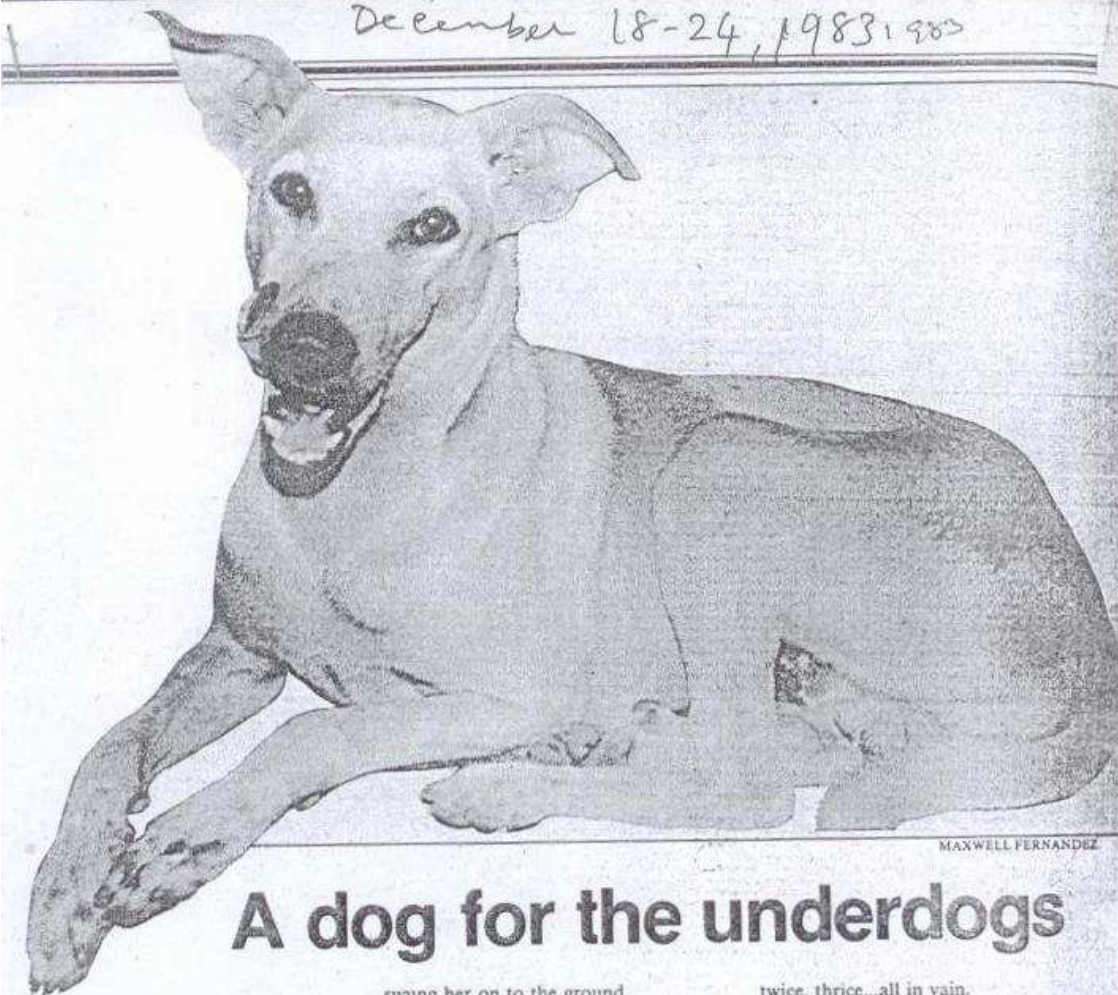


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## A dog for the underdogs

**V**ELLAYAN watched the fight in stoic silence.

It all started with an argument between a neighbouring pavement dweller's wife Pappu and 'Amma' over a piece of stone. The stone belonging to Amma had 'crossed the border of Pappu's territory'—that was the charge.

Vellayan could not understand why the two women leading a dog's life should fight this way. After all, like him, they too were children of the footpath, with nothing much to lose or gain in this world. The women showered the choicest abuses on each other, while Pappu's husband Subharaj and Thangammal's son Jeevanandam, Vellayan's master, watched the drama.

The wordy duel soon exploded into a physical fight and Subharaj joined the fray. He held the old woman by her hair and with the expertise of a wrestler,

swung her on to the ground.

Vellayan closed his eyes and groaned. What else could a dog, a stray dog, living on the leftovers of the underdogs do in such a situation? Anyway, the old woman did not have a dog's chance of winning the fight all alone.

And then he saw his master's eyes glow in anger. Jeevanandam pounced on Subharaj in a mad fury. The two men fought like animals. The number of spectators increased. It was a freestyle wrestling bout staged free on the pavement in front of the American College in Madurai. The date: November 17.

It was an eventful Thursday. Cops arrived on the scene to separate the fighting men. Vellayan saw his master being taken away by khaki-clad men, their boots pounding in unison with his heartbeats. He quietly followed them to the police station. Lathi-wielding custodians of law tried to chase him away. Once,

twice, thrice...all in vain.

Vellayan waited in vain for his master to come out. Yes, there he was, seated on the veranda of the police station, close to a pillar. Vellayan watched his master from outside, longing to reach him evading the lathi-wielding policemen. As he was waiting, he saw his master being led away.

From then on, it was a dharna by the dog in front of the police station to get his master released. Slowly, the toughness in uniform melted before Vellayan's loyalty. The police allowed him to enter the station. Vellayan straightaway went to the spot his master was last seen. He sniffed at the floor and sat there. Time passed, hours growing into days, but the dog would not leave the police station. No longer was he scared of the cops. He licked their huge black boots. Sub-Inspector Stalin gave him bread and a woman SI shared her meals with him.



(Clockwise) Bosom pals. Vellayan and Jeevanandam. And those who helped: Magistrate Ramachandran, SI Stalin and Sinkaravelu

Yet, Vellayan looked sad. He kept looking for his master. Even if he went out, he would come back and sniff at the spot where his master last sat and would remain there for hours. Vellayan's determination moved SI Stalin. Never in his career had he come under this kind of pressure. This was no political pressure, the name of the game was love, pure and simple. A street fight, after all, is a bailable offence. Why separate two souls longing to be together, he thought.

Stalin went to second class judicial magistrate M Ramachandran with the problem: I am being haunted by a dog. The listener himself was a lover of dogs. He thought of his own pet Jimmy and his kids who doted on Jimmy. The consensus of heart and head was in favour of Vellayan and his master who was now an undertrial.

The magistrate got in touch with the legal aid cell which usually bails out such

poor people. Advocate Sinkaravelu was only too happy to intervene. And, on Tuesday, November 22, Vellayan's master was released on his own personal bond. The onlookers' eyes turned misty when the dog kissed his master's feet as he came out of jail.

Fifteen months ago, when Jeevanandam and his mother Thangammal adopted a white pup that came along their way, they never thought it would one day turn out to be his saving angel.

As the master and the devoted dog walked back to their 'home' in front of the American College, the master knew that he was on a dog's surety. Down the road, on the pavement sat Thangammal. For them, ever since they were evicted from home under a slum clearance scheme, the footpath had become their refuge. Gone were the days when Thangammal worked as a nursery school teacher and her late husband as

a checking inspector in a private transport company. Now, the pavement in front of the American College on Alakarkoil Road was their home-cum-shop. They sold books of film songs, religious tracts, pictures of deities to keep their body and soul together.

At night, Vellayan eats bone-pieces from the hands of Thangammal, shares a little tea with her and goes to sleep on a bed of sack specially made for him.

Vellayan has two homes now. He often visits the police station as if to thank the officers. The woman SI continues to share her meal with him. At times he sleeps in the station. Is he getting too close to the cops? "Are you losing him, Jeevanandam?"

"No. Most of the time he is with me. Any time, when I call him, he is there." Jeevanandam knows better.

—MAXWELL FERNANDEZ in Madurai