trees ironically reminded him of a giant sliced chocolate *lamington*. Weird, he thought. The last thing he wanted was to think about Lamingtons, Matty's favourite dessert.

He carefully untied the urn containing Matty's ashes.... the last of her mortal remains. "Papanasini means the cleanser of all sins", Matty had said. "My father's ashes were

brought here by me and when I go, I want you to promise that you will bring my ashes to these hills and river”.

He threw the urn and ashes over and behind his head, just as he had seen done when the ceremony was presided over by priests. Matty didn't want any priests, they always hurried you and moreover this was one time when he needed to be alone. “ Do not turn back and look at the ashes if you wanted to truly release your loved one's soul”... he recalled her saying. . He didn't look back.

He walked further down into the icy waters till they closed over his head. This was his last mission... he needed to cleanse himself of the one sin that he was guilty of. He had known for a long time that Matty was missing India each day of her life in New Zealand. She yearned to be closer to family. She had often hinted that the cancer that was eating away at her life was very likely the result of this terrible heartache she carried inside her. Her emotional umbilical cord was so tightly connected to India, that it tugged her incessantly. He had done all he could, letting her fly to India as often as she could, but he knew he had failed.

When she knew she was dying and that she would never see another *Diwali*, she had asked him to promise that her ashes to be brought home to Thirunelli. He knew he had to come to terms with the reality that he had sinned in a way.

He surfaced up, went down again and yet again. When the ritual of three immersions was over, Pravin stepped out to begin his journey back to New Zealand, the place he called home.

### The Thirunelli Temple in Wynad

