

The woman who thought her husband was a ghost

Lakshmi Arya Thathachar

From afar, they are a cluster of orange lights that one sees from a train window at a station-- huddled, shivering bleakly, covered up in layers of night air. One of those deserted stations where the train stops for no reason. If, however, you alighted at one of those pointless stations, where the train stops for a few empty minutes, where a lone dog lies scratching itself...

If you alighted at a station that was not yours and walked towards those lights, you would find that they unhooded, separated out, became naked lone light bulbs hanging outside red-floored, red-tiled houses.

Krishnapuram.

But on the tracks, it is still light. Light tinted late-evening-yellow through the window of the air-conditioned train-compartment. A station. People clamber in through doors, two feet windows, heaped desperately on top of each other in the midsummer heat, to enter unreserved compartments in a moving, just-stopping train across from the window.

Like in the home I have just left. Where there are older people, children, and various same-age folks. New relatives, through marriage, who open doors, and enter the room, to hang their clothes in, nap in of afternoons, and bring in the neighbours come to see the new bride.

The train moves.

In the distance, in Krishnapuram, in one neat house, a woman cooks the evening meal. Her newly-wed husband will be home soon. He comes as

expected. His feet bruise the brick red and white lines of the *rangoli* she had drawn at dawn, as he crosses the threshold. He...

... ..

“Do you want to read the paper?”, he asks, sitting next to me. “News from home. It’s raining in Bangalore. 24 degrees there... Hardly news.”

I look out the window, without answer. Dusk blurs the orange lights of Krishnapuram. On the window-pane, there is my face. His.

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I peer. It gets darker.

It is the same as every night. At twelve, he goes out, bruising the red-and-white lines. “Put out the lights”, he says. “Don’t stay up. I will be back late.”

She lies awake, watching the dance of the fireflies in the hollow of the trees. A hyena laughs in the distance, past the fields, in the direction of the grave mounds.

It always rains in Krishnapuram.

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The dinner cart is here. He hands me a tray. He passes me the water bottle. He blocks the covert glances of other men in the train. The window on one side, he on the other, my new-found respectability in between.

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“Where does he go every night, Amma?”, Lakshmi asks her mother, woodsmoke choking her eyes as she blows on the flames.

“He is so thin”, her mother says.

“Yes, like a ghost. Amelu says that he may be one. That maybe he goes to the place, where those people bury their dead.” Amelu is her childhood friend. She is also her cousin: her mother’s brother’s daughter. Sheenu mama’s daughter. Sridhar’s sister.

“They do black magic there, I hear”, her mother replies. “Sridhar is coming to Krishnapuram from Bangalore this week. Amelu will see him after all these months.”

“Amelu said he would bring me silver lamps. I’ll light them in my kitchen”

Her mother looks at her briefly. The same eyes that Sridhar has. That she has. Woodsmoke muddies them. “Sheenu mama is looking for a bride for Sridhar. ... Light a lamp in the temple on the hill-top. Maybe their Shiva will cure your husband... And you.”

Lakshmi picks her way from her mother’s house to her own. Footstep upon footstep on the narrow bunds between fields, where the farmer-women walk, never stepping on the planted soil.

She thinks of her wet footprint on one red step — water, arch, toes — completing Sridhar’s left footprint, as she climbs the steps of Sheenu mama’s house, following him. His left foot, her right foot.

A mismatched pair on each step, where there should have been one.

She walks past the weekly market. There is a lantern, burning dimly in every shop. The electricity has gone off again. Men stare at her from under dripping blue tarpaulin sheets, through smoking glasses of tea. It always rains in Krishnapuram.

A child's power-cut. Magical. As they watch the rain through a glass lantern, on the jagali, the red stone porch, of Amma's house. The darkness pouring itself out into squares through the window- lattices. The passing train in the distance, lighting up a thousand windows.

She thinks of the thousand names of the god Vishnu that she and Sridhar had learnt as children, and his attributes.

Shayane Padmanabham cha; Vivahe cha Prajapatim

(Think of the reclining Vishnu, on the lotus, as Padmanabham; When he marries, as Prajapatim.)

Jalamadhya Varaham cha; Parvate Raghunandanam

(In the midst of water, as Varaha; In the mountains, as Raghunandanam)

Sridharam priya sangame

(With his lover, Sri, or Lakshmi, he is Sridharam.)

She walks a little further today. To where the village is changing. She walks past

marble-skinned

sequinned

mannequins

She stops before a sign:

Zafar Shah

9740710743

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Dusswapne smara govindam

(When you have a bad dream, remember Govindam.)

Sankate Madhusudanam

(In distress, invoke Madhusudanam.)

... ..

“Do you want to go to sleep? It’s late.”, he asks. “A little longer”, I say, looking out of the train-window again.

“What are you looking at? There is only your reflection and mine.”

... ..

“It’s late. Go to sleep.”, he says, stepping barefoot over the clean red stone floor, over the threshold, the rangoli.

“Let us go to the *Shivana gudi* on the hill-top tomorrow. Amma says to light a lamp there.”

He puts out the lights.

There are a hundred and fifty steps cut out of the hill, leading to the shrine on the top. She has counted them often, looking at the tufts of grass in between, breathing the blue dawn air, which cools her skin, until she reaches the top, somewhat breathless, and rests on the grey moist stones. The mountains of Malnad stretch steeply around, purple and green in the morning. Their fresh lichen breath. And there is the shrine. A natural cave. Shallow. And inside a

Shiva Lingam. So early in the morning, someone has already washed it. There are a few petals of hibiscus around the Lingam. A sooty wick burning in the corner. The scent of basil.

How often she has been there. Only, today she is with him. He bends over to light a lamp, bare feet on grey rocks. Bare feet precarious. The rocks are slippery wet.

It always rains in Krishnapuram.

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“If you won’t sleep, I am going out for a smoke”, he says.

I follow after a while. I walk past the train compartments rocking in their sleep, evading the dangling bed-clothes of the less tidy. I open the glass door at the end of the aisle. The hot air hits me like the blast of a furnace. The open door frames his silhouette. He turns around when he hears me, his hand slipping briefly on the rod of the door frame. His other hand holding an incandescent red ember in the night. A train hurtles past in the opposite direction, the air screeching, trapped in between metal.

No scream can carry over that metallic screech. It can only go unheard like the sound of a tree, or a man, perhaps, falling down the ravines of a purple and green Malnad forest, rustling like silk through the dawn air.

I go back to my seat. I look out the window. There is my reflection. Alone.

After a while, the train stops at one of those pointless stations.