

Ramulamma had delivered Lisa, under the strangest circumstances, on a wild stormy night, sent for by Suresh Reddy garu himself, and taken to his ancestral mansion in his own car. The birth had been natural, without any complications, but the pedda saru had been anxious and could not be displeased. When she held Lisa in her hands for the first time, still covered in the slime of the after-birth, somehow Ramulamma knew their lives were joined forever, this little black thing and herself.

Lisa herself, right from the beginning treated her like a mother, looking out for her when she came, following her obediently when she was around, allowing her liberties she allowed no one else. Though a female, she turned out to be bigger and stronger than most of her breed, and her intelligence was no less than that of the people around her. Ramulamma did not teach her tricks, she would not demean 'a daughter' that way, but she spoke to Lisa constantly, and warned and instructed her even better with a slight touch on her head or neck.

One day coming through the gates of the mansion, Ramulamma immediately knew a great tragedy had struck the great household just by looking at Lisa crouched on the floor and the deep sorrowful look in her eyes. Suresh Saru had passed away quite suddenly. He had returned home unexpectedly, saying he was tired, had refused lunch, but drunk three large tumblers full of water, and then sat down and died peacefully. Such a tragedy had not hit that great house for as long as anyone could remember. All the masters had died at a ripe old age, with middle-aged sons to take care of the family and estates. Suresh Reddy left behind a single four-year-old son, and his wife was no great dorasani either, since he had dutifully followed his father's wishes and married a poor country cousin. Who could she turn to, to manage their affairs, whispered all the people? She possessed not one speck of the abilities of her dead husband, who had single-handed and in short time restored the fortunes of the great house after three generations of dissolution, debt, and disgrace. No one had thought the short unassuming youngster Suresh had been could do it. He had still been in engineering college when the old man died, but with the initial assistance of a few rich men who liked and trusted him, and wanted to help for the sake of the family, he had built up a very prosperous construction business with very hard work, and some good luck. His elder brother Madhu, following the lordly ways of the older generations, had died in debt and delirium tremens before he could see a turn in the family fortunes. The first chance he got, Suresh Reddy had paid off all the family debts, scrupulously divided the property, settled the portion due to his widowed sister-in-law, and having made his younger brother master of his own money, still supported him through college. But Sikander, who grew up as a rakishly handsome young blood, had neither the diligence of his elder brother, nor the natural graces of the nawabi friend of his father's after whom he was named. He generously indulged in all the lusts of the flesh he thought natural to his station in life, and which his good looks enabled him to acquire with ease. When he had turned to Suresh Reddy for some accommodation to pay his debts, he had met with surprising inflexibility from his soft-spoken brother, who had told him to mend his ways and live within his means. And now, by great ill-luck, the guardianship of the family's fortunes, which had been painfully restored by Suresh Reddy at the cost of his own life, as it now became clear, had fallen into the hands of a dangerous, unprincipled rake, in the opinion of all who served the estate.

Rukmini, Suresh Reddy's widow, was however very willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. She had been frozen into shock by the tragedy that had befallen her young life,

leaving her alone and defenceless in a large mansion and the even larger world of a great family. Many girls were prepared from childhood to play the role of a dorasani, but she came from a humble home and had been pitchforked into an unexpected great alliance on the whimsical wish of her dead father-in-law who had been a childhood friend of her father's. Her husband when he had the time had tried his best to educate her up to her position, but she was naturally shy, and he was indulgent, never expecting his life would be suddenly cut short. Sikander who arrived within an hour of hearing of the tragedy was unexpectedly considerate, and melted her stricken heart by clutching her feet and weeping over them. He told her from then on he would be a Hanuman for her, and worship her as his Sita Devi. He picked up little Ramesh and kept kissing him, refusing to let anyone handle the fatherless boy. He took charge of all arrangements. He met everybody, did everything. Everyone was so unsettled by what had happened no one knew what to make of him.

Sikander seemed to have changed over completely. Perhaps, said people, a sudden shock could change the worst of us, at least that's what seemed to have happened with Sikander. The skeptics said he would slip into his old ways, once the first shock was over, but no, he continued being thoughtful and responsible. He saw to it that his bereaved sister-in-law was as comfortable as she could be. Everyday after breakfast he would ceremoniously meet her along with Suresh Reddy's faithful munim, give her a short clear account of all that had happened the previous day, explain what he intended to do that day, take her permission, and then give his orders to the munim or anyone else. He had a disused room converted into his bedroom, was punctilious in maintaining the household as his brother had left it, and remained inconspicuous when not working ostensibly in his sister-in-law's and his nephew's interest.

As the weeks changed into months, Sikander would leave for the city for a few days, profusely apologizing for his going away to attend to his 'own business.' The dejected Rukmini came to rely on him more and more, and when asked would refer all matters to Sikander maridi.

Once when Ramulamma passed the munim squatting on his cushions by his ledger stand on the verandah, she said exploringly: "Oh, Munim Babu! Now that you have only Sikander Saru to look at your accounts, life must be pretty easy?" He did not reply immediately. He looked at his ledger, made an entry, closed it with satisfaction, and looking at her over the top of his spectacles said briefly: "He is all right." With that he got up and went away. She was somewhat reassured. He did not feel it necessary to share with anyone that he himself had still reached no verdict on his master's brother. Sikander garu some days ago had made a cautious enquiry, and to prevent further explorations of any kind, he had shown him all the accounts neatly updated. His master Suresh, now to be worshipped in heaven, had left everything completely tied up in long-term investments that could not be dissolved without serious questions being raised. Sikander garu had declared himself satisfied, and he had judiciously left it at that. His master's brother could order all the Scotch whisky he wanted, and tins of 555 cigarettes, and other luxuries, which the honour of the house never grudged anyone. But that was all he could dissolve from the wealth of the future light of the house, at least as long as he himself was alive, and he had no intention whatever of dying before a ripe old age.

Life was settling down into a new stable pattern when Ramulamma spied that ne'er-do-well Gopal Reddy walk boldly into the house with Sikander Saru. She had just bathed

and dried Lisa, but she was so agitated by the sight that she kept brushing Lisa vigorously till the dog got tired of it and gave a playful nip on her hand. What was that man doing in this house, and could he really be a friend of her master's brother? Well, she wouldn't raise the matter with anyone for now, after all it was the greatest house in the region, and so many people, some very welcome and others tolerated did come there on some business or the other.

Three weeks later she had returned with some medicinal herbs Rukmini amma had requested and found the mistress in the kitchen, somewhat cross, ordering lunch for her brother-in-law and his guest Gopal Reddy garu. So the two were friends, or at least good acquaintances, or maybe that Gopal Reddy was trying to drag Sikander Saru into some shady affair? Ramulamma sat under a shady peepul tree to eat her own lunch and thought the matter over. She carefully brought to mind the previous history of the younger brother which everyone was in haste to forget, really in the hope that he had turned over a new leaf and that the child master and lonely widow were not without loyal family support. Well, he had behaved very well since the shock of his elder brother's death, but then men know how to dissemble on occasion, particularly a clever one like Sikander. Do men grow morals and conscience all of a sudden? She had been a fool in her anxiety to think it possible. But if he were cleverly hatching a plot why did he openly entertain a fellow like Gopal Reddy? Who would say anything? She was one of the few people who knew what sort of person Gopal Reddy was, and, yes, perhaps the munim, but he was trained to say nothing. Rukmini amma was too innocent to know anything about a man like Gopal Reddy. But in believing this, the sagacious Ramulamma miscalculated the instinctive shrewdness of her sheltered mistress. Rukmini had disliked the man from the start, she could not have said why, and a wariness set in not only about this new unwelcome visitor but even about the trusted brother-in-law who made him welcome.

Ramulamma started to frequent the great house more often than necessary, really to keep an eye upon whatever might be happening. Matters continued as usual. Sikander Saru made his daily reports to his sister-in-law always accompanied by the trusted munim, who upon being teased to give a reply told Ramulamma sharply that though it was none of her business he could tell her and the whole world that all accounts were exact and no extravagance permitted, especially in this the year of mourning, so she need not expect a sari as a present during dussera.

She continued to be suspicious, mainly because she saw Gopal Reddy visiting the mansion occasionally. He would walk past her in his lordly way, without caring to notice an insignificant harijan dai, but she was happy she did not have to say a word to him. Once in her hearing, he pointedly asked Sikander Saru why harijan women were hanging round, but his host replied in a distracted manner that someone had to take care of the watch-dog.

Ramulamma spent a lot of time with Lisa, who was indeed a very good companion to whom she could pour out all her doubts and fears. The dog seemed to understand everything that was said. She would allow only a few to touch her; Rukmini dorasani, Pentayya, the gardener with the club foot, and of course Ramulamma. The child Ramesh could do what he liked with her, climb onto her back, pull her long, soft blue-black hair, even pry her eyes open when she was asleep. She would growl in her throat when extremely annoyed with him, and then shake herself free and go away. She was never vicious with anyone, she would just step back and freeze them with a cold glare.

She avoided Sikander Saru and would refuse to go to him when called. Gopal Reddy she disliked greatly, narrowing her eyes and growling, crouched in attack position whenever he walked by. But Ramulamma saw to it that no incident occurred. Only once, when Gopal Reddy was at the gate asking for the 'master,' the unattended Lisa made a dash for him, her teeth showing in an awful snarl, her hackles raised stiff. The Gurkha watchman tried to call her off in vain, and then prevented her from attacking the visitor by holding her off with his lathi, but she circled round barking ferociously till Ramulamma came running up and brought her to heel. Gopal Reddy was too shaken to do more than curse them both viciously before walking away.

The monsoon season was quite a trial for Ramulamma who tried to keep Lisa clean at all times. But the large dog could not be kept for long from the heady smells of rotting vegetation that rose from the earth with every shower, or other even stronger organic smells she loved to wallow in. Ramulamma had to use all her strength and patience to wipe the muck out of her lovely long fur, and dry her fit enough to go indoors. One late evening, Lisa had emerged from the thick undergrowth that abutted onto the garden, plastered from head to tail with leaves, mud and ordure. Ramulamma dragged her panting by a long ear to a tap under the tall outer wall, and despite powerful protests, cleaned her as thoroughly as she could. She was drying the white fur of her belly with a coarse cloth she found hanging on the tap when she heard people talking. Sikander Saru and Gopal Reddy were in conversation on the terrace four floors up, but their voices carried clearly down to her through the metal drainpipe she sat next to. She remembered as a child tuning her ears to talk half-a-mile away across the broad Krishna river, and wondering how water carried the sound so clearly from so far away. Some pipes did the same thing. She sat there for a long time after night had fallen, pulling her fingers gently through Lisa's hair, pondering over what she had heard. Finally she got up and let Lisa go. She had to find out more, and she could do it only by going to the city.

Two days later she left for the city to stay with her cousin the milkman. She knew she would be welcomed by him and his wife, for had she not delivered their children? Two days were spent in her sister-in-law's company visiting cheap clothing stores that had declared a Dussera Sale, and discussing endlessly what clothes to get the children for the festival. The first evening she was able to get away she went to the dargah nearby, and after saying a silent prayer to the Sufi saint, and tying a thread there, she walked through the crooked narrow lanes to a disused fountain beside the old paan shop that some people said had been doing business for a hundred years. Some of the men sitting by the fountain gave her curious stares, but she ignored them, bought her paans and went back home. On the third evening's visit to the paan shop she spotted Dileep babu she had come all this way to see.

He was as carelessly handsome as ever, and with eyes closed drew long on his chillum before giving her a fond smile. He patted a place beside him, on the cracked marble rim of the fountain, and she sat down.

She had delivered him twenty-three years ago and loved him as a son. He had dropped out of university, and taken up no job, but what could she say to an aristocrat, when even his own father was helpless to stop him from ruining himself? She touched him gently.

He opened his eyes after a long pull. “ Yes, Ramulamma, yes, a day will come, when I understand the world, when I am reconciled to it. Then ...then I shall become a great man!” He laughed into her face and she laughed back. They sat companionably together, asked after each other and talked of the old days.

“ I have to go now, Dileep Babu,” said Ramulamma picking up her packet of paans. “But you must find out for me what trouble that Sikander Reddy is in, you know that good for nothing brother of Suresh Reddy Saru, whose poor son and wife are left in that man’s hands?”

Dileep babu’s eyes narrowed. “That fellow? We all thought somehow he had changed... but never mind, I’ll find out. Gambling is in his blood, he will gamble on anything, horses, matka, Bombay cotton market quotations, football games in Portugal... why do you ask?”

“ I know he is in debt, seriously, and I think he is being threatened, not that I care, but he plans something by dussera, thinks by the festival comes he can pay back. So I want to know what it is all about. Will you help me?”

Dileep babu nodded and went on to take a drag on his chillum. She waited for him to open his eyes. “ You come from a great family, and who am I? Only the dai that delivered you. So I will say this, my Dileep babu, as your mother would have if she poor lady were alive, do not smoke this dangerous stuff!” He was already far gone, his pupils shrinking to points. He smiled vaguely, reassuringly, and lay back to smoke some more.

Two evenings later he was walking up and down beside the fountain, waiting for her, this time his mouth red with a thick wad of paan. He came forward briskly when he saw her and they sat down on the rim of the fountain. It was getting dark, but she could see that he was agitated.

“This fellow, this fellow of yours is in deep trouble,” he said spitting out the paan into the disused fountain base covered for years with red dried paan and tobacco spit. “He owes money, you want to know how much? I’ll tell you.” He leaned and whispered a sum that made her gasp in horror. “And you know who he owes it to – the Chotta Raman gang of Bombay. If he doesn’t pay within the time given him, he’ll be finished, that’s for sure!”

Dileep babu got up with a dry laugh. “Ramulamma don’t worry about such trash! Let the mafia take care of him, what do you care? You and Suresh’s family are well rid of this fellow, I can tell you. Chotta Raman would have done you a favour!” With that he waved to her and disappeared into the thick crowd frenetically shopping before dussera.

Ramulamma thought carefully of what Dileep babu had said on her way back by bus. She would certainly lose no sleep if something bad happened to Sikander Reddy. She was now fully convinced in her mind that he was no good for Suresh Reddy’s family, for poor Rukmini dorasani, and dear little Ramesh. Her stomach tightened into knots as she thought of the defenceless child in that man’s company. She had heard Sikander, that scheming scoundrel, assure Gopal Reddy, that villain, that he would pay off the debt by dussera, that he would ‘have the power to do so.’ What power would

he have by then in less than ten days time to pay off a debt of a crore and a half? If he was buying time from the Bombay mafia, he was buying time only to do some foul deed, to secure that big sum of money from the estate. But she had been indirectly convinced by the munim that there was no way this could be done. Yes, there was only one way it could be done, but that was too horrible to be thought of.

Of course, while the whole world was celebrating the days leading up to dussera the great house maintained its mourning. But, said Sikander Saru, the child, his dear nephew, and the only pledge Suresh had left the world, the child should have his festival. So, with Rukmini's wan smile following them, he whisked the boy off to shops to buy him lots of new clothes, and fire-crackers, and kites to fly. The rest would celebrate nothing he said, but only to amuse the child. Though the dorasani had acquiesced she was deeply troubled as well. "Ramulamma! I am so worried!" she said agitatedly, her breath coming in shallow gasps. "That child all the time with the big men. I want you to keep an eye on him... just in case, you know, we women understand children, what do grownup men know, they are in their own world, and my boy, I don't want him to..." There was no need to give words to her fears, or warn Ramulamma, who was already aware of all the dangers of having a child grow up with dissolute men. But she had other worries which she kept to herself.

The child's dussera festival continued to be celebrated in great style. His uncle and Gopal Reddy and several servants let off all the crackers in the evenings, the boy kept at a safe distance from the fireworks. When he insisted, his uncle gave him the safest of sparklers to hold. Then cozened and fed with many sweets, he would be delivered half asleep to his mother's waiting arms from his uncle's shoulder. A more affectionate scene could not be imagined, but Ramulamma and Lisa watched like hawks from a distance.

To prevent Lisa from running through the wet woods and getting all dirty and foul, Ramulamma decided one evening to take her for a long walk on a long leash. They both enjoyed the ramble through some pretty countryside, both lost in their own thoughts. In the light of the setting sun, Ramulamma could see flocks of birds wheeling in circles before settling on one tree or other, and then almost immediately starting their circle landing once again. She wondered idly what made them choose a particular tree, and how they managed to keep such perfect formation without colliding into each other like human traffic? High above the birds she saw the many coloured kites the boys were flying in the stiff breeze, also wheeling against round each other and sometimes fouling their strings, by accident and also by purpose.

Happy and tired, the two turned homewards. Dusk had fallen when they reached the outer wall of the mansion. The servants had all withdrawn inside the house to light the lamps, and little Ramesh was nowhere to be seen. A sudden apprehension chilled Ramulamma's spine, and pulled forward by Lisa she quickly went inside. Neither the child nor Sikander Reddy were to be seen in any of the rooms of the first two floors, and just when she was wondering whether they had gone into town, she heard laughter from the terrace, and without a word, she and Lisa raced up through the narrow servants stairs. As she reached the terrace, she saw Sikander Reddy standing on the brick-high skirting round the edge of the terrace, flying a kite. He was trying smilingly to get his nephew to come to the edge, but the child was hanging back in fear. Gopal Reddy was standing beyond them looking down into the courtyard below. Ramulamma hesitated for a long moment in the dark landing, clutching Lisa's nape tensely.

Suddenly Gopal Reddy turned back towards Sikander Reddy with an impatient snort. "Don't delay, you fool! Someone will come up and we will lose this chance. Let me do it, you don't have the nerve!" With that he snatched up the child, who let out a cry, and drew back his arm to fling him down over the edge of the terrace. Without waiting for Ramulamma's command, Lisa sprang with a lion's roar, and brushing past the startled Sikander landed full on Gopal Reddy. Ramulamma ran forward screaming, and caught up the sobbing child, who somehow had fallen on the skirting, and rolled onto the terrace. Wrapping the boy in her sari fold she turned like a lioness herself on Gopal Reddy and saw him down on the floor, a terrified whimper breaking from his throat, as Lisa straddled him, her jaws round his neck, drawing a streak of blood a fraction from his jugular.

"You son of a whore!" screamed Ramulamma. "I should let Lisa snap your worthless neck! She or I will kill you if we ever see you again! Do you hear Yellamma Devi's drums from the temple? This is Her festival, and She is awake, you scum! Go! Go! Go!"

Gopal Reddy got up painfully, his left shoulder had been dislocated in his fall, and then, whimpering and holding his injured arm, he hobbled to the stairs, and stumbled down below. She then turned to confront Sikander, and was amazed to see him nowhere around. A commotion from far down below took her to the edge of the terrace, tightly holding the weeping boy wrapped up in her sari. Sikander, surprised by Lisa's roaring spring had lost his footing – she saw a chappal lying on the terrace, and its skid mark in the green moss of the skirting. Sikander was lying awkwardly far below, and servants were gathering round him already.

Though she breathed not a word about what had happened – not even to Rukmini dorasani – everyone in the estate seemed to know and, in fact, all over the district, and openly showered praise on a self-congratulatory Lisa in the days to come. Gopal Reddy was never seen again in the neighbourhood, and no one cared. Sikander Reddy was a sad case. He had become completely paralyzed and while doctors said miracles did happen, no one believed they happened to bad men. Ramulamma visited his room regularly to remove his soiled clothes, give him a bath, and when he mewled pleadingly pour him out a Patiala peg of raw whisky, which he sipped with her help till he sank back unconscious. When he looked a question at her, she would say dispassionately: "Yes, you will die, you will get release, but Yellamma will decide how long your punishment should be, for desecrating her festival with your foul acts!"

The event made the shy dorasani take charge of her own affairs, helped of course by her able and silent munim. Soon everyone in the region came to respect her and her abilities, so it was high praise for Ramulamma when Rukmini Madam, as she came to be known, smilingly thanked her the next dussera for saving her son, who would never have gone to Rishi Valley school but for her devoted Dalit dai and her brave Lisa, who was given a bravery medal with a blue ribbon to match her blue-black hair.