

Old Mrs. Kowshikar despite her advanced age had always been quite spry and remarkably fit for her age. However, the untimely death of her beloved grandson, of whom she had been so proud, and expected so much, enfeebled her within months of the tragedy. She was not able to get up from bed without much difficulty, and then the fall in the bathroom was disastrous, cracking her thigh-bone. On her return from hospital it was clear she needed constant attention around the house, and that she would never again take those little walks in the park close by. The young Mrs. Kowshikar, her daughter-in-law and the dead grandson's mother decided that there was no reason anymore to live with the domineering old woman, and decided to shift to Goa and live with a widowed sister. Mrs. Kowshikar's daughter herself was leading a retired life in Gangtok, and was willing to take her, but the old lady was adamant, she did not like cold places, and in any case there was no reason for her to leave the family mansion. Her grand nephews working in various cities round the country put through an emergency conference call, and finally decided to ask a forgotten unmarried poor cousin if she would shift to her grand aunt's place. That lady was overjoyed since she was no longer able to pay the hiked up rent of her miniscule apartment with the pension from the post-office. So it was all settled much to the relief of the young Mrs. Kowshikar who wanted to bear her own personal tragedy as well as she could in the company of her kindly sister. But for an interim period, say of three months, till poor Gowri understood her grand aunt and could manage an unmanageable household, maybe they should request Ramulamma to come up from the village and attend on the old lady, who had showed an inordinate liking and trust for a Dalit dai. The grand-nephews were willing in top-executive fashion to pay whatever it took to settle the problem, so Ramulamma agreed, since she herself was growing old, and needed to set aside a fat account in the bank towards a rainy day. Besides, it was always fun to be in the city, and the old one was not really a dragon, and could be managed with humour and some firmness.

Once the new household had been assembled in the old mansion, and the old lady had instructed Gowri, Ramulamma, and her retainers what she wanted done when, life started moving in a groove, like water flowing through any channel. The rains had cleared, and the old lady was itching to go to the park in the evening as had been her set custom, so a wheel-chair was purchased and Ramulamma took it upon herself to wheel the old lady to the park and back. Gowri, an earnest elderly woman, was too fussed for the moment by her changed circumstances and in gratitude to being called to live in the family mansion decided that she should spend every living moment repairing or improving some part of the rambling building. It was to be hoped that once Ramulamma took leave of them in time, she would feel free enough to relax and take her aunt to the park.

It was a large, nice circular park, with artistically planted flower beds, winding pathways, and comfortable wrought-iron benches under spreading trees, established, it was said, by an Englishman long ago, who had gone mad and returned home. Several old people frequented the park because they felt secure there, a well-kept metal fence enclosing the park, with solicitous park attendants on duty during the busy hours of the evening. It was a rich neighbourhood well able to afford a luxury like a well-tended park, but it was also a liberal community and no objection was raised when poorer people, even beggars, wandered through, as long as they did not pluck flowers, litter the place, or behave in any objectionable way.

Ramulamma wheeled the lady wherever she wanted to go, and then when she herself started to know the park a little would suggest new paths for them to try. The enfeebled old lady got tired quickly even in a wheel-chair, and would ask Ramulamma to park her under some tree or by a flowerbed and take a stroll herself. She wanted to be alone with nature, and be left to her thoughts and regrets.

Once as they sat near a bed of flaming red and orange cannas Ramulamma could not avoid noticing a large woman, with an overpoweringly heavy musky scent. Her fat face was plastered with thick makeup, her eyes hidden under thick gold-rimmed dark glasses, and she was sweating in an uncomfortable rose-coloured silk sari, unsuitable for walking in a park, though she carried an old-fashioned tasseled parasol. Her feet squeezed into new shoes, two sizes too small, must have also added to her manifest discomfort, as she looked around disdainfully while tottering off. Her elderly ward on the other hand, Ramulamma noticed approvingly, was wearing a cool and soft Upada cotton sari, also rose-coloured and far more expensive, and a class apart from what the middle-classes imagined was suitable for going out. She thought that fat woman had strayed into the park by mistake and never thought to see her again, but the very next day she was there, far away, but unmistakable, and bizarrely dressed as before. Ramulamma's mind registered everything, like a computer in fact, as a result of the few months training she got decades ago when she very young, and in love, and hunted in a forest along with her revolutionary lover. He had taught her 'tech,' the science of survival for a revolutionary, when inconsequential events were observed in detail and noted somewhere, and later automatically combined with other inconsequential details to form a judgment, whether the situation was safe or life-threatening. All that 'tech' she ruminated watching the yellow cassia flowers drop on her hair had not saved his life beyond a seven-month grace period. A spanking new white Hyundai saloon was circling round the park slowly, most probably some rich youngster, she thought, an IT professional most probably, showing off his new possession to a girl-friend.

The third day she noticed that fat woman again, and wondered why she was torturing herself coming to the park. Ramulamma could understand that person's desire to be seen in the company of the upper classes, or perhaps she was trying to lose weight, but that enthusiasm would pass she thought to herself smiling a little. No doubt she would return famished to her place and tuck into plates of aloo-parathas and thick cream. Then, she saw the white Hyundai patiently circling beyond the far fence. It could not be a coincidence, and felt a warning shiver pass down her spine, but there was nothing to fear really, living on the edge had its downside as well, it tensed you up when there was absolutely no need.

That Friday was warmer than usual, and the old lady nodded off in the park. Gently she wheeled her near a bench, where it was breezy, and sat down to rest and daydream. She must have dropped off herself, for she woke with a start to see the fat woman in the far distance, holding the hand of a little boy in bright red pants maybe three years old or so and skipping along beside the woman, clearly an aunt or grandmother. It was warm, the old lady was snoring lightly, and Ramulamma prepared to relax with her head on her arm stretched out over the back of the bench. As her eyes closed she had a glimpse of the white Hyundai driving past the far gate. Dusk had come and a cool evening breeze had sprung up when they both awoke together, it was late, and the old lady scolded Ramulamma for not taking her in earlier.

The locality's plumber always had something to do in the old mansion, and he came round soon after lunch had been cleared. After fixing the leaking taps in the disused guestroom he agreed to have a cup of tea in the kitchen. He was also keen to stun the ladies with his news. A child had been kidnapped, such a thing had never happened before in that safe neighbourhood, the little son of a clerk at the research institute, who lived in the new apartments on the other side of the main road. The crime had occurred in broad daylight, well in the evening actually and within the park, but none of the park attendants had seen anything untoward, they had all been questioned and the police were conducting a search.

That evening itself, while old Mrs. Kowshikar was having her cup of light tea and arrowroot biscuits, the distraught mother came to see the great lady and solicit her help. With tears choking her, the young slim woman in a cheap printed nylon sari ran forward and fell at the old lady's feet, clutching them and sobbing. Her husband, a dark small-built nervous fellow stood at a respectful distance by the door.

"Amma, Amma! You are our saviour! Your august family has always looked after all the people here! Get them to bring back my child! He is so little and cannot sleep unless I put him to bed! Amma! Tell the police to get him back, they won't do anything for a poor person like me!"

The woman's husband made unhappy noises in the background and tried to pull her back, but the woman kept clutching the old lady's feet. Old Mrs. Kowshikar said nothing, but just nodded her head, told Gowri irritably to give the girl some tea and biscuits and told Ramulamma to bring her the telephone. She called the Director General of Police – everyone else fell into awed silence – and instructed him that something must be done, this sort of thing cannot go on in a civilized society, it was distressing her, and the child must be returned. She nodded at the answers, the great man seemed to be taking several minutes assuring her that all would be done to restore the child, and finally she rang off. She told the mother briefly to rest, weeping did no good to anyone, said she did not want to go to the park that day, but would retire to her bed.

Despite the assurances given by the head of police, the child remained lost, and the grieving mother's aunts descended on her tiny apartment to console her, and had to be fed constantly. Day-long pujas were started in the local temple and since these were broadcast over loudspeakers it was a great trial for old Mrs. Kowshikar, who however showed remarkable patience, remembering her own loss. She was good enough, however, to make regular enquiries with the police about the progress of the investigations, and Ramulamma became the conduit through which the latest police intelligence on the case was reached to the distraught mother. The father, equally bereft, buried himself in his work, dallying in the laboratory till the porter came to lock up.

The police of course paid a perfunctory visit to the redoubtable Mrs. Kowshikar, and withdrew from the presence immediately after being told crossly and clearly she knew nothing or she would have caught the kidnapper herself without their help. The young Assistant Commissioner of Police investigating the case thought he would spend a minute with Ramulamma since she had been in the park about the time the crime happened. He was a fit dark handsome fellow with pleasing manners, and Ramulamma liked him immediately.

“Oh, you are Chattupalli Ramulamma!” he said delighted, sitting next to her on the cane settee in the front verandah. “If you are an asadhi, I guess you were or are a dai?”

She was amazed. “Yes, I am a dai, but how do you know our customs?” she asked somewhat warily.

He laughed openly. “I am Arjun Rao, a Mala, and a police officer, and I know my department has done bad things to our people. So, don’t let that ‘background’ stand between you and me in this investigation. You know, social change always comes slowly, Ramulamma.” He looked pleasantly at her, like an equal, and she felt a sudden gush of warmth for this Dalit boy.

He went very carefully into all the details. He asked her to think back to that evening, could she remember anything, anything at all that could lead him forward? She shook her head sadly. He thanked her, picked up his papers and took leave of her, stretching out his hand and shaking hers in the modern manner. She followed him to the gate, and then on a whim called him back as he was getting into his jeep.

“There was one thing I didn’t tell you,” she started hesitantly. “It has nothing to do with the case!” she added hastily. He nodded that he understood and waited patiently.

“I live in a village, I am new to the city, so I notice many things, I am stupid that way.” She looked up at him pleadingly, but all she saw was a quiet sympathetic look. This boy would understand. “Well, there was a woman who came to the park, used to come for a few days. She didn’t belong there...”

Gently he led her back to the verandah and they sat down again. Gently he pried loose her suspicions. “What makes you think she was ‘a madam?’” he asked.

Ramulamma shook her head. “I cannot tell you one fact to support my hunch. It was the total effect. I have known ‘madams’ of brothels before, she was a ‘madam’ of that I am sure. I don’t like to blame people – rich people do that all the time, and we get beaten, sometimes killed, all for nothing, because the rich are scared of us, scared of everyone. I didn’t tell you before because you would say, ah, ha, a madam, she’s kidnapped him. But the poor woman most probably came only to show off, get a customer maybe, what do you think, all these great sahibs are all customers of some madam or other, don’t I know?”

The words tumbled out of her now that she had decided to tell him of that curious event.

After going carefully over what she could remember of everything she had seen, and writing down a careful description of the woman, her clothes, her makeup, the way she walked, he asked one last time: “Anything else?”

“There was a white Hyundai circling,” she said simply.

At the gate she had misgivings. “Look, I think I am completely wrong about that wretched woman, that last day, the day of the kidnapping she was there with a child

herself, I had fallen asleep as you know, but I remember that child with his bright red pants, now, no one would bring a child to a kidnapping would they?"

He agreed with her gravely, told her not to worry, no harm would be done to anybody. He did not think it necessary to inform her that the mother in her statement had clearly mentioned the bright red pants her son wore that fateful evening.

The whole community in the apartment buildings across the main road was now involved in the tragedy and the efforts to get the boy home. One of the aunts who had come to comfort the mother insisted that a matravadi by using black magic could draw the criminal back to them helplessly tied up by magical power. A local resident assured them excitedly he knew of a very powerful person, but who would have to be paid a big amount to use the black arts. The mother moaned she was willing to sell her jewels to get her son back, the husband without much faith withdrew a month's salary from the bank, and a séance was arranged for the evening. Of course Ramulamma was there with the assembled crowd in the apartment's courtyard to witness the magic.

The mantravadi was a fearsome looking person, a black man in a loin-cloth, with big handlebar moustaches, and wild hair all round his head like a halo. A big red tilak adorned his forehead; his body was smeared with ash, they said, taken from the burning ghats, and he wore thick silver bracelets and anklets. He danced about waving young neem branches, shouting loudly to his 'Sirkar' to bring the criminal to justice. He said his body was burning with the presence of his ghostly 'Sirkar' and asked them to pour buckets of water over him to prevent him bursting into flames. He was frothing in his mouth in ten minutes, and brushed the neem leaves repeatedly over the bodies of the couple who had lost the child. He shook his head, his 'Sirkar' was unable to trace the child or the criminal, he was afraid something terrible had happened to the child, maybe all was too late! The mother started weeping inconsolably. Suddenly the mantravadi leapt five feet in the air and shouted: " My Sirkar had caught him, the wicked scoundrel! The child is safe, safe for the moment! The Sirkar has them all in his power, no one can escape! All is well!" Then, exhausted he fell senseless to the ground, his body quivering with an unearthly force.

When he regained consciousness, he talked in a normal voice, assured them once again that the boy was safe, all was under control. They had to let his 'Sirkar' use his powers. The séance must be continued everyday for three days, by which time the 'Sirkar' would bring the boy to their gate. He collected his fee and left. Everyone was much assured by what they had witnessed till a quiet neighbour came forward and said hesitantly he recognized that mantravadi, he worked during daytime as a linesman at the local electric substation. Somehow this fact about his other occupation removed all their faith in him. An elderly retired teacher came forward to suggest they should rather ask the help of an astrologer, a pandit, and not go for the black arts. The respected Srinivas Sastri garu lived not a mile away, and a delegation set off immediately to seek him out.

The next day at an auspicious hour selected by the panditji himself, a brief ceremony was held in the couple's apartment itself. The front room was cleared of all modern furniture, and the floor made sacred by cleaning it with a roll of cowdung. He had insisted in a quiet voice they should make sure it was cowdung and not buffalo dung. A homa was lit and a simple puja conducted by the aged panditji, bare-bodied and in a wet dhoti. After blessing the couple, and sending some neighbours out to distribute a

few rupees among beggars, the panditji opened the child's horoscope, and studied it in detail for sometime, muttering to himself in Sanskrit, correcting himself with some impatience. Everyone sat silent and breathless, waiting.

At long last, Srinivas Sastri garu closed the pages of the horoscope and smiled gently at the couple. "The child is very well, and he is very happy." The mother burst into relieved tears.

"When will he be home?" asked the father diffidently.

"He is home with his family, as it was ordained," said the panditji with quiet confidence.

People looked at each other in confusion. The panditji laughed a little, sympathetically. "Don't any of you remember Dinesh? He was born in Saradarnagar village of Gorakpur district, Uttar Pradesh, in 1953. By the time he was three, he started speaking in a strange tongue, people thought the child was mad! Then, a pandit on a pilgrimage from the south recognized the language as Telugu, our language! The child remembered his previous incarnation! His parents brought him to the Godavari, they knew no Telugu, they spoke only Hindi! He recognized his home in Badrachalam, he had been a priest, he had slipped and drowned in the river when it was in spate, but his duties from his previous life remained uncompleted, his karma drew him back to complete them!"

Everyone looked around, a wild unspoken surmise forming in their minds. A government accounts officer spoke up: "Panditji, are you telling us something like that has happened with little Sashikant? That, that, he, he, that is..."

The panditji nodded serenely. "It is very clear from his kundali. He was a great scholar in his previous birth, a renowned astrologer in Kasi, on amavasya night, it was moonless, coming up the ghat steps in the dark after a bath, he slipped, hit his head against a stone, fell into the river and drowned. His previous life's karma has recalled him to Kasi. We are all bound by our karma, even the Gods are so bound. It must be completed before we can proceed to the next reincarnation." He closed his eyes and recited sonorously in Sanskrit, but no one could understand anything.

The accounts officer was persistent. "But, but, panditji, how could the little boy, I mean, how could he travel... to Varanasi, how without tickets...?"

The panditji looked at him pityingly and laughed contentedly once again. "You must understand he was a great astrologer, a realized soul. For such people astral travel poses no difficulty." He spoke as with personal authority. He turned to the anxious couple. "You are blessed. The son born in your womb is a great soul. He has gone back to complete some tasks according to his karma. Don't seek to disturb the cosmic order of the universe, it is not good for you or the many blessed children who will be born, I can see that already. In good time, he may come back to comfort you, but when this will be I cannot tell you with any assurance. The future is unknowable, even to great rishis."

He got up laboriously, and then sprinkled water from a copper vessel he had brought with him to purify their home and departed, after blessing everyone who touched his

feet. The mother was still disconsolate but at the same time rather proud that her son was a great realized soul who had voluntarily left home to complete his karmic duties.

Two mornings later, Arjun Rao, the Dalit ACP, brought the boy round in his jeep and delivered him to his overjoyed mother. He would say very little except that the boy was well, had been very well treated, had come to no harm, had enjoyed himself, in fact, and that he should return to his duties. He saluted the mother smartly, and roared off in his jeep. The boy himself could say nothing to clear the mystery. He talked of great houses, loads of sweets, a great soft bed, shiny lights, a smiling kind lady, being taken to the zoo, there were big African animals there, and he recited their names and described them faultlessly. In fact he would talk only about the animals he had seen in the zoo. People who preferred the black arts said they had been hasty not to recall the mantravadi, surely all this sounded like magic, and his Sirkar must have dragged the boy back from some magician's land. Those who preferred religion said surely the panditji had been right, the boy was talking about his previous life when he had enjoyed all the luxuries of life as a great astrologer, he had completed his tasks and returned. They would request the panditji to perform a great fourteen-day yagna for the welfare of all.

The ACP returned to report to Mrs. Kowshikar that the boy had been returned, and she graciously rewarded him with a copy of her father's book, written in 1911, 'Duties of an Indian Officer to the Crown and the People of India.' He dallied at the gate to let Ramulamma catch up with him.

"Once I had your clues, the case was really very simple," he told her, "the 'madam and the white Hyundai.' You know we keep tabs on everybody, particularly powerful people. They had lost their three-old boy to childhood diabetes. She was permanently depressed, wanted her child back. Blamed him, refused to let him come near. He started going to class brothels, you know? The madam suggested the scheme, some poor child no one wanted, you know, they could adopt, and make her happy? He gave her the picture of his lost son, well you can guess the rest! When of course he heard it had been a kidnap, and worse that Mrs. Kowshikar was taking an interest, there was a moment of panic but we handled it. No blame attached to anyone. Actually the boy would have had a life few can only dream of, but there is no replacement for one's real parents, is there?"