

“Lakshmi should not be in the house this evening,” said Sharmaji to no one in particular.

“Why not?” challenged his wife. “Where will she go? In the evenings I don’t want to send her here and there. The place is no longer safe. You don’t know how wicked men have become. No, she stays home.”

“Why don’t you understand?” asked Sharmaji irritably. “But when have you ever understood anything about my work? Some foreigners are coming this evening. Ramulu will bring them home straight from the airport. After an hour’s discussion, I will ask them what sort of hotel they want to go to, and send them off. That’s all.”

Oh, foreigners are safe,” said his wife relieved. “They won’t even notice Lakshmi. They want only high-class women, like you see in pictures. Lakshmi must definitely stay. Who will serve them pakodas and tea? Not me, I am not their servant, or your servant.”

“You have got a one track mind,” declared Sharmaji. “Try and understand something – they have just led a campaign against child labour in the North, where they are very cruel to children, not like our people. We are cheated by employing these lazy kids, we spend money on them, and they are always outside playing. Anyway, it will be a big, big, misunderstanding if Lakshmi is here when those foreigners come. I am expecting a large grant, and I don’t want anything spoilt just because of you. Send Lakshmi to Shanta.”

After some discussion, it was settled that Lakshmi would be given bus fare, given clear instructions how to find Shanta’s house and packed off early enough in the day. But she should return by the first bus next day, there would be too much cleaning to be done. Lakshmi seemed cheerfully agreeable when Sharmaji left for work in the morning. It was raining hard in the evening when he returned. His wife met him at the door with a worried frown.

“I tried to call Shanta all day,” she said, “but her line is down. In America it snows and there are hurricanes every other day, but the telephone always works, clearer than calling across the street. So why should rain break everything down here?”

Sharmaji had no answer, but was relieved to learn that Lakshmi had set off quite confidently, the persistent rain not making any difference to her. These village people are quite hardy, Sharmaji told his wife, they survive, and before you know it Lakshmi will come home with three little kids dragging at her skirt. He tried to phone the airport to find out if the plane was on time, but the line was persistently busy, so he sent Ramulu off in any case to wait for the foreign guests in the porch of the airport, and bring them straight home whenever they arrived.

An hour later, his wife had made a pile of nice spicy pakodas, some of which he gratefully munched with a cup of tea, leaving the rest for the guests. But one by one, the pakodas disappeared as the guests failed to arrive, till they were all gone. After shouting at him for being greedy, and predicting he would suffer from gas all night, his wife went back to the kitchen to make another pile of pakodas. A heavy thunderstorm broke

overhead, and all the lights went out all over the colony. With much shouting, so as to be heard over the lashing of the storm, they closed the rattling windows, dug out some candles, and sat round the table grumbling about the weather, the inconsiderate guests, the inefficiency of the airlines, and corruption in politics, which was at the root of all their troubles.

Suddenly the electric lights came on in a blaze, and they could hear the buzzing of the phone, which had come off the hook. Sharmaji's wife tried Shanta's number, and declared gleefully that it was ringing. After several renewed attempts, she came to her husband with an anxious look.

"I think Shanta is not in town," she said in a frightened whisper. "She did tell me she might go to Shirdi one of these weekends, and that's where she must have gone locking up the house. I never thought she would do so without telling me, she must have tried, but her line has been down. What are we to do? That stupid girl must be sitting outside the door all this while in the dark. I am scared. You must go immediately and get her back. What will I say to her parents if they do anything to her?"

Sharmaji looked at his watch. It was nearing ten. "It is so late, and I don't have a car, and where do you think I can find autos on a wet night like this? She will be all right huddled up. A little cold, that is all."

"You don't know that neighbourhood," wailed his wife. "You don't see anything, even right under your nose! That colony has bars, and men get drunk in the evening, and you know what drunk men are like. They are bad even when they are sober, they never think honourably about helpless girls. And our girl is a wayward, I know her type, the way she looks at the milkman, I know. What will we say to her parents? What will we say to my grand-uncle who sent her from the village? If you won't go, I will go."

When she started looking frantically for her umbrella and chappals, Sharmaji knew there was no option, and he had to go find the wretched girl so far away in that windy, cold dark night. His worst fears were realized. He couldn't find an auto for well over half-an-hour, and when he did find one in a dark street, the drunk autowallah –he could smell his breathe even on that windy night –demanded two-hundred rupees to take him back and forth. Sharmaji was tired, his pants were soaked in splashes of muddy water, so he got in and said he would add a baksheesh of ten rupees if the fellow drove politely and carefully.

"Guru, I am always polite to my customers," said the fellow revving up his engine. "Come, I can take you to better places. You will have the most colourful night of all nights!"

"Arre, I am going to get a sick person, not for any pleasure, so drive carefully and quickly. We don't want someone's life on our hands," said Sharmaji. Sobered that he was on a mission of mercy, the autowallah bumped his way in the dark, splashing Sharmaji with more muddy water, and lurching perilously over pot-holes, cursing the government and corruption among politicians. Shanta's colony had again descended into pitch

darkness when Sharmaji got there at last. He went up to her door, but found no Lakshmi. Where could the girl have gone? He stumbled down the stairs, and along with the autowallah hunted out a sleepy chowkidar asleep under a flight of stairs.

The chowkidar was annoyed and suspicious till he was told he was speaking to Shantamma's father. "Shantamma left two days ago. There has been nobody here since then. No girl, who will come in this rain? She must have stayed home." With that he curled himself inside his blanket, calling on Indra and Arjuna to save him on this rainy night. Sharmaji was really worried now. Where could the girl have gone? He remembered a case from several years ago when the whole village had turned up to beat up the employer of a boy who had died of natural causes. God knows! He could be ruined over this stupid girl, even if he escaped a thrashing. The autowallah and he stumbled around the dark housing complex, while he called out her name. They only set off dogs barking, one truculent animal, baring his teeth and snapping at them.

"You said it was some sick person," said the autowallah, not liking getting sober in the wind. "Now you are after some girl. I can get you all the girls you want. College educated for a man like you. Starlets!"

"She is my missing servant, don't you understand?" screamed Sharmaji. "Anything could have happened to her on a night like this! And you are making indecent proposals!"

"Arre Sahib, there is nothing indecent about sex," said the autowallah in a professorial manner. "How do you think you were born? By your parents doing pooja? No, no, I mean no disrespect. That girl has run away, they all do that, and earn some money. Don't worry, she will turn up for work tomorrow morning, when you can beat her for worrying you, all right?"

This advice did not satisfy Sharmaji and he tried to scour a few more streets, but when the autowallah said he would then charge three-hundred rupees, Sharmaji very reluctantly decided to return home. He was very tired, sick of accosting policemen on the beat, and in any case the search was useless. But what would he tell his wife, and what of the consequences on the morrow?

It was somewhat of a relief to enter his apartment, warm and blazing with light, after stumbling around in the cold dark streets for hours. A pile of backpacks and suitcases met him at the door, and then he saw his three foreign guests sitting around the table being served tea and pakaodas by Lakshmi, while his wife sat smiling at the head, telling them jokes.

Henk, a burly man in khaki shorts half rose from his chair, waving his cup. "Sharmaji! We are told you have been hunting for Lakshmi in the dark, but here she is safe and sound." Gerd, also in khaki, nodded from Olympian heights, and patted the girl's shoulders. His wife cracked more jokes setting off happy laughter. The plane had been hours late, it was now past midnight and too late to find hotels, so that night they would all stretch out in the spare room, Mrs. Sharma had been so kind as to make all

arrangements. Even Lakshmi seemed quite at ease, only hunching her shoulders forward to hide her budding breasts under the unblinking bespectacled gaze of Peter's. At last, all the tall foreigners stretched their arms and said they were ready for bed. Henk threw a hundred rupee note at Lakshmi and told her to get him some cigarettes from any corner shop that was open, he was fresh out of stock. And so they went to bed, Sharmaji thanking the Gods that all had turned out well on that blustery night.