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The Puppeteers of Palem

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The Puppeteers of Palem

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Aditi, this is for you.

Avadhani leaned over the edge of the cot, away from the children, and spat out on the mud floor a pasty, orange mix of Manikchand gutkha and Crane betel nut. Then he turned back and smiled at his audience, making no attempt to conceal his decaying teeth. There was no need to, they had all seen his teeth numerous times before.

‘So Chotu,’ he said, and pulled one of the young children onto his lap. ‘Have you ever heard the story of Rama and Sita?’

A collective groan went up. The child on his lap looked up at him and pinched his nose. The seventy-watt Philips bulb, flickering on its last legs, covered the porch in a dim, smudgy light. Even if Avadhani had been a young forty-something, he would not have been able to see the children’s faces. At his present age, he could forget about it.

He removed his glasses and squinted at them. A moth, one of the three that had been circling the light, fell on one of the lenses and started to hurry away. He closed his thumb and index finger around it. Then he squeezed. He felt its wings flutter under his fingers for a second before going limp. After he had satisfied himself that it was dead, he raised his thumb and swatted it away.

To his right, he heard the son of Anjaneyulu kill a mosquito on his thigh with one decisive slap. He murmured in approval.

There had been no mosquitoes here in Palem where Avadhani had grown up. No mosquitoes, and no moths. It was all thanks to this industrialization going on in Dhavaleshwaram—all these factories and men and machines and god knew what else. They did not even have light bulbs back then. They did not need any.

‘You have told us that story so many times, Thatha,’ Chotu said. Chotu was the son of—now, whose son was Chotu? Well, whoever he was, he sat on Avadhani’s lap and played with the smudge left by the moth on his glasses. ‘That, and the story of those five men and their hundred brothers.’

‘Yes Thatha,’ someone else from the group piped up. ‘Too many times.’

‘Yes, yes, too many times.’

‘Something new.’

‘Yes, a new one.’

Avadhani felt a prick under his left arm. He resisted the instinct to move and instead waited a second, allowing the pain to build up. Yes, let the mosquito think it was safe. He would wait for just the *right* moment and—slap! He examined his hand. Nothing. He had missed. Damn! The mosquitoes used to be slow and lazy when he was young. Now, with all this industrialization and factories and machines...

‘Orey, who are you? Son of Mangamma, aren’t you?’

The boy did not speak. Chotu looked up at him and nodded.

‘Why are you pulling Venkataramana’s hair?’

‘He pulled my hair first, Thatha.’

‘I did not see that.’

‘He did it when you were not looking!’

Avadhani sighed and looked away. The radio crackled to life and hissed out an old Shree Shree song. It tended to do that nowadays, his radio. It stopped and started whenever it wished, much like that Ambassador his son had bought last year. Avadhani had told him that a bicycle was a much better investment. A bicycle ran for as long as you pedalled. It needed no petrol. It did not have an attitude. It did not stop and moan or belt out random songs at you.

‘Give that thing a whack for me, will you, Chanti?’ he said.

The children sat there in silence. They were all there—yes, the son and daughter of the carpenter. Subbai were here too. Subbai, whose father had once made this very cot for *his* father. They made things to last back then, in the old days. His cot did not creak once in all these years. Subbai had been a mere chit of a boy then, about as old as his son and daughter were now.

All those years ago, on nights like these, Subbai used to come to Avadhani’s house. He always used to sit next to that girl—Venkatamma’s daughter—what was her name? Yes, Gowri. The bulb on his porch had only been a twenty-watt one in those days, but even in that light, Avadhani had seen how they smiled at each other.

They always stopped coming once they reached a certain age. Subbai and Gowri stopped too. But they did not stop seeing each other. They did not stop smiling at each other. When they had gotten married, they had come and touched his feet. ‘I will send my children to you every night, Avadhanayya,’ he had said. ‘Tell them the stories you told me.’

And he had. Gowramma’s kids...Subbai’s kids were here. But what were their names? He had been very good at remembering names in his youth. But now, all he remembered were their parents’ names. He remembered perfectly well whose kids they each were, but their names... Well, he *was* getting a little long in the tooth...

‘Did you not see,’ he said to the son of Mangamma, ‘what little hair Venkataramana’s father has? Who will marry Venkataramana if you pull out all his hair, boy?’

Venkataramana patted his hair and huffed. ‘Why, Thatha, all my uncles have *this much* hair. My mother says I got *their* hair.’

Avadhani ran a palm across his bald patch and smiled. The light whirred each time it flickered. Another moth took the dead one’s place. Directly under the bulb, his old radio sat in brooding silence. The two big speakers on either side of the cassette holder resembled the eyes of a drunk. Avadhani peered into one of them, half expecting the box to reach out and whisper something confidentially in his ear.

That song... yes, the song that had played on it before Chanti had thwacked it... it had been so long...

‘Thatha,’ Chotu said. ‘I am feeling sleepy.’

That was Chotu’s way of saying, ‘Tell me a story now.’

Avadhani looked up at the sky, at the dark, squiggly spots of the full moon. There had been a full moon that night too. That song and that night... oh, how well he remembered. His memory was not as bad as he thought. But then, this was not something a man forgot as long as he lived. This was one

those things that you took with you to your pyre.

He leaned away, spat again and licked his lips clean. Facing the children, he said, 'Do you want hear a new story?'

'Yes! Yes, yes!'

He lay on his side and propped himself up on his elbow. With his free hand he picked off bits of betel leaves stuck between his teeth and chewed on them. Chotu was now sitting on the floor with the rest of the group.

'Have you heard the story of Lachi?' he said at last. Even now, he could not say that name without a catch in his throat. Lachi would now have been old enough to be a mother. She was as old as Subba was she not? Yes, if that was true, she would have had kids as old as *these*. Her body would have withered. Her beauty would have waned.

But to him, she had always remained the thirteen-year-old that skipped along the streets of Palem in that green silk langa and red jacket, laughing in that clear, ringing voice. In his mind's eye, she always wore her hair in two plaits. And in his mind's eye, she always looked at him with love in her eyes. In reality, she had done only the first two. Not the third. *Never* the third.

The silence at his question was but expected. People in Palem were not supposed to speak of Lachi. On the rare occasions that they did, they took great care not to say her name. She was always 'the witch' or 'the wretch', or simply, 'that woman'.

'Her name is Vijayalakshmi,' Avadhani said, adopting his storytelling voice. 'Their hut used to be where Poola Rangayya's shack is now. Her father used to milk the buffaloes in Saraswatamma's house.'

Images floated into his head, unannounced. He remembered how he used to stand behind the stage and watch her drink water from the school well. He had volunteered to teach Sanskrit at the school just so he could see her. To this day, he could not decide whether Lachi had looked more becoming in her langa and red jacket or in her blue school skirt and white buttoned shirt.

One of the children, Seeta—Mallamma's daughter, by the colour of her skin and the twist in her upper lip—said slowly, 'You are telling us about fichi Lachi?' A muffled giggle made its way around the group, as it usually did when this girl spoke.

Avadhani nodded. 'Did you know that Lachi was once not pichi? Do you want to know what it was that drove her mad?'

The child looked up at the light doubtfully and back at Avadhani. Then she nodded.

Avadhani cleared his throat. 'Vijayalakshmi went to Dhavaleshwaram for her school studies. When she completed her matriculation, she came back here and married.' There was another catch in his throat. He himself had gone to Hyderabad for his Intermediate years. He and Lachi, he had thought back then, would be the most educated people in Palem. He had planned to talk to her father once she returned. After all, he had thought, what fear could he possibly have?

But Lachi had gone to town for studies, and had learnt some of the ways of a town girl. She had learnt to love.

'She killed her husband, didn't she?' Seeta asked Avadhani. Her upper lip curved upward and pointed at her cheek, resting in an impossible angle, as though it had been stitched into place. Two

her front teeth were always visible underneath. She sat in such a position that the light shone upon her grotesque half and shrouded the good half in darkness.

‘Yes, my dear,’ Avadhani said, smiling at her kindly. ‘But she loved her husband.’

‘Fhe killed him with a ftone,’ Seeta said. ‘On the head.’

The other children gasped. Chotu’s little mouth opened in a perfect circle and his eyes blinked up at Avadhani.

Avadhani said, ‘Chakali Sangayya was a drunk. He drank like a fish. And do you know what Vijayalakshmi did when his kidneys failed?’

‘What are kidneys?’

‘They are like hearts, Chotu. But we have two of them. In here.’ Avadhani poked himself in the ribs. ‘Do you know what she did? She gave him one of hers. I am telling you, kids, she loved him.’

‘But if she did...’

‘She went to the Shivalayam.’

They did not say anything. The light flickered.

‘Everyone in the village knows that you simply do not go to the Shivalayam at any time, let alone at night. Why Lachi went there that night, nobody knows. What she saw there, that also nobody knows. But that night, after Sangadu came back, drunk as usual, she fed him. And when he went to sleep, she went to the kitchen, picked up her rolling stone, went to the cot on which her husband was sleeping and...’

Avadhani stopped, looked meaningfully at the children, closed his right hand in a fist and pressed it silently into his left palm.

The kids gasped again.

‘Why...why did fhe kill him?’ Seeta asked.

‘She became mad. The next morning when the milkman called at their door, there she was with Sangadu’s head in her lap, the bloody stone by her side, and her hands, soaked in his blood, caressing his hair. She was singing to him.’

Yes, that same song.

Challani raja o Chandamama...

‘And when she saw Varadayya at the door, she smiled and nodded at him to come in. She lifted her bloody hand like this,’ and he stretched out his hand toward the children, ‘and beckoned him to come to her.’

The children shrank back. ‘Did Varadayya go?’

‘Oh, he went all right. He dropped his cans and ran from the house, and he ran and ran, stopping only when he got to Saraswatamma’s house. He told them everything and returned to the hut with a few servants.’

Avadhani brought his hand to his nose. As it always did when he thought of Lachi, it smelled of mangoes. He had gone to their shack, one summer afternoon, to get some mangoes. Their hands had touched when she placed the fruits in his hands. That was the only time he had ever touched her. The scent of mangoes... the scent of her touch would never leave him.

‘Then what happened, Thatha?’

Avadhani said, 'When Varadayya came back, they did not find her. People said they had seen her walk in the direction of the Shivalayam. Some say they saw her jump into the old well. Some say she ran away to another village. But all of them agree on one thing. All of them who claim to have seen her that day say that she had been laughing.'

'And no one has seen her since?'

'Not for a few years. Then people started seeing her around the shack and around the Shivalayam. She had killed Sangadu on a full moon night, so she came back on full moon nights and roamed the village, rock in hand.'

Chotu looked around, then stood up and hurried over to Avadhani's lap. The group huddled a little closer and no one said a word.

Then Avadhani said softly, 'I saw her too.'

The kids rose up in a titter. Avadhani silenced them with a wave of the hand and continued. 'It was only a year or two ago. I had to go to Dhavaleshwaram and I thought I would take a short cut through Erragadda canal. It was when I got close to the Shivalayam that I started to hear her.'

'Hear what?' they asked in chorus. 'Hear what, Thatha?'

'It was a very low sound at first, but slowly, as I got closer to the lingam, the jingle of her anklets grew louder. I looked up at the sky. It was a full moon. I had my radio to my ear. Do you know which song was playing?'

The kids nodded slowly.

Avadhani nodded along with them. 'Yes. Good. And then I saw her, right next to the lingam. She was sitting there with her legs splayed, as if she was washing clothes. She held a smooth rock in her hand, which she rubbed against the base of the lingam again and again. When I approached, she looked up at me and smiled.'

Avadhani paused and looked at their faces. The cot creaked under his weight. The moths flapped their wings against the bulb at jerky, unsteady intervals. The buzz of mosquitoes was constant.

'And then,' he said, 'she raised her hand towards me. She held out the rock and nodded to me, calling me closer.'

'Did you... go?'

'I wanted to. I took a few steps towards her. But then I saw that she was glowing. Everything around her was in the shadow of the Kalikadevi tree, but she... she *glowed*, children. Such a shine... all her... her white sari, her skin, even her fingernails, everything glowed. I saw her so clearly, as if it was a sunny afternoon. So I stopped.'

'She said, "Haan!" and nodded at me again. "Come!" she said to me. I took another step. But just at that moment, just as she was about to reach out and strike my skull with that rock, I heard a dog howl. That shook me back to my senses and I backed away.'

'Did she... come after you?'

'She wanted to! She got on her knees and reached out with the rock. "Come! Haan! It's me. Lachi!" But I backed away, faster and faster. And then I turned and ran. I ran for my life, boys, and if that dog had not howled at that moment, I would not be sitting here today.'

The light flickered one last time and went out. The sudden explosion of black washed over all of them and brought them closer to the cot. They sat in the darkness, each one nursing his own thoughts.

‘And when I ran away, do you know what song I heard behind me?’ Avadhani said. ‘She was singing that same song... singing it out to me.’

Another gasp. Some of them tentatively looked up at the moon. Chotu nestled deeper in Avadhani’s arms. Avadhani saw the outline of Chotu’s chest heave up and down. His breath was heavy, his body cold.

Then somebody—Avadhani could not tell who—spoke up. ‘But what made her like that, Thatha?’

Avadhani rocked Chotu in his arms in silence, until he felt the kid’s breathing return to normal. ‘She saw something at the Shivalayam that drove her crazy. And she is not the kind of person who would be easily scared. She was educated, remember? She studied in *English medium*.’

‘So whatever she saw—’

‘Yes, there is something there at the Shivalayam, boys. Something that will reach into your mind and scoop your brains out. That will rob your soul of all sanity and leave you as an empty shell of skin with nothing inside.’

Chotu shuddered. Avadhani began to rock him again. A song came to his lips and he sang softly. Low and clear, his voice punctured the stillness.

‘*Challani raja o Chandamama...*’

The last of the moths fell to the ground, broke its wings and died.



Little Heroes Save Day

AP Mirror

| Feb 22, 2001

Who says heroes exist only on TV? Last night, in the village of Rudrakshapalem in Dhavaleshwaram, two disabled boys brought down and overpowered a homicidal maniac who had been about to set the village on fire.

Saidulu, twelve, and Ramesh, fourteen, are close friends and spend practically every minute of the day in each other's company. Last night, as was their habit, they went for a walk in the direction of the Kalikadevi tree, where an old temple lies in ruins. Halfway to their destination, however, they saw a man pouring vessel after vessel of kerosene over bales of hay that stood in a row by the house of one of the village elders, Saraswatamma.

Arriving just in time, the two boys got into a fierce struggle with the man—a struggle that the boys won thanks to their resourcefulness. The man has been identified as Aravind Nookala, a man reportedly born in this very village, who had left the village as a child and is said to have returned last week.

There were other wounds found on Nookala's body, but most prominent are the ones on both sides of his head, presumably inflicted by Saidulu's crutches. His motives for wanting to burn the village down are still not clear, but the police have hinted that this might not be Nookala's only crime. He is yet to regain consciousness.

The boys have sustained minor injuries. A detailed report will follow.

News segment on *Ee Roju* presented by Sonali Rao

7:35 p.m.

| Feb 23, 2001 |

The story of the Palem man, who two nights ago attempted to set fire to his village, has now taken a new turn. Police investigations have found seven dead bodies at various locations in the village. Though they are reluctant to commit to anything certain at this stage, our sources close to the police believe that it is very likely that Mr Nookala was behind at least some of these killings. Saraswatamma, whose house was the closest to the scene of the night's events, is understandably quite rattled.

'Name?'

'Saraswatamma.'

'What do you do?'

'My husband is a landlord, Madam.'

'What happened here last night?'

Saraswatamma pointed in the direction of the bales of hay. ‘We keep them here to feed our cattle,’ she said. ‘It is dry hay, and the weather is so hot these days. Only god knows what would have happened if he had set fire to them.’

And he probably would have, if it were not for the courage and presence of mind shown by two young men. A short while ago, I had the opportunity to talk to Ramesh.

‘I don’t know why we turned in this direction,’ Ramesh said, rubbing his forehead with the back of his wrist and balancing himself on his crutches. ‘We normally go from the other side, crossing Avadhanayya’s house. For some reason yesterday, Saidulu said let us go from here, and I said yes.’ *Whatever it was that made them take that route, it is definitely not a stretch of imagination to say that if they had gone by their usual route, they would not be standing here with us right now.*

‘One look at him and I knew he was up to something bad,’ said Ramesh. ‘When he saw me, he came running and knocked my crutches off. He also slapped Saidulu, so hard that he fell to the ground and rolled some distance away.’

‘What were you feeling at that time?’

‘I was very angry. I was asking myself, “Why is he doing this? Why is Aravind Anna behaving like this?” I asked him about it.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He walked up to me and kicked me again and again—in my ribs, on my thighs, everywhere he could. He kept saying none of us deserved to live. He kept calling me a shameless dog.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘Then Saidulu found one of my crutches. He must have made his way to where we were by the sound of our voices. He crept up behind Aravind Anna and hit him on the head.’

The camera panned to reveal a second boy standing by Ramesh’s side. A thin, triangular face, endowed with monk-like serenity. A sharp, straight nose. Narrow, dark, out-of-focus eyes. Dilated pupils. He played with his empty right shirtsleeve.

‘I... I could tell they were to my left,’ he said. He bent his head at an angle as he spoke. Every once in a while, he shook his head in small, twitchy movements. ‘I groped and found Ramesh’s crutch. I picked it up and just swung it.’

‘How did you know which side they were on with such certainty?’

‘I... I just knew.’

Ramesh said, ‘We spend a lot of time together. He is very used to my voice.’

The microphone moved back to Saidulu.

‘Uh... then I felt fingers—*his* fingers—close around my throat and push me down to the ground. He sat on top of my chest and started punching me. I... I could not breathe.’ His fingers moved to his cheek and nursed a wound that was still tender.

‘I crawled over to where they were and hit him with one of my crutches,’ Ramesh said. ‘When he rolled over on his back, we both jumped on him and pinned him. But he kept hitting us. He kept slapping us. “Die, you mongrels,” he was saying, “Die, you motherless pieces of crap”.’

‘How did you feel then? Were you afraid?’

‘Very afraid. I thought I was going to die. We were trying our best to keep him down but he was hitting us so hard. Then he picked up my crutch.’

‘Did he hit you with it?’

‘Yes.’ Ramesh turned and lifted his shirt. A solid line of pink and purple ran across his back. The skin along the borders of the wound was swollen and had turned dark blue. Tiny spots, like perforations, appeared at irregular intervals along the length of the wound.

‘That was when Saidulu bent down and bit him in the thigh. Aravind Anna screamed. He was still shouting abuses at us to let him go. “Let me go, you scoundrels,” he said. “Let me go so that I can kill all of you.” Seeing Saidulu, I grabbed hold of his other thigh with my teeth.’

Saidulu said slowly, ‘He pulled our hair. He slapped us hard on the back. He did everything he could, but we did not let go.’

‘Then he started pleading with us,’ Ramesh said. ““Please let me go,” he said. “You are killing me”.’

‘But you did not let go.’

Saidulu and Ramesh shook their heads.

‘You were afraid that he would kill you if you let go.’

They nodded. ‘We knew he would definitely kill us if we let go. We just hoped that we could hold on long enough until someone from the village came there.’

‘Did someone come then?’

They shook their heads.

It would not be until early in the morning, when Lakshmayya, one of Saraswatamma’s servants, found the three of them unconscious by the bales of hay. The two boys had passed out in the arms of the attacker, and thankfully for them, he did not wake up before they did.

‘Lakshmayya?’

‘Haan, Amma.’

‘Where did you find Saidulu and Ramesh this morning?’

‘Near Mandiramma Banda. I take Tulasi out to the hay for a feed, and I find the boys and Aravind babu there, sleeping.’

‘What did you do?’

‘What to do, Amma? I go back and call Saraswatamma and Raji and Upender and Ellayya and everyone.’

‘What about the man?’

‘Aravind babu? He does not wake up. Even after doctors come and pick him up, he does not wake up. They said he is in a *coma* or something.’

‘Coma.’

‘Haan, yes, yes.’

We have received confirmation from the hospital that Aravind Nookala is still in a coma. Efforts are being made to revive him. But what can be done to revive the fallen spirits of the villagers here? The

something like this could happen in a quiet, sleepy little haven like Rudrakshapalem beggars believe. The parched earth, the quiet atmosphere, the Arthur Cotton dam and the Godavari in the distant background—everything looks so harmless, so innocent. Sometimes, it seems humanity chooses the strangest places to show its ugly side.

For Ee Roju, this is Sonali Rao.



‘One full, to Palem,’ Venkataramana said.

Coins wedged between his fingers, a pen tucked behind his ear, the conductor looked weary at the twenty-rupee note. Then he cast a leisurely eye at Venkataramana’s blue shirt, his white jeans, his black Nike shoes and his imported bag. ‘Got anything smaller?’ he asked, and then added, ‘Sir?’

Venkataramana shook his head.

The conductor sighed and grabbed the note. Muttering under his breath, he punched a hole in the ticket with his pen and scribbled something behind it. ‘I go as far as Dhavaleshwaram. You can take a cart from there to Palem.’

Venkataramana nodded and took the ticket. So nothing had changed in all this time then, he thought.

‘Why are you going to that dead village anyway?’ the conductor asked, sizing him up again.

‘I was born there.’

With the metal end of his ticket holder, the conductor tapped on the railing. The bus started moving. There were plenty of empty seats but the conductor, like all self-respecting practitioners of the trade, preferred to stand. He held his balance with a minimum of fuss, writing something down on a piece of checked paper.

Venkataramana closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. It was a hot morning and the trip was a long one. The last thing he wanted now was to have a pointless conversation with a bus conductor.

Buses had once held an almost unbearable fascination for him. In the first eight years of his life, he had taken a bus exactly three times.

‘My mother’s second cousin’s parents live in Palem,’ the conductor offered.

Venkataramana considered ignoring him and continuing the pretence of sleep, but a bead of sweat crawled down his temple and tickled his cheek. He rubbed it off with his handkerchief. ‘Hmm,’ he said.

‘The laziest people you will ever find,’ the conductor continued. ‘I tell you Sir, they invited us for their daughter’s wedding and the service was atrocious. Nobody used to wake up until at least eleven in the morning. You can forget about breakfast—you’re lucky if you get lunch on time.’

Venkataramana smiled. So something *had* changed in Palem. Back then, he recalled it had been a village of early risers. The bus manoeuvred its way through the traffic at Hyderabad Central. His shirt was already soaked. It wouldn’t be until they reached the outskirts and the bus picked up some real speed that the breeze would bring some relief.

‘Flyovers, flyovers, flyovers,’ the conductor said, looking distastefully at the flying dust. ‘I was a young boy when they started this one, Sir. Sometimes I feel it will be better if I go back to my village and till the land. There is *honour* in tilling the land, you know.’ He flipped each bundle of tickets, one by one. His body swayed continuously to balance itself. ‘And the traffic. Sometimes I feel it will be nice to go back to Godavarikani. I am from Godavarikani, Sir.’

Venkataramana nodded.

‘My mother keeps asking me to come, but my wife... my wife does not want to leave.’

Venkataramana looked up for the first time at the man’s face. All conductors looked alike, he mused. Just like all policemen and all postmen. It must be the uniform. And the things they carried. When you looked at a conductor, you did not really notice his face. You noticed the leather boots, the soiled khaki dress, the ticket holder, the coins between his fingers. And the impersonal tone in which he grunted and said, ‘Right, right.’

But this man had a face, Venkataramana observed. Not a great face, but a face all the same. He has a house in the village, a mother who waits for him there, a father probably dead, a nagging wife who doesn’t allow him to bring his mother to live with them, maybe a young daughter who goes to school. He dreams of going back to the village, to a simpler time and a simpler place, away from the bustle. He probably knows that it will never happen, which makes the dream all the sweeter.

The man looked at him and smiled in resignation. He had caught the meaning in Venkataramana’s glance. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘My son is in fifth class now. After his school is finished and he finds a job, I think I will go back to Kani and till the land. Back to where I began. Back to my roots, you know?’

Venkataramana heard the unsaid words too. *Back to my mother, you know?* He nodded. ‘I am sure you will.’

‘There is *honour* in that, Sir.’

Honour. There was no honour in issuing tickets to passengers. And there was no recognition. Here he was a nameless, faceless entity masked by the khaki uniform and the ticket holder. Here, he was a conductor and would never be anything more. In his village, he would be surrounded by people he knew. He would be called by his name and be invited to participate in local festivals and customs, but here he would be *someone*.

‘Why are you going to Palem, Sir?’

Venkataramana smiled at him. ‘For the same reasons you told me just now.’ He did not tell him the real reason, of course, because he did not know it himself. For seventeen years of his life in the city, three of which had been spent in Australia, he had not thought of Palem and his old life with anything but detachment.

It had all started with that letter...

‘Oh, oh, people coming.’ They had reached the main bus stop. Through the windshields, Venkataramana saw a throng of people scrambling over each other towards the bus. Some of the younger men jumped in even before it had come to a stop. On both sides, people threw handkerchiefs through the open windows onto the seats.

Venkataramana hurriedly scooted and occupied the window seat.

‘I have to go and attend to my duties now, Sir,’ the conductor said, stepping away. ‘If Seetayya and Vishalakshamma are still living in Palem and if they are still alive, tell them I said namaskaaram.’

And with a smart salute that looked quite honourable, he walked off.

Alighting from the cart at exactly 12:10 p.m., Venkataramana crossed the muddy road and made his way to Mahender Reddy’s paan shop. He felt no nostalgia, no memories came rushing to him. He felt as if he had been there yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. Nothing had changed.

They had still not corrected the spelling of 'Mahender' on the signboard at the front. Oodles of Crisco nut powder and 7 o'clock shaving blades hung down from the roof. The glass display case still stacked endless packs of Gold Flake and Charminar cigarettes. To the left, occupying a good third of the counter, sat the tools of every paan shop owner worth his salt—betel leaves, nuts, aluminium foil, jarda, a box of red-and-yellow sweetener ribbons and a bowl of cherries. The row of open tins at the front contained sweets of all kinds. He noted that his favourite Poppins tin was still there.

The man sitting behind the counter was the illusion-breaker. He was young—not more than a boy—and smooth-faced. Where had Mahender Mama gone?

'How much for Poppins?' he asked.

'Two rupees.'

It had been fifty paise then.

'Give me one. And one Thums-up.'

'Cold is ten rupees. No-cold is eight rupees.'

'I will take cold.'

The boy tried not to watch him while he drank. There was something of Mahender Mama in him. Venkataramana thought, though he could not place the resemblance exactly. He saw a flicker of the old man when the boy sneered at him. Yes, he had the same thin, feminine eyebrows.

'Where is Mahender Mama?'

'Dead. He got the coughing fever last year. Coughed continuously for a year. Doctor said he will get better. He didn't.'

The Thums-up was stale. But it was cold. Ramana licked his lips and thought of some Black Lab on ice. The best you could get here in Palem was toddy at Rathayya's hovel, and that too only after dark. For now, Thums-up would have to do.

'You are not from here,' the boy said. His eyes asked, 'Why are you here?'

'I am originally from here. I was born here.'

The boy raised his eyebrows and twitched his nostrils. 'Whose son are you?'

'I used to live with my uncle. You must know his name. Narsayya.'

'Oh Narsayya, yes. He moved to the city a long time ago. Nanna used to get letters from him when he was alive. But since last year...' he shrugged and opened a cigarette pack. After lighting one and taking a puff, he held the pack out in Venkataramana's direction.

Venkataramana shook his head and looked away. The road to the village stretched out in front of him, baked in the afternoon sun. On either side of the road, roofed by parched straw and held together with brittle, muddy walls, stood huts of various sizes. Names rushed into his head—that one with the white curly patterns on the wall was Poshamma's, that one with the crude gate had to be Daanayya's, this one with the hole in the door was Ibrahim Bhai's and that one...

He stepped out into the sun and immediately felt his neck burn. He walked along the bend in the curve past Karnam Prabhakarayya's house (it had a compound wall and a gate now, he noted) and stopped at the Gandhi statue near the school. It was a little worn from what he remembered, but there it stood, nice and tall. It was here that they used to line up on Independence Day and salute the flag.

Now a couple of crows sat on Gandhi's head and clawed at one another for territory, cawing and

screeching.

At the bottom of the statue a figure stood hunched, shoulders raised, holding something in his hands. He looked like a circus clown walking on stilts. On moving closer, Venkataramana saw that they were crutches. He was dressed in a smart white shirt and grey pants, the trouser legs fluttering about in the hot, dry breeze.

The cawing of the crows got louder. Another crow joined the scuffle atop the statue.

The boy looked at him and frowned.

‘What have you got there?’ Venkataramana asked. The boy was holding in his hands a perfectly shaped paper boat. ‘That is very nice.’

The boy looked down at the boat and back up at him. Without a word, he held it out to him.

‘Oh no,’ Venkataramana said. ‘You should keep it. You must be very good with your hands.’ He tried not to let his glance drop below the boy’s waist. *Ask him about anything but the legs.* ‘Don’t you have school today?’

‘School starts at one.’

The group of crows had descended to the ground. There were about seven or eight of them now, clawing and scratching one another. Around them, nothing stirred but the boy’s empty trouser legs. He had seen the boy somewhere before. Without the goat-like hair covering his chin and upper lip. But he looked no more than twelve, this boy. And Venkataramana had not visited the village in seventeen years.

A song popped into his mind. *Woh kaagaz ki kashti, woh baarish ka paani...*

Sweat poured down his forehead and dripped onto the cracked ground. It was supposed to be spring, he thought. It was supposed to be *harvest* season. Why was everything so dried up? This was the Godavari belt, wasn’t it? The Arthur Cotton dam was not more than a mile away. Irrigation should not be a problem. Then why was the ground so parched?

The boy took no notice of him. He kept staring at the boat in his hand. *Woh kaagaz ki kashti...*

The group of fighting crows had grown bigger now, numbering about fifteen. Venkataramana noticed that all the crows were poking and clawing at one crow in the middle. It kept trying to take wing and fly away but the other crows would not let it. Every time it tried to jump away from its attackers, they would pin it down with their beaks and scratch its sides.

The boy looked at the spectacle too. When Venkataramana took a step towards the crows, the boy said, ‘Don’t.’

‘Don’t what?’

‘Don’t scare them away.’

‘I want to save the bird.’

‘Don’t,’ he said, looking back at his boat. ‘Don’t you know that crows punish their flock members by killing it? Justice has to be done.’

He looks like a baby version of some sort of anti-buddha, Venkataramana decided. The boy’s face carried serenity, yes, but it was masking something volatile under the surface. Much like this cracked earth.

Venkataramana took another step towards the screeching birds.

‘No! Don’t!’

Good one, Ramana. You’re being told what to do by a boy. A cripple.

Two crows mounted the criminal crow and pinned it to the ground.

What is he going to do? Beat you up with those crutches of his?

Two others started pecking the criminal’s eyes out. The air filled with a cacophony of caws, the loudest coming from the victim.

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle; I am scared of the cripple.

The cawing reduced. One by one the crows started to disperse. But two of them remained to peck the wounded carcass. The legs of the dead crow had folded on top of themselves and gone limp. The attackers, though, hacked away mercilessly.

‘They are going to eat it,’ the boy said.

Venkataramana said, ‘That’s rubbish. Crows are not cannibalistic. They—’ He caught himself and stared.

One of the crows held the leg of the dead crow in its beak and stretched it. The other pecked at the flesh until it gave way. Once the limb got dismembered, they held the ends and pulled in opposite directions until each one had a piece. Seemingly satisfied with their respective spoils, they stepped away to feed before coming back for the other leg.

‘No,’ Venkataramana said, shaking his head in disbelief and disgust.

The boy did not say anything. He turned and stepped away from the Gandhi statue, in the direction of the school building. ‘I have to go,’ he said. ‘I have homework.’

Venkataramana walked up to the statue and picked up the paper boat from the pedestal. The boy had left it behind. From the side, the cawing of the crows had become softer and more contented, presumably because their hunger was satiated. Without thinking, he started unfolding the paper boat bit by bit. His neck and his back seemed to be on fire. His knees and hands shivered. He thought of two things at the same time.

Woh kagaz ki kashti, woh baarish ka paani...

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle; I am scared of the cripple.



Cricket. So many crickets.

They seemed to be everywhere. Chanti had caught a cricket the night before in front of his house. He had used two sticks from the broom to pin it by the wings. It had not struggled to get away. It had merely leaned forward, lifted its legs and scratched itself under the wings. He had wanted to squash it to stop that horrible noise, but he only had the two thin broom sticks for weapons. And he was too afraid to squash it with his hand. It had such big eyes. And so many.

It was the season of crickets. They made that sound because they wanted to get married, his mother had once told him. They got married, and then had baby crickets who would get married the next year and have more baby crickets who would come back the following year to get married—there was just no end to it. The only way out of it was to kill them all. One day he would squash them all. No, not with his hands. With a hammer. Yes, maybe when he was as old as Aravind.

They were walking through the babul bushes down the narrow path to the Shivalayam.

‘Thorns,’ Venkarataramana said. ‘Thorns everywhere.’

Aravind did not turn back. ‘These are babul bushes, Ramana. You expect thorns.’

‘We should have brought a torch.’

It was Sarayu’s idea that they did not need a torch. But there was no blaming her. How was she to know that the clouds would gather with such haste?

‘It better not rain,’ Venkataramana said sulkily.

Sarayu did not say anything. Her anklets were the only sounds that accompanied the harried croaking of the crickets. Chanti had always liked the sound of her anklets—the smoothness of her hair too, but mainly her anklets—but now, with thorns strewn upon their dark path and with their destination just coming into view as a black shadow looming ahead of them, he wished she had come bare-footed. The sound, sweet though it was, was beginning to get creepy.

‘Why are we going to the Shivalayam? Thatha said—’

‘Chotu, if you are feeling scared, run back to the house,’ Aravind had snapped.

Ghal. Ghal. Ghal.

He wouldn’t run back, of course. It was a good two kilometres to Chotu’s house. Hell, Chanti knew that even he himself would have wet his pants if he had to walk back to his house alone. If there had been a time to pull out of this, it was at Thatha’s house. Chanti wished he had. But Aravind had given him the ‘run home to Mother, kid’ look. How he hated that look!

They came to the lingam and stood near it in a huddle. Behind it, the Kalikadevi tree stood silhouetted by the silvery grey clouds, extending its branches downward in a canopy. It was stupid, he knew, but the tendrils at the ends of the branches nearest to them looked like fingers. Any moment now, one of them would snap him up. The lingam would open at the top and Chotu would disappear under it, screaming and snatching.

Something moved under the leaves. Lizards probably. *Or snakes.*

From somewhere close by, beyond the tree and just out of view, a dog whimpered; a low, whine sound that went on for eleven interminable seconds. Chanti counted out each second.

He heard the clack of knees next to him. Venkataramana's bow legs were shivering. Chotu's hands tightened around his. The only ones that made no sound or movement were Aravind and Sarayu. How nice it would be to hear the sound of her anklets just about now?

Aravind bent down and picked up a stick. 'Aravind, Thatha told us a story,' Chanti said. His voice sounded very small and insignificant, like an echo coming from a distant place. All Chanti could hear was the whimpering of the dog. 'And I want to see if Lachi will come here tonight.'

'Are there... snakes here?' Venkataramana asked.

'I want to ask her what she is doing here. I want to know whom she wants to kill.'

'How do you know she wants to kill someone?' Sarayu asked. She moved a little and her ankle jingled. Why was she even listening to what Aravind was saying? Who cared what Lachi wanted? Thatha had told them never to go to the Shivalayam. Chanti wondered for a second if he should turn back and leave. Let Aravind do what he wanted. Let him *die*.

'Dead people don't hang around if their job here is done. If they don't leave us, it means they want *revenge*.'

'But she was crazy,' Sarayu said.

'Was she?' Aravind walked around the lingam, tapping at it with the stick. 'Oye, Ramana, come here. Chanti, Chotu, come.' He reached into his pocket and held out his hand. 'Here, tamarind gum. It will keep you safe.'

None of them asked what for. They held out their hands.

'Ouch!' he said and slapped his wrist. 'Mosquitoes.' He bent down and picked up the piece of gum. He touched each of their hands with the gum. It was sticky. 'Keep touching it now and then.'

None of them asked why. Chanti immediately started dabbing a finger on the sticky spot of her palm. It got stickier and stickier with each touch. *I cannot see the others, but I bet they're doing it too*, he thought. *Yes, even Sarayu.*

They sat down around the lingam, holding hands. Sarayu's hand in his felt limp and lifeless. Even now and then, he would release the pressure on her palm and dab his finger on the sticky smudge. The crickets had stopped croaking now. The night was once again silent. They were far away from the village. Sitting like a bunch of goats waiting to be butchered. That is, if goats held hands. They had tamarind gum on their hands too. Some pickle to go with the meat. *Pichi Lachi* would come any time now and pick them off, one by one.

Will she come with a rock? With that old rolling stone stained with Chakali Sangadu's blood?

Why was it so damned silent?

Or did she have a new rock now—a brand new rock for a brand new slaughter.

Why were Sarayu's anklets not making any sound? He reached out with his foot and tapped against hers.

Ghal. Ghal. Ghal.

He stopped. That was no better. In fact, it was much worse. It made him think of women's feet. C

Lachi's feet. Did she have feet, first of all? If she did, were they turned around the other way? Did she still have teeth after all these years?

Teeth or fangs?

His eyes closed. The branches of the tree swayed in the breeze and made rustling—n rumbling—noises. He drifted off into semi-consciousness. The last thing he saw that night was the image of an old woman clad in white, the edge of her sari draped around her faceless head, two curved, conical fangs protruding from nothingness where her mouth should have been, and a vertical slit tongue showing itself every now and then before vanishing behind the featureless whiteness. And her hands were the long, slender branches of the Kalikadevi tree, swaying in the breeze, wrapped around a smooth, oval rock. There was no blot on it. *A new rock for a new goat.*

And the last thing he heard was a soft, thudding sound. Nice and slow. Slow and rhythmic.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

It was the beating of his heart.

‘She did not come.’ Aravind’s voice was bitter with disappointment. ‘And where the hell is Chotu?’

Chanti kept his eyes closed for a moment longer, savouring the relief. Whether Lachi had come for them or not last night, the fact that he was able to hear Aravind’s words was proof—sweet proof indeed—that he was still alive. How nice it was to be alive.

‘Why do you think she did not come?’ Sarayu’s voice sounded so much sweeter this morning. Last night, it had felt like someone had their hand wrapped around her throat. She had spoken in short, desperate gasps and snaps. Now, there was the old lilt to her voice that he liked so much. ‘Don’t worry about Chotu, he probably woke up before us and walked back to the village.’

He waited for the sound of her anklets.

‘I don’t *know*,’ Aravind said. Even Aravind’s voice had smoothed from last night. Yes, it was definitely good to be alive. Maybe she was scared of our tamarind gum. I should not have brought it but for these... mouses.’

‘Mice,’ Sarayu corrected.

‘Next time, I will come alone. Next time, I will *not* bring any of these fellows. I will come without tamarind gum. When she comes, I will ask her—’

‘I will come with you.’

‘Are you crazy? There will be no gum on your hands.’

A second’s silence. Then, again, ‘I will come with you.’

Chanti heard her move, but there was no sound. He opened his eyes. She was sitting up against the lingam with her arms wrapped around her knees. The hem of her skirt hitched up.

‘Right,’ said Aravind. ‘Let’s wake the others up and go home. Not a word to your parents about where we spent the night, okay?’

Chanti nodded absently.

‘Hey,’ Aravind was saying to Sarayu, ‘where are your anklets?’

Yes, her anklets. If it were not for them, wouldn’t he have gone crazy last night? Was there a sweeter sound in this world than the sound of Sarayu’s anklets? Chanti did not think so. He smiled.

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