

A *mutt* could also be called a *peetham*, but to avoid confusion let us simply say that it was a monk's dwelling. Later, as the empire grew, the Mandana *mutt* became a grand place extending all the way to the banks of the rushing river, an enormous complex employing thousands of priests, servitors, tradesmen, craftsmen, janitors, elephant keepers, monkey handlers, stable hands, and workers in the *mutt's* extensive paddy fields, and it was revered as the sacred place where emperors came for advice, but in this early time before the beginning began it was humble, little more than an ascetic's cave and a vegetable patch, and the resident ascetic, still a young man at that time, a twenty-five-year-old scholar with long curly locks flowing down his back all the way to his waist, went by the name of Vidyasagar, which meant that there was a knowledge-ocean, a *vidya-sagara*, inside his large head. When he saw the girl approaching with hunger on her tongue and madness in her eyes, he understood at once that she had witnessed terrible things, and he gave her water to drink and what little food he had.

After that, at least in Vidyasagar's version of events, they lived together easily enough, sleeping on opposite sides of the cave, and they got along fine, in part because the monk had sworn a solemn vow of abstinence from the things of the flesh, so that even when Pampa Kampana blossomed into the grandeur of her beauty he never laid a finger on her, although the cave wasn't very big and they were alone in the dark. For the rest of his life, that was what he said to anyone who asked—and there were people who asked, because the world is a cynical and suspicious place and, being full of liars, thinks of everything as a lie. Which was what Vidyasagar's story was.

Pampa Kampana, when asked, did not reply. From an early age she acquired the ability to shut away from her consciousness many of the evils that life handed out. She had not yet understood or harnessed the power of the goddess within her, so she was not able to protect herself when the supposedly abstinent scholar crossed the invisible line between them and did what he did. He did not do it often, because scholarship usually left him too tired to satisfy his lusts, but he did it often enough, and every time he did she erased it from her memory by an act of will. She also erased her mother, whose self-sacrifice had sacrificed her daughter on the altar of the ascetic's desires, and for a long time she tried to tell herself that what had happened in the cave was an illusion, and that she had never had a mother at all.

In this way, she was able to accept her fate in silence, though an angry power began to grow in her, a force from which the future would be born. In time. All in good time.

She did not say a single word for the next nine years, which meant that Vidyasagar, who knew many things, didn't even know her name. He decided to call her Gangadevi, and she accepted the name without complaint, and helped him gather berries and roots to eat, to sweep out their poor residence, and to haul water from the well. Her silence suited him perfectly, because on most days he was lost in meditation, considering the meanings of the sacred texts that he had learned by heart, and seeking answers to two great questions: whether wisdom existed, or if there was only folly; and the related question of whether there was, among humans, such a thing as *vidya*, true knowledge, for which he was named, or if there were just many different kinds of ignorance, while true knowledge was possessed only by the gods. In addition, he thought about peace, and asked himself how to insure the triumph of nonviolence in a violent age.

This was how men were, Pampa Kampana thought. A man philosophized about peace but his deeds—his treatment of the helpless girl sleeping in his cave—were not in alignment with his philosophy.

When Pampa Kampana had been living in Vidyasagar's cave for nine years, two brothers came to call. They were cowherds from the hill town of Gooty who had gone to war, war being one of the growth industries of the time. They had joined up with a local princeling's army, and because they were amateurs in the art of killing they had been captured by the Delhi sultan's forces and sent to the north, where to save their skins they pretended to be converted to the religion of their captors, and then escaped soon afterward, shedding their adopted faith like an unwanted shawl, getting away before they could be circumcised according to the requirements of the religion in which they didn't really believe. They were local boys, they explained, and they had heard of the wisdom of the sage Vidyasagar and, to be honest, they had also heard of the beauty of the mute young woman who lived with him, and so here they were in search of some good advice. They did not come empty-handed. They brought baskets of fresh fruit and a sack of nuts and an urn filled with milk from their favorite cow, and also a sack of seeds. Their names, they said, were Hukka and Bukka Sangama: Hukka, the tall, gray-haired, good-looking one, who stood very still and gazed deep into your eyes as if he could see your thoughts, and Bukka, his much younger sibling, the small rotund one who buzzed around him, and everyone else, like a bee. After their escape from the north, they were looking for a new direction in life. The care of cows had ceased to be enough for them, they said. Their horizons were wider now and their ambitions were greater, so they would appreciate any guidance, any ripples flowing from the amplitude of the Ocean of Knowledge, any whispers from the depths of wisdom that the sage might be willing to offer, anything at all that might show them the way. "We know of you as the great apostle of peace," Hukka Sangama said. "We're not so keen on soldiering ourselves, after our recent experiences. Show us the fruits that nonviolence can grow."

To everyone's surprise, it was not the monk but his eighteen-year-old companion who replied, in an ordinary, conversational voice, strong and low, a voice that gave no hint that it hadn't been used for nine years. It was a voice by which both brothers were instantly seduced. "Suppose you had a sackful of seeds," she said. "Then suppose you could plant them and grow a city, and grow its inhabitants, too, as if people were plants, budding and flowering in the spring, only to wither in the autumn. Suppose now that these seeds could grow generations, and bring forth a history, a new reality, an empire. Suppose they could make you kings, and your children, too, and your children's children."

"Sounds good," young Bukka, the more outspoken of the brothers, said. "But where are we supposed to find seeds like that? We are only cowherds, but we know better than to believe in fairy tales."

"Your name Sangama is a sign," she said. "A *sangam* is a confluence, like the River Pampa, which is formed by the joining of the Tunga and Bhadra rivers, which were created from the sweat pouring down the two sides of the head of Lord Vishnu, and so it also means the flowing together of different parts to make a new kind of whole. This is your destiny. Go to the place of the women's sacrifice, the sacred place where my mother died, which is also the place where in ancient times Lord Ram and his brother Lakshman joined forces with the mighty Lord Hanuman of Kishkindha and went forth to battle the many-headed Ravana of Lanka, who had abducted the lady Sita. You two are brothers just as Ram and Lakshman were. Build your city there."

Now the sage spoke up. "It's not such a bad start, being cowherds," he said. "The sultanate of Golconda was started by shepherds, you know—in fact, its name means 'the shepherds' hill'—and those shepherds were lucky, because they discovered that the place was rich in

diamonds, and now they are diamond princes, owners of the Twenty-three Mines, discoverers of most of the world's pink diamonds, and possessors of the Great Table Diamond, which they keep in the deepest dungeon of their mountaintop fortress, the most impregnable castle in the land, harder to take than even Mehrangarh, up in Jodhpur, or Udayagiri, right down the road."

"And your seeds are better than diamonds," the young woman said, handing back the sack that the brothers had brought with them.

"What, these seeds?" Bukka asked, very surprised. "But these are just an ordinary assortment we brought along as a gift for your vegetable patch—they are for okra, beans, and snake gourds, all mixed up together."

The prophetess shook her head. "Not anymore," she said. "Now these are the seeds of the future. Your city will grow from them."

The two brothers realized at that moment that they were both truly, deeply, and forever in love with this strange beauty who was clearly a great sorceress, or at the very least a person touched by a god and granted exceptional powers. "They say Vidyasagar gave you the name of Gangadevi," Hukka said. "But what is your real name? I would very much like to know it, so that I can remember you in the manner your parents intended."

"Go and make your city," she said. "Come back and ask me my name again when it has sprouted up out of rocks and dust. Maybe I'll tell you then."

After they had gone to the designated place and scattered the seeds, their hearts full of great perplexity and just a little hope, the two Sangama brothers climbed to the top of a hill of large boulders and thornbushes that tore at their peasant clothes and sat down in the late afternoon to wait and watch. No more than an hour later, they saw the air begin to shimmer, as it does during the hottest hours of the hottest days, and then the miracle city started growing before their astonished eyes, the stone edifices of the central zone pushing up from the rocky ground, and the majesty of the royal palace, and the first great temple, too. All these and more arose in old-fashioned splendor, the Royal Enclosure spreading out at the far end of the long market street. The mud, wood, and cow-shit hovels of the common people also made their humble way into the air at the city's periphery. In those first moments the city was not yet fully alive. Spreading out from the shadow of the barren bouldered hills, it looked like a shining cosmopolis whose inhabitants had all abandoned it. The villas of the rich, with stone foundations from which sprouted graceful, pillared structures of brick and wood, stood unoccupied; the canopied market stalls were empty, awaiting the arrival of florists, butchers, tailors, wine merchants, and dentists; in the red-light district there were brothels but, as yet, no whores. The river rushed along and the banks where washerwomen and washermen would do their work seemed to wait expectantly for some action, some movement that would give meaning to the place. In the Royal Enclosure, the great Elephant House with its eleven arches anticipated the coming of the tuskers and their dung.

Then life began, and hundreds—no, thousands—of men and women were born full grown from the brown earth, shaking the dirt off their garments and thronging the city in the evening breeze. Stray dogs and bony cows walked in the streets, trees burst into blossom and leaf, and the sky swarmed with parrots, yes, and crows. There was laundry upon the riverbank, and royal elephants trumpeting in their mansion, and armed guards—women!—at the Royal

Enclosure's gates. An army camp could be seen beyond the city's boundary, a substantial cantonment, in which stood an awesome force of thousands more newborn human beings, equipped with clattering armor and weapons, as well as with ranks of camels and horses, and siege weaponry—battering rams, trebuchets, and the like.

“This is what it must feel like to be a god,” Bukka Sangama said to his brother in a trembling voice. “To perform the act of creation, a thing only the gods can do.”

“We must become gods now,” Hukka said, “to make sure the people worship us.” He looked up into the sky. “There, you see,” he pointed. “There is our father, the Moon.”

“No.” Bukka shook his head. “We'll never get away with that.”

“The great Moon God, our ancestor,” Hukka said, making it up as he went along, “he had a son, whose name was Budha. And then after a number of generations the family line arrived at the Moon King of the mythological era. Pururavas. That was his name. He had two sons, Yadu and Turvasu. Some say there were five, but I think two is plenty. And we are the sons of the sons of Yadu. Thus we are a part of the illustrious Lunar Lineage, like the great warrior Arjuna in the Mahabharata, and even Lord Krishna himself.”

“Let's go down and take a look at the palace,” Bukka suggested. “I hope there are plenty of servants and cooks and not just a bunch of empty chambers of state. I hope there are beds as soft as clouds and maybe a women's wing of ready-made wives of unimaginable beauty as well. We should celebrate, right? We aren't cowherds anymore.”

“But cows will remain important to us,” Hukka proposed.

“Metaphorically, you mean?” Bukka asked. “I'm not planning to do any more milking.”

“Yes,” Hukka Sangama said. “Metaphorically, of course.”

They were both silent for a while, awed by what they had brought into being. “If something can come out of nothing like this,” Bukka finally said, “maybe anything is possible in this world, and we can really be great men, although we will need to have great thoughts as well, and we don't have any seeds for those.”

Hukka was thinking along different lines. “If we can grow people like tapioca plants,” he mused, “then it doesn't matter how many soldiers we lose in battle, because there will be plenty more where they came from, and therefore we will be invincible and will be able to conquer the world. These thousands are just a beginning. We will grow hundreds of thousands of citizens, maybe a million, and a million soldiers as well. There are plenty of seeds left. We barely used half the sack.”

Bukka was thinking about Pampa Kampana. “She talks a lot about peace, but if that's what she wants why did she grow us this army?” he wondered. “Is it peace she really wants, or revenge? For her mother's death, I mean.”

“It's up to us now,” Hukka told him. “An army can be a force for peace as well as for war.”

“And another thing I’m wondering,” Bukka said. “Those people down there, our new citizens—the men, I mean—do you think they are circumcised or not circumcised?”

Hukka pondered this question. “What do you want to do?” he asked finally. “Do you want to go down there and ask them all to open their *lungis*, pull down their pajamas, unwrap their sarongs? You think that’s a good way to begin?”

“The truth is,” Bukka replied, “I don’t really care. It’s probably a mixture, and so what.”

“Exactly,” Hukka said. “So what.”

“So I don’t care if you don’t care,” Bukka said.

“I don’t care,” Hukka replied.

“Then so what,” Bukka confirmed.

They were silent again, staring down at the miracle, trying to accept its incomprehensibility, its beauty, its consequences. “We should go and introduce ourselves,” Bukka said after a while. “They need to know who’s in charge.”

“There’s no rush,” Hukka replied. “I think we’re both a little crazy right now, because we are in the middle of a great craziness, and we both need a minute to absorb it, and to get a grip on our sanity again. And in the second place . . .” And here he paused.

“Yes?” Bukka urged him on. “What’s in the second place?”

“In the second place,” Hukka said slowly, “we have to decide which one of the two of us is going to be king first, and who will be in the second place.”

“Well,” Bukka said, hopefully, “I’m the smartest.”

“That’s debatable,” Hukka said. “However, I’m the oldest.”

“And I’m the most likable.”

“Again, debatable. But I repeat: I’m the oldest.”

“Yes, you’re old. But I’m the most dynamic.”

“Dynamic isn’t the same thing as regal,” Hukka said. “And I’m still the oldest.”

“You say that as if it’s some sort of commandment,” Bukka protested. “Oldest goes first. Where does it say that? Where’s that written down?”

Hukka’s hand moved to the hilt of his sword. “Here,” he said.

A bird flew across the sun. The earth took a deep breath. The gods, if there were any gods, stopped doing what they were doing and paid attention.

Bukka gave in. “O.K., O.K.,” he said, raising his hands in surrender. “You’re my older brother and I love you and you go first.”

“Thank you,” Hukka said. “I love you, too.”

“But,” Bukka added, “I get to decide the next thing.”

“Agreed,” Hukka Sangama, who was now King Hukka—Hukka Raya I—said. “You get first pick of bedrooms in the palace.”

“And concubines,” Bukka insisted.

“Yes, yes,” Hukka Raya I said, waving an irritated hand. “And concubines as well.”

After another moment’s silence, Bukka attempted a great thought. “What is a human being?” he wondered. “I mean, what makes us what we are? Did we all start out as seeds? Are all our ancestors vegetables, if we go back far enough? Or did we grow out of fishes? Are we fishes who learned to breathe air? Or maybe we are cows who lost our udders and two of our legs? Somehow I’m finding the vegetable possibility the most upsetting. I don’t want to discover that my great-grandfather was a brinjal, or a pea.”

“And yet it is from seeds that our subjects have been born,” Hukka said, shaking his head. “So the vegetable possibility is the most probable.”

“Things are simpler for vegetables,” Bukka mused. “They have their roots, so they know their place. They grow, and they serve their purpose by propagating and then being consumed. But we are rootless and we don’t want to be eaten. So how are we supposed to live? What is a human life? What’s a good life and what isn’t? Who and what are these thousands we have just brought into being?”

“The question of origins,” Hukka said gravely, “we must leave to the gods. The question we must answer is this one: now that we find ourselves here—and they, our seed people, are down there—how shall we live?”

“If we were philosophers,” Bukka said, “we could answer such questions philosophically. But we are poor cowherds only, who became unsuccessful soldiers, and have suddenly somehow risen above our station, so we had better just get down there and begin, and find out the answers by being there and seeing how things work out. An army is a question, and the answer to the question of the army is to fight. A cow is a question, too, and the answer to the question of the cow is to milk it. Down there is a city that appeared out of nowhere, and that’s a bigger question than we have ever been asked. And so maybe the answer to the question of the city is to live in it.”

But still, as if dazed, the two brothers remained on the hill, immobile, watching the movement of the new people in the streets of the new city below them, and often shaking their heads in disbelief. It was as if they were afraid of going down into those streets, afraid that the whole thing was some sort of hallucination, and that if they entered it the deception would be revealed, the vision would dissolve, and they would return to the previous nothingness of their lives. Perhaps their stunned condition explained why they did not notice that the people in the new streets, and in the army camp beyond, were behaving peculiarly, as if they, too, had been

driven a little crazy by their incomprehension of their own sudden existence. There was a good deal of shouting and crying, and some of the people were rolling on the ground and kicking their legs in the air, punching the air as if to say, Where am I? Let me out of here. In the fruit-and-vegetable market people were throwing produce at one another, and it was unclear if they were playing or expressing their inarticulate rage. In fact, they seemed incapable of expressing what they truly wanted—food, or shelter, or someone to explain the world to them and make them feel safe in it, someone whose soft words could grant them the happy illusion of understanding what they could not understand. The fights in the army camp, where the new people carried weapons, were more dangerous, and there were injuries.

The sun was already diving toward the horizon when Hukka and Bukka finally made their way down the rocky hill. As evening shadows crawled across the many enigmatic boulders that crowded their path, it seemed to them both that the stones were acquiring human faces, with hollow eyes that examined them closely, as if to ask, “What, are these unimpressive individuals the ones who brought a whole city to life?” Hukka, who was already putting on royal airs like a boy trying on the new birthday clothes his parents had left at the foot of his bed while he slept, chose to ignore the staring stones, but Bukka grew afraid, because the stones didn’t seem to be their friends, and could easily start an avalanche that would bury the two brothers forever, before they were able to step into their glorious future. The new city was surrounded by rocky hillsides of this sort, except along the riverbank, and all the boulders on all the hills now seemed to have become giant heads, whose faces wore hostile frowns, and whose mouths were on the verge of speech. They never spoke, but Bukka made a note. “We are surrounded by enemies,” he told himself, “and if we are not quick to defend ourselves against them they will thunder down upon us and crush us.” Aloud he said to his brother the king, “You know what this city doesn’t have, and needs as soon as possible? Walls. High, thick walls, strong enough to withstand any attack.”

Hukka nodded his assent. “Build them,” he said.

Then they entered the city and, as night fell, found themselves at the dawn of time, and in the midst of the chaos that is the first condition of all new universes. By now, many of their new progeny had fallen asleep, in the street, on the doorstep of the palace, in the shadow of the temple, everywhere. There was also a rank odor in the air, because hundreds of the citizens had fouled their garments. Those who were not asleep were like sleepwalkers, empty people with empty eyes, marching through the streets like automata, buying fruit at the fruit stalls without knowing what they were putting in their baskets, or selling the fruits without knowing what they were called, or, at the stalls offering religious paraphernalia, buying and selling enamel eyes, pink and white with black irises, selling and buying these and many other trinkets to be used in the temple’s daily devotions without knowing what deities liked to receive which offerings, or why. It was night now, but even in the darkness the sleepwalkers continued buying, selling, roaming the confused streets, and their glazed presences were even more alarming than those of the stinking sleepers.

The new king, Hukka, was dismayed at the condition of his subjects. “It looks like that witch has given us a kingdom of subhumans,” he cried. “These people are as brainless as cows, and they don’t even have udders to give us milk.”

Bukka, the more imaginative of the two brothers, put a consoling hand on Hukka’s shoulder. “Calm down,” he said. “Even human babies take some time to emerge from their mothers and start breathing air. And when they emerge they have no idea what to do, and so they cry, they

laugh, they piss and shit, and they wait for their parents to take care of everything. I think what's happening here is that our city is still in the process of being born, and all these people, including the grownups, are babies right now, and we just have to hope that they grow up fast, because we don't have mothers to care for them."

"And, if you're right, what are we supposed to do with this half-born crowd?" Hukka wanted to know.

"We wait," Bukka told him, having no better idea to offer. "This is the first lesson of your new kingship: patience. We must allow our new citizens—our new subjects—to become real, to grow into their newly created selves. Do they even know their names? Where do they think they came from? It's a problem. Maybe they will change quickly. Maybe by the morning they will have become men and women, and we can talk about everything. Until then, there's nothing to be done." The full moon burst out of the sky like a descending angel and bathed the new world in milky light. And on that moon-blessed night at the beginning of the beginning the Sangama brothers understood that the act of creation was only the first of many necessary acts, that even the powerful magic of the seeds could not provide everything that was needed. They themselves were exhausted, worn out by everything they had wrought, and so they made their way into the palace.

Here different rules seemed to apply. As they approached the arched gate into the first courtyard they saw a full complement of servitors standing before them like statues, equerries and grooms frozen beside their immobile horses, musicians on a stage leaning into their silent instruments, and any number of household servants and aides, dressed in such finery as was appropriate for those who served a king—cockaded turbans, brocaded coats, shoes that curled up at their pointed toes, necklaces, and rings. No sooner had Hukka and Bukka passed through the gate than the scene sprang to life, and all was bustle and hum. Courtiers rushed forward to escort them, and these were not the big babies of the city streets but grown men and women, well spoken and knowledgeable, and fully competent to carry out their duties. A flunky approached Hukka carrying a crown on a red velvet cushion, and Hukka set it happily on his head, noting that it was a perfect fit. He received the service of the palace staff as if it were his right and his due, but Bukka, walking a step or two behind him, had other thoughts. "Looks like even the magic seeds have one rule for the rulers and another for the ruled," he reflected. "But if the ruled continue to be unruly it won't be easy to rule them."

The bedroom suites were so lavishly appointed that the question of who slept where was resolved without much discussion, and there were lords of the bedchamber to bring the brothers their nightgowns and show them the wardrobes filled with royal garments appropriate to their stature. But they were too tired to take in much about their new home, or to be interested in concubines, and within moments they were both fast asleep.

In the morning things were different.

"How is the city today?" Hukka asked the courtier who came into his bedroom to draw back the curtains. This individual turned and bowed deeply. "Perfect, as always, sire," he replied. "The city thrives under Your Majesty's rule, today and every day."

Hukka and Bukka summoned horses and rode out to see the state of things for themselves. They were astonished to find a metropolis bustling about its business, thronged with adults behaving like grownups and children running around their feet as children should. It was as if

everyone had lived here for years, as if the adults had been children there, and grown to adulthood, and married, and raised children of their own; as if they possessed memories and histories, and belonged to a long-established community, a city of love and death, tears and laughter, loyalty and betrayal, and everything else that human nature contains, everything that, when added together, makes up the meaning of life—and all of it conjured up out of nothing by the magic seeds.

The noises of the city—street venders, horses’ hooves, the clatter of carts, songs and arguments—filled the air. In the military cantonment, a formidable army stood at the ready, awaiting its lords’ commands.

“How did this happen?” Hukka asked his brother in wonderment.

“There’s your answer,” Bukka said, pointing.

Coming toward them through the crowd, dressed in an ascetic’s simple saffron wrap and carrying a wooden staff, was Pampa Kampana, with whom they were both in love. There was a fire blazing in her eyes.

“We built the city,” Hukka said to her. “You said when we had done that we could ask you for your real name.”

So Pampa Kampana told the brothers her name, and congratulated them. “You’ve done well,” she said. “They just needed someone to whisper their dreams into their ears.”

Everyone came from a seed, she added. Men planted seeds in women and so forth. But this was different. A whole city, people of all kinds and ages, blooming from the earth on the same day, such flowers have no souls, they don’t know who they are, because the truth is they are nothing. But such truth is unacceptable. It was necessary, she said, to do something to cure the multitude of its unreality. Her solution was fiction. She was making up their lives, their castes, their faiths, how many brothers and sisters they had, and what childhood games they had played, and sending the stories whispering through the streets into the ears that needed to hear them. She was writing the grand narrative of the city, creating its story now that she had created its life. Some of her stories came from her memories of lost Kampili, the slaughtered fathers and the burned mothers; she was trying to bring that place back to life in this place, to bring back the old dead in the newly living, but memory wasn’t enough, there were too many lives to enliven, and so imagination had to take over from the point at which memory failed.

“My mother abandoned me,” she said, “but I will be the mother of them all.” ♦

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[Salman Rushdie](#) has written fifteen novels, including “[Victory City](#),” which will be published in February.