

'The Door! Open the Door!'

The door stood closed, snugly perched inside its frame.

It was a warm, balmy night. The clock inside the room struck one, with a sonorous 'tingg' that echoed through the wood, and into the ears of Gopala Rao. A minute passed, as he stood waiting, each second sending his mind into a spiral of guilt. Sensing that he was in trouble, he began to mutter to himself.

'Ahh, I'm so late! My brains are turning to mush with every sunset. From tomorrow, I shall be more vigilant.'

The door remained shut. Gopala Rao's midnight musings continued.

'Ahhh, why did I ever start going to the courtesans! Ten Days—every day! And today, as if the song and dance didn't go on long enough, this fool waited for hours for a chance to speak to the dancers. What an utter idiot I am!'

The door stood as still as it had been since he arrived. As seconds turned into minutes, Gopala Rao's self-depreciation turned into a series of self-proclamations.

'From tomorrow, forget about attending, let alone waiting. I shall not even leave the home. Yes, I shall not go! It is done! It is done!'

Aware that there was no one to bear witness to his grandiose statements, Gopala Rao's affirmations became self-interrogations, about his current predicament— being stuck outside the door at one in the morning. As the sound of chirping crickets rose and fell, he asked himself:

'Shall I knock loudly and risk waking Kamalini, or shall I knock softly and wake Ramudu? If only the fool wakes up and does his damned job...'

His hand hovered near the door, then lightly pressed upon it. The door swung open. It had been unlocked all along.

'Arrey!' He exclaimed in a low voice, as he stepped into the pitch darkness of the home. Walking instinctively through the hall, and into the bedroom, Gopala Rao tried his best to estimate whether Kamalini was awake or asleep, but his frazzled mind could not reach a conclusion.

The room's central feature was an ornate four-poster bed, with intricately carved flowers on its rectangular edges. Silently groping around on the table next to the bed, his fingers clasped a box of matches, kept in its usual place next to the oil lamp. As he struck a matchstick and held it up, its yellow-blue flame cast a soft glow on the white mattress upon the bed. The sleeping figure of Kamalini that he was hoping to see, was not present. As he stood staring at the empty bed, the shimmering whiteness of the sheets stared back at him, underlining her absence.

The match-flame reached Gopala Rao's fingertips, scorching them slightly. With a whimper, he let go of the stick. It fell to the floor, its flame going out with a gentle puff, plunging both the room and Gopala Rao's heart, into a vacuous darkness. A hundred frenzied questions began to flood his mind, each accompanied by even more frenzied answers.

Stifling the brewing storm in his head, angry at himself, and worried for Kamalini, Gopala Rao picked up the matchbox again, and the oil lamp next to it. Striking a second matchstick, and bringing it to the wick, he lit the lamp. In its flickering light, he looked hard at every corner of the bedroom, hoping to see Kamalini appear from the shadows. But to no avail—the room was empty. The giant bed seemed to look back at him, stoic and silent.

Holding the lamp, he walked back into the hall, his eyes sweeping it from edge to edge, his heart straining with hope that perhaps she had fallen asleep there, as she sometimes did. The hall was as empty as it had been minutes ago. It became clear to Gopala Rao that despite his childish desire for the contrary, Kamalini was not at home.

Dejected and confused, he stepped out onto the outer courtyard. The clouds made way for moonlight to stream onto the little garden, and a man's frame revealed itself. Standing in the corner, dressed in a raggedy tunic and pyjama, gazing at the star-speckled sky, blowing puffs of smoke into the air, was the househelp— Ramudu.

'Orrey Ramudu!' Gopala Rao's yell pierced the air, briefly drowning out the sound of chirping crickets.

Ramudu's languid midnight reverie broke in an instant, his heart leaping into his mouth with a loud 'Jhalluuu' that only he could hear. Startled, as he turned around, the beedi in his mouth dropped onto the grass, its embers breaking off and glowing for a split second, then doused out by the night air.

'Come here, you fool!'

Dragging his feet, a sleepy-looking Ramudu slowly walked towards Gopala Rao.

'Where is your "Amma"?'

Ramudu was in a daze. 'My Amma? She's at home, Sire! In my village. Where else would she be?'

Gopala Rao stood blinking for a moment, not sure whether his househelp was attempting to make a joke. As Ramudu innocently stared back at him, he realized that the statement had been made with utmost seriousness.

'I meant Amma—not your mother, you moron! I meant my wife. Where is Amma?'

Ramudu realized his mistake and quickly corrected it.

'Ahh, Amma! Ummm... Amma would be resting in the inner quarters! Where else would she be, Sire?'

'She is not inside the house! And where were you all this time?'

With a long face, Ramudu said, 'Sire, your humble servant had a severe ache in his stomach and his legs. Unable to sleep, he wanted to soothe himself with a quick smoke.'

'Amma is missing! And instead of knowing where she is, here you are—referring to yourself in the third person!'

Grabbing Ramudu by the shoulder and making him bend down, Gopala Rao swung his palm on the man's back. A sonorous thud reverberated across the courtyard, coupled with Ramudu's loud yell of pain—'Ayyyaaaa!'

Ramudu fell down to the ground, his hand reaching for his back.

Gopala Rao realized that he had clapped the man much harder than he intended to.

'Sorry Ramudu, my anger got the better of me.'

Helping a wincing Ramudu up, Gopala Rao took him inside, the lamp's glow revealing the homely void.

'See...what mirage of emptiness is this?'

'Yes, a mirage it is, Sire...'

'She must have gone to her parent's house.'

Gopala Rao placed the lamp on the table in the hall, and sat on a chair next to it.

'Pardon me, Sire, but if women are taught to read and write, this is exactly what they do.'

Gopala Rao looked at Ramudu with a glint of anger in his eyes. 'What do you know, you fool? Don't you dare spout your silly opinions!'

Unsure what to do next, and tired from his long evening, he drew up his legs, hugging his knees. As his gaze moved across the tabletop, a neatly folded piece of paper caught his attention. Reaching out and opening it, he recognized the rounded loops and curved horns of the Telugu letters—it was Kamalini's handwriting.

'Ramudu, hold up the lamp near me! She has left a letter.'

As Ramudu held the lamp close, Gopala Rao began reading aloud: 'Mister...'

Gopala Rao stopped after the first word, his eyes slanted into a shrewd look of fear.

'Mister? Mister? This is bad...this is really bad! She always begins with "My Love"...'

He continued reading...

*Mister,*

*I trust you are doing well. I am sure the evening revelries would have refreshed you. But knowing you well, the guilt of keeping this secret from me must have lessened your enjoyment. As for me, the last 10 days have been horrible. I cannot bear to put you in a situation where you have to lie every single day, soiling your exalted morals. Yet, the situation is not complicated. You need not lie, if there is no person to be lied to. It is logical to me, that my presence is the cause of your lies. And hence, I am leaving. So that you don't have to lie. May your morals be more and more exalted each day. And henceforth, each night.*

*Kamalini*

Finishing the letter, Gopala Rao looked up at Ramudu, just in time to see him snigger silently. With his head bowed down, he muttered.

'Yes Ramudu, go ahead. You should laugh at me. I am an animal.'

'No Sire, not at all! Please don't speak that way!'

'Yes, I am. A fool and an animal...'

Ramudu let out another snigger, this time not suppressing it.

'Pardon me, Sire, but I have said this before as well. An educated woman will make her own decisions. And always the wrong ones. It's your fault for marrying a woman who has gone to school since she was a child.'

Gopala Rao's eyes now turned red with anger.

'SHUT UP! You fool! Don't say another word! An educated woman is the moral torchbearer of the world. And Kamalini was...is...the torchbearer of my morals. And now she is gone.'

Ramudu stared at his employer with a half-smile, as if pitying him.

Gopala Rao wailed, 'Even Lord Shiva gave half his body to Parvati. Even the Englishman calls his wife "the better half". And now I am reduced to half of what I was.'

Ramudu stood silently, nodding.

'Do you understand?'

'I don't, Sire.'

'Aaargghhh! Forget it. We are sending your daughter to school, aren't we? She too is being educated from a young age. As she grows older, you will find out what a blessing an educated woman is. Until then, you just do your job.'

A look of determination and resolve appeared on Gopala Rao's face.

'Okay now listen, Ramudu. I have to be in town for the next three days. I have already committed to professional engagements. And despite the fool you are, I trust you. So, you go to Chandranagar town and persuade Kamalini to come back.'

'As you command, Sire. But what if she says no?'

'Persuade her. Do everything you can to convince her that I will not repeat my mistakes. Here are ten rupees. I will give you ten more if you succeed. When you succeed.'

Ramudu took the ten rupee note.

'Sire, I will simply tell her that you got very angry when you found out about her leaving. And you clapped my back so hard that even the crickets stopped chirping for a moment. So Amma, please come back home.'

Gopala Rao's face went pale with fear.

'No No No Ramudu, please don't tell her that I hit you!'

He fished another ten rupees out.

'Here's an extra ten. Please don't tell her I hit you. Listen to me carefully. This is what you have to tell her:

"Your old man has finally come to his senses. He has sworn that he will never visit the courtesans again. He will never even leave the house at night. He will stay indoors and behave himself. Without your presence, he is already turning into a sad sack. Every second without you feels like an eon to him. Please return. Henceforth, he will be a reformed man.'

Ramudu looked at Gopala Rao with a blank stare. A hint of a smile began to appear on his face, which he stopped just before it could turn into a full grin. The oil in the lamp was almost over, and the flame had become shorter and dimmer.

'Ramudu, what is so funny? Repeat what I just told you. What will you say to her?'

Scratching his head, Ramudu said, 'Sire, this is too much for me to remember. I am just going to tell her: "Amma, please listen to me. I am older than you, and have seen the ways of the world. You may be educated, but it doesn't matter. A good woman should let her husband do what he wants to. In this case, your husband seems to be going the way of his elder brother, if you know what I mean. He will be a lost cause if you also leave him. So just come back, and let him have his evening fun. Your duty is to bear with all his whims.'

Gopala Rao was aghast at every word that Ramudu had uttered. Moments passed, as he fully processed what Ramudu was saying to him.

The oil in the lamp had run out. With a gentle puff, the light went out, plunging the hall into pitch darkness again. Their eyes accustomed by now to the darkness, the two men could see each other's silhouettes.

'Ramudu, you hopeless fool! How dare you speak that way to Kamalini?'

With a loud yell, Gopala Rao charged at Ramudu, hand raised, prepared to clap his back again. Anticipating the attack, Ramudu ran away, across the dark hall and into the even darker bedroom. Gopala Rao entered the room, his eyes scanning hard for Ramudu. The two men stood huffing, unsure of what to do next. In the dimness of the room, the dark silhouette of the bed made its presence felt, in its unsparing silence. With each passing moment, the silence began to feel denser and heavier. The still air of the night seemed to be full of Kamalini's absence.

Suddenly, yet steadily- from underneath the bed, arose the musical clanging of bangles; and a hearty laugh, full of mirth and mischief, rang across the room.

In the photograph's aesthetic interest in the marketplace of affect and necessity, we saw a reasonable correspondence with the story's subject matter.