23 Rain*

Raavi Sastry

Like a big bully, the rain kept up its coercion. It was towards evening. Because of the overcast sky, it was darker than usual. In the thatched tea shack by the roadside, the gloom was more irksome. Addressing the city gent who had arrived from Adivipalem and been trapped in his tea shack, the old man observed:

'This rain won't stop for three days.' He added that he would bet his ear on it.

Feeling uneasy, Purushottam, otherwise called 'city gent', sank onto the bench.

'You said you are going to the railway station?'

The sky was split by lightning.

'Yes.'

'Too much! It is at least two *cos*!'

It thundered as though lightning had struck.

'What?'

'I am saying it is at least two cos. I rushed my boy there for fetching coal. I am not lettered. But I am sure it is two cos,' said the old one, making it sound like two thousand miles.

'Can't I get a bus?' asked Purushottam in a feeble voice.

'You think the bus can come in this kind of rain? Are you out of your mind? Even in normal times, it does not come. My boy went on foot.'

Purushottam grew rather worried. He had to go to Calcutta on urgent business. If he had to reach Calcutta within three days, he must reach the railway station within the next two hours. The bus had been ruled out—he could not even see a cart anywhere. The rain, on the other hand, was coming down like the deluge.

'I must go to Calcutta, but how?'

'Which place?'

---

*Varsham

'Calcutta.'

'Oho, that is very far off. You have to go there?'

'Yes.'

'You cannot.'

The old man had expressed himself with great certainty. Purushottam sat dejected. Lightning kept flashing like naked swords. Thunder roared and kept roaring as though it was determined to split the hills. In a wild frenzy, the gale blew. The rain came down with a vengeance. The shack had been taken over by the gloom, but the new trousers, the new shirt, and the new shoes stood out. All these Purushottam was wearing. Had anyone wanted to take a better look at him, he would have had to light a lamp. Was he handsome? Not many would agree that he was. But it must be conceded that he had a slender, attractive waist. He might have been lion-waisted, but not lion-hearted. When he was fifteen, many wondered if he was not twenty. If the opinion of the tea-shack man were sought, he might have said, 'Closer to forty.' That Purushottam had been born only twenty-five years ago was not known to any other than those who knew about his birth. Like a calf that failed to grow, he remained stunted.

His journey, before he got stuck in that tea-shack, had started the day before. He had actually started for Calcutta. But from somewhere arrived, like a dust devil, his maternal uncle. This uncle specialized in giving unsolicited advice to people; wouldn't find it hard to set people to tasks. Now he descended on the young man and confronted him. 'Do you know that you have to get married?' he hustled him, 'Hurry, hurry, move, go. Good girl, nubile girl, wealthy girl. The daughter of the munsif in Adivipalem is waiting. After bride-viewing, you can proceed to Calcutta without any problem. Go, go, go, and see her.' He fairly chased his nephew into this. After that, the young man, bag in hand, landed in a relative's house in Adivipalem and putting on his new clothes, materialized in the evening before the would-be bride. She looked at him once and that one look presented a formidable poser to him.

The 'muneeseeb' lived in an old-fashioned tiled house. On a mat on the rear verandah, they presented the girl. There she sat comfortably, at ease, cross-legged. Not far off, next to the sacred *tulasi* plant, a white sari was drying on a clothesline. In the yard, wet brass utensils, freshly

scrubbed and washed, glinted. He could even see a mango tree behind the house, dark and green. Next to it, right next to it, stood a coconut palm, tall and straight and majestic, as though ready to make the ultimate sacrifice to protect the mango tree. In two minds, whether to set or not, the sun in the sky hovered near the rear door. All of a sudden, he felt that someone had thrown open all the doors and windows and spilled tones of vermilion all over the sky. At that, the tender shoot on the mango tree and the fronds on the coconut palm rejoiced quietly. The white sari on the clothesline caught the diffused light and splashed the whole place with the red. The brass utensils, already shiny, now assimilated a little of copper and shimmered like gold. In its brickwork pot, the tulasi plant stood poised like a classical danseuse.

In the lamplight, the would-be bride looked the very image of the goddess Devi. Her head slightly lowered, eyelids lifted a little, she took a good deliberate look at Purushottam. Those eyes looked like two ponds filled to the brim with fresh and pure water. Though bred and brought up in a remote village, those eyes had grown to see clearly the shining stars, the bright moon, and the burning sun as well. And they could see far.

The mother was throwing all sorts of questions at her daughter and getting her to talk. The girl spoke softly, but those words sounded lofty and solemn, like words spoken in a cave. At the conclusion of the interview, as Purushottam rose to leave, she looked at him again with that same poise from where she was sitting on the mat, raising her eyelids slightly, heavily. On the conclusion of that assessment, she went in. Her look started an agitation in his breast, though he could not figure out why.

Next day, after the midday meal at the relative's house, he climbed into a double-bullock cart and headed towards the road junction. It was one in the afternoon. Tinkling their neckbells, the bullocks surged forward. As the cart went by the munsif's house which was right on the way, for some reason the would-be bride came out into the street, saw the cart, and instead of turning promptly back, kept standing there. Leaning one arm on the doorframe, she stood there firmly and looked steadily at him. The cart moved on. She was left behind; but that look of hers kept chasing him; putting it in other words, that look burrowed deep pits in him. Sometime earlier, Purushottam had fallen ill and

was hospitalized. He was terribly weak and emaciated. From behind the doctors examining him, a nurse stepped out and said, 'Come with me,' and took him to a weighing machine. As they moved, he noticed she was looking at him. She was of tender age. The sick environment around her had not yet made her insensitive. Her eyes were quite small. The meaning of her look he did not understand until he had weighed himself on the machine. Then he realized, 'That's it, she had been trying to estimate my weight!' When he stepped down from the machine, she looked at him with pity and gave him a cautioning smile and said, 'Nothing to worry. Rest assured. You will be normal in no time.' He hadn't known how to thank her and his eyes had brimmed. As he now sat on the cart, somehow Purushottam remembered that sensitive nurse. Viewing the dark hills in the distance, the coconut groves this side, next to them the green fields, overhead the silver spread of the clouds, he was lost in his thoughts. Am I the correct weight? He asked himself. But he could not make sense of it. Like wet firewood, his mind was taking time to ignite. The cart moved steadily on. When the cartman pulled the bullocks to a stop—'Ohoy, hoy, hoy'—he started up and got down. At the same moment, somewhere the sky roared, reverberated. In the orchards, the breeze fluttered; it whirled. Purushottam looked at the sky. The wind had swept the sky clean of the white clouds. From the other side, dark clouds streamed out, like lava, like a tidal wave, on a rampage.

Where the *kutcha* road joined the trunk road, standing like a government officer by the roadside a tamarind stoutly defied the skies. Under the tamarind tree stood the tea-shack shaking like an old woman in the cold. In no time, the clouds had covered the heavens. Like moisture on a child's slate exposed to the sun, the sunlight disappeared even as he watched, while the shadows of the clouds raced across the fields.

The cartman threw obscenities at the wind and dust, turned the cart around and jumped onto his seat. Defying the dust and breeze, the bullocks raced home. As Purushottam rushed into the tea-shack opposite, rain descended in a spatter and bustle. The breeze grew into a gale and the rain came down like a flood surging into low-lying land, drenched the hut in no time, and moved forward with a roar.

Purushottam had sat on the tea-shack bench for over an hour. The tumblers lay idly on the table. What looked like a kettle had gone to

sleep on the fireplace; the fire below was dying out rapidly. The whole tea-shack looked quite indolent. Appearing as though it was not his job to prepare tea, the old man sat on his three-legged stool like an aged cat, sucked twice at his already dead cheroot, put it down on the table without relighting it, and said, 'Where are you from?' And that was his first question. He followed that up with the whole series, dropping them steadily—like rainwater descending from thatch eaves, he dropped them on Purushottam. Dreading the consequences if he failed to respond, he answered each and every question.

At the end of it all, the old man told him with utmost certainty that he would not be able to reach his destination and then smiled to himself with satisfaction.

The rain grew; the gale blew. Lightning tore open the heavens; thunder exploded. The hills stood defying the onslaught. The trees were in revolt. The fire in the shack's hearth was not getting enough air; on top of it, the roof leaked, water dripped from the kettle into the embers below and evaporated.

Suppressing his smile in his days-old beard, the old man said, 'He went for coal, the boy. Has not returned yet, where he is stuck, who knows?'

'Do you mean to say the bus won't turn up today?'

'If you think of it, even the train won't move today in this rain. Not to speak of the useless bus,' the old man said, and he appeared quite pleased that the whole world had been paralysed by the deluge.

The rain and wind sounded like so many snakes crawling down the thatched roof of the shack. Not even two hours left for the arrival of the train at the nearest station.

'If only you had started earlier, you could have made it on foot. Now you cannot reach it. The whole world is just one flood now.'

The old fellow appeared pleased too that he would not be able to make it even on foot.

In agony, Purushottam continued to sit. The old man was vexed that the boy who had gone to fetch coal had not returned yet. The hut was now soaked. It grew colder, the cold breeze grew wilder.

The rain poured down.

'Why should it not rain? Rain has to come at its proper time.'

Now less than two hours from the arrival of the train, he was still the same two cos away from the station as earlier. The bus must have been stranded somewhere. The sky was breaking up. Purushottam stood up.

'No human creature can step outside.'

Purushottam moved about restlessly, chafing at being forced to do nothing.

'Do you have matches?'

'No.'

'I thought as much. The only way you can get a fire now is to make it out of water. And this fellow has not returned. He is only a boy. The fellow is a daredevil though. He can defy the rain, why only the rain, he can bear down a whole herd of elephants on the way.'

Purushottam's thoughts were far away from the boy, his departure for coal, any confrontation with elephants. To him the tea-shack appeared like a narrow prison cell; the steadily descending rain like so many bars. He was quite distraught, cursing his situation.

'Go, go!' Someone had said and he had obeyed. He should have first gone to Calcutta, settled his matters there, and then come to view the girl. It had been that way, ever and always. That chit of a girl appeared to have assessed him correctly. Tcha, he had always been like this! 'You must come to Calcutta,' they said; 'I shall,' he said. 'Go to Adivipalem,' said the uncle. 'Going,' he said. He had been like this since his childhood. 'If you don't study well, you will come to no good, so study well,' they said; he agreed. 'Watch your conduct, otherwise you will come to no good,' they said; he swore by the gods to behave himself. A friend mocked him: 'people who don't know how to enjoy life behave properly,' he said; Purushottam concurred. This had been his style, his approach in every matter. 'If you don't know how to swim, don't get into water, be careful.' 'Of course, I won't!' 'Don't walk in the dark without a lamp in your hand, be cautious!' 'Of course, I won't!' 'Walk on the highways and not in lanes and bylanes, take care!' 'Of course.' 'Let others drop dead, but you don't go to their help!' 'Of course, I won't.' 'Inequity and injustice: why bother about it , mind your own business, otherwise you will land yourself in serious trouble, so take care.' 'True, why bother about these things; why court unnecessary trouble? I shall mind my business!' 'Typhoid, pneumonia, or some other disease you will catch, so don't go out in the rain, be careful!' 'Of course, I won't go out in the rain, I shall remain here.'

Purushottam woke up with a start. Then how was he going to reach Calcutta? Not more than an hour and a half was left. Undecided on a course of action, he was about to drop down on the bench again when the old man shouted with joy, 'Here he comes! That's it, just like a hound! Come fast, run quickly!'

Purushottam bent low and peeped out.

He could see the road straight and open before him. On either side stood trees, soaring like soldiers, now agitated. The entire length of the road was one sheet of water, looked like a canal. All alone on this road, like an unquenchable ember, like a smooth-sailing boat on the water, as though tearing apart the trees to make his way down, the bag flung on his shoulder, came surging, a boy.

Having cheered on the boy, the old man turned and puffing his cheeks out blew with all his might into the fire. 'I thought the fire had died out. No, there is still a spark left,' he said and began to blow more furiously than ever.

The boy came up fast, cutting through the rain and with one bound burst into the shack. 'I made it Grandfather!' he shouted as he entered, easily slipped the bag from his shoulder and dropped it quickly on the floor. The boy was not above twelve years of age—exactly like a hound. In no time he squeezed the water out of his hair, squeezed his clothes dry, and kept hopping around the shack with unbounded energy. 'If you had died somewhere in the rain, what would you have done, Grandson?' the old man asked opening the coal bag. As he opened the bag, the hard coal glinted and shone. 'Rain! Don't you know me, grandfather. This Pothuraju can knock off any rain,' said the boy as though he was the lord of all the three worlds, and moved off jauntily to blow into the fire. Purushottam stood as though rooted in that shack. The sky flashed. The would-be bride who had haunted him all along now stood right before him. That look she had given him, that smile, that half-smile that tender nurse had given him; the mango tree just putting out new shoots, the soaring coconut palm; cold wind, torrential rain; fire out of water, the flame in man—he now understood everything. It all made sense, clear and vivid, like a story on the screen. He now understood everything. In contemplation of it all, he stood still.

192

Streams of rain appeared as though they were hanging still and immobile. The sky was, rather than clearing, becoming more overcast. The cold wind raged as though driving an unstoppable all-crushing chariot. The flashes of light were followed by lightning, destroying anything and everything around. The more the clouds gathered, the darker it became in the tea-shack.

The boy fanning the fire now looked inflamed like red hot iron.

The old man, now bustling around the shack, suddenly seemed to remember something, stopped short, narrowed his eyes, looked around, and addressed his grandson, 'Look here, he was here until a moment ago. Where has the city gent disappeared?' expressing his surprise, as though he half believed that the young fellow had been snatched away by the local deity, Ennemma.

'There!' said Pothuraju.

'Where?'

'Look, look over there,' said Pothuraju, pointing to the road.

'What!' exclaimed the old man in disbelief, bending low and peering out. 'I thought he had settled down here like a good-for-nothing. I thought he wouldn't leave the shack until the rain stopped. Aha, he did it!'

In the semi-darkness of the road ahead, straight and firm, braving the cold wind fully and squarely, unmindful of the downpour, penetrating the curtain around him, moved on Purushottam. Gazing at the sight, looking at him, the old man nodded his head and said, '*Sabaas!*'

Translated by Ranga Rao