

Anil

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On a hot, sweltering night in the middle of March when the mosquitoes were in their reign of terrorism, there was a little village where the villagers kept to themselves in little huts, sleeping deeply and dreaming their dreams that rarely amounted to anything. Probably a new cow for Kuppusamy, the milkman, or a profitable harvest for the farmers, or a new sewing machine for Rajgopal, the tailor. Housewives dreamed of tomorrow's cooking and the children dreamed of waking up to another day, and the next, and the next, till it was over as soon as it began. Meanwhile the streets were pitch dark, with no lighting and with the sounds of crickets crying out to each other. As the village slept the night away, a little boy in one of the huts was wide awake.

Anil lay awake on his mat, his eyes transfixed on the thatched roof of the hut where there were many holes in the ceiling. So many that they had to put pots under the various holes every time it rained. But tonight he could only make out one hole, because through it, a small star shone down upon him.

Anil was seven years old, the only son of Ragunathan, the village headman's servant. His mother worked for the headman, too. In a few years, he would also be working for the headman, though he had no knowledge of this. For now, he found the star fascinating. His parents would not even stop for a second to gape at a star. But he did. Because he believed in the magical wonders of life. Because his dreams were bigger than him.

Beside him, on another mat spread on the dusty floor, slept his mother. She wore a faded sari, one of the four that she owned, each as faded as the other. The sari she now wore used to be bright green, but had faded to a muddy green, and there was a small hole on the shoulder of the blouse. There was a wet patch around her armpit and layers of fat protruded from the bared midriff. Her skin was encased in sweat and a fly hovered around it.

Wheee, Anil thought, wheee, the fly slid down the fat.

His mother wheezed in her sleep, her head supported by her right arm. Anil saw the bruise on her shoulder, where Appa, returning home drunk last night, had hit her. Her thali, omnipresent around her neck, glimmered, catching a light somewhere and then retreated into the darkness again.

Anil whispered, 'Amma.'

Wheeeezing.

'Ammaaa ...'

Wheee ...

His bladder was bursting. He looked up at the rattan bed, where Appa slept. Anil could not make out his features clearly in the dark, but he could see his father's close-knit eyebrows and his thick moustache. His father was a burly man, a bully to his family and a timid mouse to the headman. Anil debated waking him up, to follow him out to pee. He decided that he did not need a walloping at this time of the night.

His gaze returned to his mother again. Gently, he reached out with his tiny hand and touched his mother's gigantic arm, softly shaking her.

'Amma ...'

Wheee ...

He stuck his lower lip out and frowned, then glanced towards the door. The need to relieve himself battled with his fear of venturing out into the dark on his own. He could go out and not return. Right now, he dared not even think of the reason why he would not return. As if thinking it alone was enough to bring it into being. As if they could read his mind. They. *Peyi. Pesase. Ghosts.*

He sat up on the mat and scratched his wrist, where a mosquito had embedded its pain upon him, and looked out of the window of the hut that was half-open. He could see only the dark. *Dare he?*

Then he heard a noise from outside. The shuffling of feet. His eyes assumed the look of terror. Suspended into suspense. Expecting a ghastly face to emerge at the window and send him screaming his head off, yet he could not bring himself to look away from the window. If there was something out there, he wanted to be prepared for it. If it sneaked up on him, he would not have time to scream, not have time to escape. If there was something out there, he had to know. If there was something out there, he hoped it would not come in here.

'Marimuthu!' a voice half-snarled, half-whispered.

Marimuthu? The headman's brother?

Anil crept to his feet and tiptoed to the window. He was only tall enough to touch the bottom of the window, and he tried to pull himself higher to see what was going on outside, but in vain.

'Marimuthu, don't you chicken out now! Come here!'

As his eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, he saw the large, ghostly tree that grew in front of the hut, the tree with thick vines hanging from it.

Even when Anil and his friends played outside in the mornings, they would avoid going near the tree. Even in bright daylight, it looked extremely scary. Nagaraj, the madman

who sang to himself by the river every day from dawn till dusk, told them he had once seen the tree wrap its vines around little kids who ventured unknowingly near it and then reel the kids into its thick canopy of leaves, and no one would ever see the kid again. It was a tree that ate little children.

'Marimuthu!' the voice hissed.

Anil, forgetting about his pleading bladder for the time being, could see nothing, but he heard the constant shuffling of feet and of something heavier being dragged on the ground. A rope was thrown over one of the branches of the ghostly tree. Deftly, it was tied to the branch and a noose was formed with the other end. Anil could see the hands that expertly tied the noose.

He turned to his sleeping parents, his mouth opened, filled with a whisper, but the words failed him. He turned back to the window, his heart beating very fast, very hard. His sweaty hands grabbed the bottom of the window, and he stood on his toes. Still he could not see anyone.

'Help me lift her up!' the same voice hissed.

Two pairs of hands hoisted a white cloth. Anil's heart stilled for a moment, caught in a shocking revelation. It wasn't a white cloth, it was a woman dressed in white, her long, black hair synonymous with the darkness and strewn across her face. They were hanging a woman. Marimuthu and another man. Anil's little body trembled for a moment, as a spasm of chilling fear crept up his spine.

They fitted her neck into the noose and let go of her. The body shook violently all of a sudden. The woman was still alive! She had been unconscious, but now the force of impending death had awakened her for a final struggle for her life. It did not last long. After a few moments, the body of the woman lay limp, swaying from side to side and twirling sadistically to face east and then west and then east again. Anil watched, numbed from the horror.

He did not know how long it lasted but after a long while, after a long period of silence, and the body hung before his sight in silence, Anil moved away from the window. He moved away to the furthest corner of the hut from the window. He crouched into the dirt-stained corner and sat there for the rest of the night as the rest of the village slept and dreamt little dreams. A little boy, clutching his mouth with both hands and silencing the sobs that wracked his little body, as a star shimmered above him in the dark sky.

There were no more stars in the morning as Anil woke up to a noisy commotion outside the hut. He saw that he had fallen asleep again, in the corner, curled into a ball. There was a little black lizard on the wall several metres away from where he slept. He blinked the sleep out of his eyes at it. Amma had rolled up her mat and Appa's rattan bed had been pushed against the wall. The sunlight trickled in through the window, leaving a dazzling path of light on the floor, only possible in a place as dusty as the hut. The door had been

left carelessly open and both Amma and Appa were gone. Then he remembered last night.

Peeking out of the door, he saw a crowd gathered around the tree. No, don't go there ... Anil thought to himself. He saw the noose hanging freely in the air. The body was missing. The tree had reeled it in and devoured the body. The tree must have spat out the woman's bones and the villagers were looking at the bones, unsuspecting. The hanging vines swayed carefree in the wind. Any moment now, the vines would reach out and snatch all the villagers and devour them all, leaving him alone in the village. Don't go there ...

He saw his mother chatting away with some of the other village women. He sidled up to her and tugged on her faded pink sari. She placed a hand on his head and kept chatting away. Anil pushed his way deeper into the circle. Men stood in the deeper circle, most of them with their arms folded across their chests and heads bent to the ground. Nobody said much; they merely kept repeating the same words over and over again. At the core of the crowd, lay the body of the woman. Anil was, suddenly, seized by a pair of hands. He turned and saw his father. Appa's eyes were red, but not from sadness; they were always red. Appa held Anil behind him, where the little boy peered at the body and clutched on to his father's shirt.

An old woman sat by the body, cradling the dead woman's head on her lap and crying out her woes. The old woman was the headman's mother, and she sat on the dusty ground, her mouth wide open to reveal a toothless mouth. Tears ran down the sides of her eyes and she beat her chest and her forehead in sorrow.

A little girl, a little younger than Anil, was crying beside her. Shanti, the woman's daughter. A man kneeled across the body from her, his face buried in his hands and he was wailing aloud.

The woman who had died was his wife.

Marimuthu's wife.

The headman stood behind Marimuthu, stoic and unmoving. He finally took a deep breath, and crossed his hands behind his back, a sign to the villagers that he was about to say something important.

'We will bury her body as soon as possible. There is no need to report this to the authorities. Obviously, my sister-in-law has chosen to end her life and thus committed suicide. We are all deeply troubled by this incident. Why worsen things by bringing in the authorities?' he said, his eyes darting from one face to another as he addressed the crowd, his moustache bristling. 'What do you all think?'

Anil's father was one of the first to agree with the headman's decision. The rest of the villagers piped in, gesturing their agreement with the headman's wise decision. Anil clutched tighter to his father's shirt.

Marimuthu kept his head to the ground, never looking up once. Anil looked at him, wanting to catch a glimpse of the guilt in his eyes.

'Ragunathan, get a rattan cot. We'll carry the body to the burial plot, right away.'

Appa hurried away, leaving Anil exposed, standing smack in the centre of the crowd, abreast from the headman, who did not pay any attention to his presence.

'Marimuthu, get up, brother. Get yourself together.'

Upon hearing these words from his brother, Marimuthu launched into a new wailing session. The crowd started to become noisy, asking for the reasons why Marimuthu's wife would have wanted to commit suicide. The headman suffered the humiliation silently, angered that his family's personal affairs had been laid out for public speculation. He heard whispers of the woman having been abused by Marimuthu. He heard whispers of his family abusing the woman.

Anil suddenly found himself whispering to Marimuthu, 'You killed her. You killed your wife.'

Marimuthu turned sharply to face his accuser, his eyes momentarily exposing his naked guilt. But then he saw the little boy and pretended to be wrapped in sorrow once again.

The headman's hand came onto Anil's shoulder. Anil looked up at him and repeated his words, 'He did it. I know he did. I saw it.'

'Come with me, son,' the headman said.

He led the boy out of the crowd, where none of the villagers could hear Anil's words. Anil's father was coming in their direction, carrying his rattan bed on his shoulder.

'Ragunathan, get someone else to carry on with the proceedings. I want to speak with you.'

Appa dropped the bed and called out to the milkman, Kuppusamy, to replace him. He ran after the headman, who was dragging Anil alongside him towards the bullock-cart.

'Get in,' he told a bewildered Anil, carrying the boy up.

Appa got in beside Anil and the headman after him, calling for the driver to head for his bungalow.

'I have to talk to you, Ragunathan. I have to talk to you about this son of yours.'

And Ragunathan, the illiterate, uneducated father, the person with little dreams, the mouse of a man who was ever ready to serve his employer, nodded agreeably.

'You will study hard and be an engineer, or a doctor, or a lawyer. Make this father proud of you. Do you understand? You are very, very lucky to have this chance. You are going to be studying in a big university and becoming someone great one day, you understand? And you better not play a fool and mix around with bad company, or I'll come down there and give you a good wallop, do you understand?'

Anil looked up at his father and nodded, tears swimming on the rims of his eyes. His lower lip trembled.

'Your mother has made these sweets for you. Take it. Don't finish everything on the train. Keep some for later. Be a good boy and don't forget your parents. Remember to write back, understand?'

Anil nodded again, his tears spilling.

'Don't be silly. Men don't cry. You're going into a man's world, you must act like a man now.'

His father got down from the train and stood outside the window, a hand reaching in to pull Anil towards him and kiss his forehead. The train let out a wail, announcing its intention to depart in a short while.

'Are you sending me off because I saw him do it?' Anil asked.

Ragunathan was taken aback by the question. He was ashamed for helping the headman to hide the truth about Marimuthu's wife's death, ashamed that he had literally jumped at the chance to send his son away from this village to receive an education in the town. Was it wrong that he sacrificed the truth and justice for his son's only chance out of an otherwise dreary life like his?

'Someday you will understand, son, someday you will see that it is for your own good,' his father said. 'It is for the better.'

The train started to move, its tired wheels pushing away from the station. His father held onto his hand and moved along with the train.

'Be a good boy, Anil. Remember your Appa and your Amma. Remember this town,' he cried out as the train gained speed and left the station. Anil stuck his head outside the window and shouted at the top of his lungs, his hands outreached towards his father.

'Appaaaaa!'

I don't want to go away. I don't want to leave you. Where am I going? How will I know you'll still be here when I come back? Stop this train ... stop the train!

In the distance, he saw his father fall to his knees, a bent, despaired figure that had just let go of his only son.

I will never forget you Appa, or forget Amma. I will never forget this town and the sin that it buries today.

Anil sat in his train seat and cried.

A few miles away, at the fields that were left to fallow, the villagers stood around the burning body of the woman who had committed suicide. Marimuthu, a husband caught in his heartbreaking sorrow, his eyes hidden in his hands, heard the train leaving the village and looked up to see it darting across the horizon, the heat from the funeral pyre distorting the image of the train, making it look like a squiggly worm. The headman put his hand around Marimuthu's shoulder. Marimuthu turned to his brother and saw the shadow of a smile on his lips.

He heaved a sigh of relief.