

ILLUMINATION

by Appadurai Muttulingam
Translated from the Tamil by Thila Varghese



Some people would lose the cell phone and find it later. Some would lose a pen and some would lose a key. I once lost my car.

The announcement came on the radio of a severe snowstorm in Toronto that would get worse later in the day. I reached the hospital in a hurry. I had to be present in the doctor's reception at the appointed time. Only five more minutes were left. There were four parking levels at that hospital, and each one had several sections. In each of the parking spots, there was a car parked. Cars had lined up and were circling around looking for a place to park. After going around several times, I spotted a place, parked my car and rushed to the doctor's office. In that hurry, I failed to make a note of where I parked the car.

By the time I returned to the parking lot around two o'clock in the afternoon after my visit to the doctor, I had forgotten where I had parked my car. I couldn't even remember the parking level. The details of which parking section and which parking spot had totally slipped from my mind. I calmly looked around for the car as I passed the parked vehicles one by one. I am only describing it as such now, but in fact, I was frantically looking for it, going around here and there in no orderly fashion. The car was missing, and I couldn't locate it.

I had the car key in my hand and every time I pressed the key, the car headlights should come on. Outstretching my hand and pressing the key every second, I kept moving up and down looking

for signs of my car. That's when I saw the white couple. The husband had his wife seated in a wheelchair and was pushing it. He was probably 45 years of age, and his wife, even less.

The husband said something loud to cheer his wife up as he walked. The wife would likely have been beautiful at one time. Her emaciated 70-pound frame hardly filling even half the chair, she remained seated with her head drooping down to one side. Her hair had fallen out in clumps. Listening to what her husband said, she tried to laugh. As he walked past me towards the hospital entrance, the husband noticed me pressing the key and searching for the car. "Did you lose your car," he asked. "The car is somewhere here. I am the one who is lost," I said. "Look harder, you'll locate it. You didn't lose a dog or a cat. They'll keep moving, but your car will stay on the same spot. You will find it," he said with a half-smile. Then he disappeared with the wheelchair. I resumed my search.

Even after searching for an hour up and down the rows in all the sections, I couldn't find the car. It was astonishing. The only thing I remember was parking the car to the right of a pillar. I proceeded to look for the car again, this time only in the parking spots to the right of a pillar. I didn't miss pressing the key either, but no headlights flashed. I felt exasperated. Since all the parking levels were long and wide, walking around over and over also made my legs feel heavy and tired. I went to the parking office and explained my situation to the officer. He looked at me as though he was listening to something that happened as a daily routine. "I'm sorry. I can't come right now leaving my customers unattended. My shift ends in one hour. I'll come and help you then," he said.

Once again, I started looking for the car. Two hours might have passed. Outside, at least 30 cm of snow had fallen. Just then, the gentleman I met earlier came back. This time there was neither the wheelchair nor his wife with him. Looking at me, he laughed and said, "Are you still searching?" I said, "The car didn't run off by itself. It's here somewhere." He said that he had to go home to bring some stuff for his wife while the doctors examined her and started towards his car. He then turned around and came back to me and asked what type of car I had, and I told him. I also told him the colour of the car and the plate number. He asked for the car key, and I gave it to him.

While the gentleman walked forward from one end of the row in each parking level pressing the car key, I walked towards him from the opposite end looking for signs of my car. Ten minutes might have passed by then. Near a pillar, car lights flashed on and off. "That's it, that's it!" I screamed. As he held out the key to me, I thanked him and asked for his name.

"What are you going to do with my name?" He asked.

"I didn't do anything for you. At least I'll honour your name in my heart."

"Noam," he said.

"I wish your wife all the best. She will recover soon and join you."

"She won't return home."

His facial expression changed. I felt sorry, wishing I hadn't said anything.

Walking towards his car, he raised his hand without turning back and waved.

About the author



A recipient of numerous literary awards in Sri Lanka, India, and Canada, including the Sri Lankan Government Sahitya Academy Award, **Appadurai Muttulingam** is the author of 15 short story collections, 2 novels, and 10 collections of essays in Tamil. Originally from Sri Lanka, Muttulingam, who lives in Canada, is the founder/director of Tamil Literary Garden, a charitable organization in Toronto that promotes literary excellence. He is also the founder/director of Tamil Chair Inc., a charitable organization registered in the United States for the establishment of Tamil Studies at Harvard University.

About the translator



Thila Varghese lives in Canada where she works part-time during the academic year as a Senior Writing Advisor at Western University. Her translations of Tamil literary works have been published in *World Literature Today*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *National Translation Month*, *Metamorphoses*, *Asymptote*, *Indian Literature*, and *Columbia Journal*. Photo credit: Veena Varghese.