

Ramulamma had of course known Sub-Inspector Prasad Rao for a long time, but no one in his right mind would have said they were friends – that accusation would have been rejected by both with contempt. She always dealt with him respectfully, as was his due as thanedar of the area; he dealt with her anyway the mood moved him, sometimes very harshly, sometimes jocularly, always as a nuisance, never as a person. So, it was an extraordinary experience for Ramulamma one early morning to be signaled over to his verandah, with a glum but not unfriendly wave of his hand.

She went over with the copper lota of morning milk she was carrying to her hut, squatted down beside him and looked anxiously respectful, which was the proper expression to adopt when facing a police officer in charge of your area.

Prasad Rao wearing a sleeveless white banian and dark check lungi was seated in his canvas-backed chair. He gave her a long morose look. “Ramulamma, you and I have known each other a long, long time, in this ilaka,” he said, and paused. There was nothing she could add to this remark. He started again. “Yes, we have known each other a long time, and I have helped you many times, you don’t know it, but I have, I can tell you I have saved your skin, risking my job.”

Ramulamma was amazed at this bare-faced lie, but kept silent waiting for more.

He gave her another morose look. “I know the big people, and you know the little, rogues, thieves, miscreants – people like you come to know such characters, I know, so don’t lie to me. I have spoken on your behalf with the big people on occasion and I will continue to do so, because I – I – like you.”

Astounded she could not respond to such an insincere statement either.

He drew a long quivering breath. “And you in turn, Ramulamma, it is your duty to your superiors, to your protectors, to help them – you must help me. If you find out through all your undesirable friends – give me a clue – who stole the DIG Sahib’s wife’s diamond necklace, I will give you an inam, out of my own pocket, of a hundred rupees – more later, more later!”

So that was it. She had heard that the DIG was encamped in the police guesthouse for a week or so on routine inspection duties, but the theft was news to her. Slowly Prasad Rao told her everything. It had occurred the previous day, no one knew of it yet, but the DIG had been furious, wanted Prasad Rao to track the thief down and return the necklace the very next day to his wife who was weeping inconsolably in the bedroom. He had been threatened with dire consequences, for corruption, for incompetence. Why did that woman have to bring an expensive necklace to this worthless no good place? And how could it get stolen – the guest house was not in a jungle, it stood bare and clear in the middle of the police compound, with sentries all round? And why did it have to happen to him who had never treated anyone unjustly? He paused a little uncertainly for they both knew that was one defence he could not plead in her presence.

Ramulamma smiled inwardly. If any in the police had difficulties, she would lose no sleep over it, but she promised she would keep her ears open. Maybe she could help, and if she did she would not let Prasad Rao forget it in a hurry. She knew this DIG, a big florid boastful officer from the North, who knew how to push his way to the top. His

wife, a large but comely lady, was generous, and friendly even to people like herself. She was sorry the necklace was lost, but she agreed with Prasad Rao that it was just like Madam's stupid self to bring a costly item like that on tour and lose it.

She went over to the police camp that afternoon. By then she could see that the news was out. The sentries had been roundly abused by Prasad Rao, and though everyone knew her, permission to enter was refused abusively, till the head constable waved her in. He was an old man and thought that her company may offer some consolation to the bade memsahib.

Once inside the police compound, she paused and looked around. The policemen's quarters were stretched round on the periphery of the compound. In front were the low office building and the small armoury with its thick walls. In a clear space next to the volleyball ground stood the police guesthouse, a simple square structure, not like the old beautiful colonial houses, with deep verandahs, slanting tiled roofs, shaded by huge trees, and large french windows. It was a modern graceless building in cement concrete, with a flat roof, straight walls, and small barred windows. There were sentries at their posts everywhere, in front of the main entrance to the attached office-room and beyond to the private rooms; at the back where there were two doors, one for the kitchen and the other for the bathroom. Though desultory attempts had been made to grow trees to shade the building from the sun in summer, all had wilted and it stood out in its yellow ugliness, at least a hundred yards from the nearest barbed-wire fence. There was no place for a thief to hide on his way in or out, even at night, for tall searchlights lit the compound like a football field. Of course the grid failed every now and then, and it would take the constables maybe three minutes to start the backup generator, but a thief would have to hang about outside for hours for current failure, and surely he would be picked up in minutes. The cook and the servant maid would enter through the back doors – as she herself normally would – but Madam would be around all the time, and though she was not very clever, Ramulamma knew her to be quite careful with her possessions. Furthermore, with all the Naxalite threat to the police, the constables always searched the servants on their way in and out. And these serving women were old, and had worked there a long time, it just was not imaginable that one of them would turn into a crack thief. Talashi naturally had been taken of their mean little rooms, and they were beaten for good measure, but the search revealed nothing. She had heard of monkeys being trained to steal, but no monkey could have crossed over the treeless area without the police dogs scenting it and killing it on the spot. So it had to be a daring constable who would have to march in through the office and steal the necklace while all his comrades were looking on. Or maybe all of them were in on it, without one informer trying to curry favour? This possibility also seemed bizarre to her. The only person who regularly went in and out to meet the DIG was the 'Circle Sahib,' an old pious Muslim. She was baffled.

She found Madam stretched full on the bed face down, a wet towel over her head, and the room reeking of eau de cologne. Madam gave her permission to make tea, and when it came got up to sip it, her eyes swollen, and her pink face washed clean of all makeup.

“ I had been named Lashkmi by my parents because I brought them good luck,” she explained tearfully to Ramulamma in Hindi, “and when I got married they gave me that diamond necklace saying Lakshmi must go to her new house properly adorned. And that is lost. It is a bad omen, Ramulamma! I don't care for myself but I am afraid it

may cast its shadow on Sahib – you know his work? – I am so scared!” Tears ran down fat cheeks, and like any ordinary woman, she wiped them on her sari.

It was indeed a complete mystery. The place was not a fortress, but the thieves in the area were petty crooks, who would steal a chicken maybe but never dare to come near the police camp, let alone make off with the DIG Madam’s necklace at the dead of night. Already, as required every constable on duty the previous night had asked for his quarters to be searched, and talashi was taken grimly by the ‘Circle’ but as was to be expected nothing was found. The sentries felt their honour had been questioned, and the camp was in sour mood. It was indeed a mystery.

Things did not get better in the next few days. Almost everyone in the neighbourhood was brought in and questioned, the rowdy-sheeters all pulled in and beaten for news, and everyone in Ramulamma’s community threatened with dire consequences if they refused to offer information. Prasad Rao in an assumed fit of rage went about breaking earthen pots looking for the necklace till he got tired and left in disgust. Lakshmi Madam continued to be inconsolable, wept on Ramulamma’s shoulder, said she was sorry to have brought so much unhappiness to everybody’s doorstep but the necklace had been a present from her parents – who were in heaven – on her wedding day to bring prosperity to her new house, and it was a bad omen, and she hoped it would not affect Sahib, she would rather die.

The little town was buzzing with the news. Police patrolling had been doubled, and people did not like to stir out in case they were stopped and questioned. Ramulamma was sitting outside the tea shop, drinking her tea from a disposable plastic cup, given to Dalits, when she heard the deep throb of a motorcycle coming down the road, and looking to the left saw Dileep babu smiling through the visor of his helmet as he drew to a stop. After he had shaken the dust of his clothes like a friendly dog, he ordered a large metal tumbler full of special ‘Iranian’ tea, mind there was enough sugar, and a layer of cream, and sat down beside her, stretching his long legs out to relax them. She had known him forever, she had delivered him, actually. He had been born into an aristocratic family that had seen better days, and for years had taken to all the vices of that class like a fish to water.

After they had exchanged pleasantries, he ordered dosas for both of them, more tea, and exchanged his metal tumbler for her plastic cup. “I told you, Ramulamma, I will become a successful man someday. Well, I am very successful! I am buying up land for some very rich people. All these stupid beggarly villages will go. There will be casinos, hotels, parks all the way to Bombay!” He laughed uproariously at the meaningless of it all. She told him about the theft, what a mystery it was. He looked thoughtful.

“ Well, sometimes bad luck follows good luck; sometimes good luck follows bad luck,” he said ruminatively. “That DIG of yours is quite a punter, you know that? Sometimes he has the devil’s own luck, but of late all his horses have come last. That’s luck. If he doesn’t pay up quickly there will be a stink, you know the mafia controls all betting and the police cannot take that sort of publicity. They will move him into dairy development, or women’s welfare.” He laughed, then put on his helmet and prepared to leave. “Anyway I am sure it’s insured so he won’t lose its value, but I am sorry for the poor lady.”

That evening, she sat on the floor beside Lakshmi Madam and they both watched the TV. But Madam was listless, and kept changing channels finding amusement in none. They saw a flash of a horse race in one of the sports channels, and Ramulamma said she always liked horse races, the animals were so beautiful and did Madam ever watch them.

“Horse races? Horse races!” exclaimed Lakshmi Madam. “Are you serious, Ramulamma? I am the wife of a DIG, who is one of our best officers, remember that, he will be Director General one day, and I’ll never ruin his chances, though I have brought ill luck on him now.” She turned away to wipe a tear. So, Madam knew nothing of her husband’s passion, well, most men hid many things from their wives who kept on believing in them, though if they had the courage to open their eyes they would know the truth in a second.

The next day she was making a special decoction of herbs to relieve Madam’s persistent headache, when she heard the DIG give an intemperate dressing down to Prasad Rao, in the office-room next door. “You are not fit to be a police officer, Prasad Rao,” stormed the DIG. “You are not fit to be a constable! There is no discipline here! The place is a nest of thieves, who steal from your own DIG! I shall see to it that you are sacked. I don’t want to see you! Leave!” She could hear Prasad Rao’s heavy salute, and his boots stomping away. The mystery made her head swim. The impossible crime had been committed, and in her town, where everyone was known, and not one of them had done the crime, she was sure of it. Maybe the gods had decided to warn Madam with a bad omen; there was no other explanation possible.

She went hesitantly into the office-room to find out if the Bade Sahib would also like a cup of tea. He was rattling the phone on his desk, muttering ‘stupid bastards’ to himself, when the Circle Inspector dashed into the office and said, saluting: “The phone is OK in the main building, Sir, and we have the Director General’s office on line, Sir!” He stamped one more time, loudly. The DIG, cursed to himself, twirled the number lock of his briefcase with his right thumb, and seizing his cap hurried out to speak with his superior. Ramulamma stared at the squat red leather briefcase sitting on the DIG’s desk, with all his secret papers. This is how even great men, the most cautious, make just one mistake, and a thief seizes a moment’s chance to commit a crime. The DIG had snapped his briefcase shut and twirled the number lock on the right-side, but in his worry or because the DG was waiting on the phone, he had left the left-side lock in open position. She went over and read the number: 218; so one chance was all it took to commit a crime. She would know for sure if she looked inside.

That night she cooked a nice biryani dinner for both of them, and though Madam was still very weepy, she enjoyed good food every time. The Sahib and his Memsahib ate the spicy dinner quite heartily, though Madam did make the occasional sniveling remark now and then. Ramulamma stood in a corner and took care that the plates were loaded with biryani, brinjal curry, and hot tomato sauce. The night was quite still with distant drumming from the Yellamma temple coming to them on snatches of wind.

Lakshmi Madam put down her fork after the third helping and said she couldn’t eat a thing, she felt so guilty she had brought the bad omen onto her husband. The DIG Sahib just grunted, digging into the food.

“Madam do you hear the drums from Yellamma’s temple?” asked Ramulamma meekly. “She is a very powerful goddess. She will remove the ill omen if you come with me tomorrow to the temple. All will be well. There is a story that this very goddess here restored a great diamond necklace that Maddiraju’s queen lost, I don’t know how many centuries ago!”

Lakshmi Madam looked up breathlessly. “You mean this goddess in your temple actually restored a lost necklace? Maybe, she will restore mine, what do you think, Sushil?” The DIG grunted again.

“Haven’t you heard, Madam?” asked Ramulamma eagerly. “This Maddiraju was king of all this ilaka long ago, before the days of the British, and the great Rama Raya, emperor of Vijayanagaram, had given him his daughter in marriage. She came from the richest empire on earth and brought very many jewels – especially this great diamond necklace, they say it sparkled like the sun, she did not need any light at night when she wore it. They were happily married for many years and had many children, they were blessed. But then you know these rajahs of old, they were fickle, they fell in love with dancing girls, and lavished enormous wealth on such worthless women. But Maddiraju was not like them, so the queen from Vijayanagaram, she was also called Lakshmi just like you, was very happy. But Maddiraju had one weakness, he liked horse racing, he was proud of his fine horses, and once bet a neighbouring king that his horse could not be beaten. That other king was a clever fellow, he had brought horses from Arabia, the best horses as you know, so he agreed to run his horse against Maddiraju’s but the wager should be worthy of kings. He would give Maddiraju half his own kingdom if he lost, but if Maddiraju lost, he wanted the famous diamond necklace of the Queen Lakshmi. What could the king do, his honour was pledged? Well, the race was run, and Maddiraju lost, and gave the necklace to his neighbour. The queen wept and wept and wept, just like you Madam, and then someone took her to this Yellamma’s temple to pray. The goddess appeared to her and told her that when she returned home she would find the necklace in its traditional sandalwood box. She came running home in excitement, but the king was angry because he thought it was all superstition, what could this goddess of low-caste people do? He took up the sandalwood box, as I – she looked round and picked up the red leather briefcase – “just as I pick up Sahib’s briefcase, and he threw it down with great force, and there was the great diamond necklace returned to its owner!”

Ramulamma put the briefcase carefully down even as the DIG, startled, tried to rise, dropping his fork. “Well, Sahib, that was just a wooden box and shattered, not a good leather case like this which cannot be opened; unless you know the number 218, it cannot be opened. In those days, Madam, there was no insurance, people’s wealth was in their jewels, so the kindly goddess returned the necklace to the rightful owner. If you come and pray tomorrow she will be kind with you also. You will get your necklace back sometime, Our Sahib is a great police officer, he will find out where the thieves have taken it to sell and bring it back for you, will you not, Sahib?”

The DIG turned to his wife. “Yes, Lakshmi, she is quite right. They have to sell it somewhere. I will get it back for you, it may take a few months, but it’s a promise, so cheer up.”

Lakshmi Madam returned back to the guesthouse much comforted the next afternoon. The visit to the temple had been a good one, she got exclusive darshan of the goddess,

and the priests who were there, all known to Ramulamma, assured her that her offerings had been gladly accepted by the goddess. Though she liked Ramulamma herself, she had been a little hesitant about mixing with a large ill-smelling low-caste crowd, but the constables saw to it that they stood far away and there was no one else in the temple except her own people.

As Ramulamma was turning to leave, the DIG called her into his office.

“Thank you, Ramulamma, for comforting my wife, and cooking that good diner last night, and for your stories!” He laughed. “Here’s your inam.” He held out a thousand-rupee note. Ramulamma gasped, and shook her head vigorously. She bent down and touched his feet.

“Sahib, I don’t deserve so much money, what will I do with so much money, that thief will take it away! Just my normal hundred-rupee inam is more than I deserve.”

He gave her what she wanted with reluctance. “But I do want to reward you especially for comforting Lakshmi, what can I do?” he asked comfortably.

“Sahib, I am sure you will restore that necklace to her one day, that will make her happy. As for me – yes, Sahib, you can forgive that ‘Sub,’ Prasad Rao Sahib. He has done his best. He is not very clever, he is not very bad, he’s just our local ‘Sub.’ Why punish him more?”

The DIG looked keenly at her. “Is he good to you?” he asked.

Ramulamma shook her head vigorously. “No, Sahib, never, I can show you how he has beaten me at times, my body still carries the marks. I just request you to be fair, and tell him he is forgiven because I pleaded with you.”

The DIG laughed out quite happily this time. “You are a very clever woman, Ramulamma! Your Yellamma did not do the right thing by making you a Dalit dai! You should have been a Police Officer!” With that he waved her away.

Three days later she was walking by Prasad Rao’s house early in the morning, carrying her lota of morning milk, when he signaled to her vigorously. He was wearing his white banian and dark check lungi as usual, and settled happily in his canvas-backed chair. “Don’t sit on the ground, Ramulamma, sit on this nice pai,” he said hospitably, pointing to a new woven mat. He shouted to a constable, and told him to bring two hot cups of tea for himself and Ramulamma. The constable looked dazed as he served them both.

“You have helped me, Ramulamma, you have helped me a lot, we both know that,” he said at last. “You will see that I am a grateful man.” He leaned confidentially towards her. “You know we collect some small mamul from the truck-wallahs – well we have to – we do so much for them! We will cut you in.” His voice was barely a whisper. “There won’t be much, but something, every now and then, after all the expenses are paid of course, nothing is cheap nowadays, and...”

She was shaking her head vigorously. “No, no, Prasad Saru! No. What will a poor Dalit dai do with all that? No. Yes, I pleaded with the great DIG Saru for you, for you are a righteous man!”

Prasad Rao nodded in agreement, but slightly bewildered.

“Lakshmi Madam is a devotee of Yellamma, our Dalit goddess, and she was shocked to hear that sometimes police constables beat up Dalit boys, for nothing, just for being Dalit! But I said, ‘Our Prasad Rao is a righteous man, he will not allow this to happen in future, I will personally keep you informed, and he should not be touched because he is so righteous!’ Well, thank you for the hot cup of tea and thinking well of all Dalits, Prasad garu. I’ll take leave of you now, you are such a busy person, you don’t want a poor Dalit woman to waste your time.”