



SHORT STORY: RATNA RAMAN

Life-cycle Spiral

Gowri set out in the direction of the temple. She was tired and exhausted, but there was really nowhere else to go. As she walked past Mungru's fields, she encountered Sundari, who, had been gathering flat beans. Sundari looked at her and made as if to greet her. Then her eyes fell on what Gowri was clutching with both hands.

Words dried up in Sundari's throat and her face took on an expression of astonishment. In that time Gowri moved past her.

Gowri continued walking, her feet taking her along a journey that she had traced since the time she had turned ten. She had gone along with Mai every other day to the temple that stood beyond the fields. They visited the Shiv temple every Monday without fail. There he was ensconced, Roopnath, formidable and strong in his beauty and each time they were there Mai prayed for her family and herself pleading for everybody's well-being. He looked majestic and knowledgeable. His gaze was always

serene and he looked composed while the milk delicately slid down the sides of the shivalinga in little streams, and was then followed by faster rivulets of water.

A temple for Parvati stood just across the road.. Her mother and she visited the Devi every Friday. "Give my daughter a strong man just like the one you found for yourself, powerful and independent," her mother had begun entreating the deity from the time Gowri had begun menstruating.

The village temple was still over a kilometre away. Whom else would she encounter? Brijesh Nath was cycling in the distance, his cloth turban dusty over his head. Brijesh hadn't really noticed her yet. He was looking at the ground in front of him as his cycle wobbled. He saw Gowri's feet first, then her ankles with heavy silver anklets on them. His eyes moved puzzling over the rust brown blotches in the front of her saree and then he froze. What was Gowri holding so firmly in her hands? It couldn't be... He spluttered: "Gowriwhat is this? What have you done?" Swaying, he lost his balance; the cycle hit a bump, teetered and fell. Gowri steeled herself and walked past Brijesh without a word.

There was nothing really to be said. It had all drawn to a close and then concluded on this day. She had never thought it would come to this. The lunch she had cooked hadn't been eaten and it was unlikely that anyone was going to eat anything.

How much she had loved this long stretch of the road, from the time when she was a young girl. It was the vital artery that connected her to the rest of the village and the temple.

Her feet had never tired of running part of the way, keeping up with her brother and Shyamlal. They would walk in the fields and eat sugarcane, climb the mango trees to eat raw fruit, or move to the pond to catch dragonflies. All this on the way back from school, for many times there was no teacher.

Near the temple, a broad rivulet had decided to take a daring jump and transform into a tiny waterfall. The three of them often stopped there, watching it make its way down the rocky surface and then collecting in a quiet pool below.

On hot days the air was moist and humid and the cool spray felt wonderful on the skin. Sometimes, Nathu went back early because Mai needed him in the field and then she stayed back, lingering on with Shyamlal.

The proximity of long stretches in each other's company had made them become aware of each other all at once. The first time their bodies had touched in passing, it was accidental. The hot electrifying wave that ran through her was not. Over time, their charged young bodies had begun to respond to each other. There was not the luxury of uninterrupted lovemaking. Furtive glances and tentative stroking, ending in a hasty squeeze or a rub, a hurried groping and a fondling or a crushing embrace, were predominant among their accomplishments; yet how exhilarating and palpable all of it was.

All three of them would sit beside the protected edict often enough and share their midday meal. Gowri would always trace the engraved lettering and wonder what it all meant. It allowed them many private moments though.

A powerful king had laid down rules on stone for his subjects a long, long time ago. He spoke about obedience to elders and about planting trees and kindness to animals. He had not always been this way. Once he had been on the warpath killing everyone who stood in his way. A bloody war had been waged before he could calm down. The littered field, dead carcasses and the wails of the bereaved, all these had hammered at his soul after creeping in through his eyes and ears. He had then stopped and tried to shut out the sights, the sounds and the smells.

Plugging his ears and covering his face, he had dragged himself away and tried to recuperate. When the noises inside his head died down, he began to heal slowly. He recovered and inscribed laws on harsh stones, for people to follow in peacetime.

One evening, Nathu had arrived unexpectedly, to find them wrapped around each other, beside the Ashokan rock edict. Shyamlal and she were forced to reluctantly push away from each other. Let us go home, Nathu said to her, while he refrained from glancing in Shyamlal's direction.

Nathu and Gowri reached their stone and lime coated cottage without speaking. Nathu went in alone to speak to their mother. She called out to Gowri, asking "What is this I hear about Shyamlal and you?" Gowri remained silent and downcast. Yanking Gowri by her plait, Mai dragged her inside the hut hitting her across the shoulders. Gowri fell against the wall of the cottage. She was taken aback by her mother's anger. Clearly, Shyamlal was not the answer to the prayers offered every week at the temple. "You will not see him again," her mother warned. "Baba will not earn dishonour because of you!"

"Why can I not marry him Maa?" she had wailed. Mai adjusted her saree pallu over her head, looked at her stonily and forbade her from stepping out of the house. She remembered how Jayanti had been caught rolling in the hay with Kuldeep and had been dragged home and beaten up. Jayanti had been married off in the month after, to someone in the next village and Kuldeep had left the village for the city shortly thereafter.

Baba found a match for her. Dhanshyam was much older, but he had a provisions store in the next village. Maybe it was much easier to be a woman, after all, she had reasoned with herself then. You didn't have to work hard to get yourself a husband. There was no need for you to take any trouble. Fathers and mothers planned it all out for their daughters.

Poor Parvati, although she was Himavat's daughter, she still had to meditate and pray in the forest, all because she had set her heart upon Roopnath. How long he had taken to come out of his stupor and notice her. How endless and difficult her penance had been. She seemed happy

enough now though, in her own temple, facing Roopnath every day and knowing that he was there for her. However, Sati's fate was much worse. She married the man she loved and her displeased father slighted her, and humiliated her husband, driving her to self-immolation. Even goddesses were not spared patriarchal unkindnesses.

Gowri was married and sent away a short while later. She kept home for Dhanshyam, worked on the fields, and bore him children. Time moved slowly, even if you were young, but there was always plenty to do on the land, lots of hard toil.

Sometimes, there were also occasions to celebrate.

.She worked and by and by, Reet and Yukti, her little girls had begun to pitch in. They worked around the house and helped with the cows, before they left for school. The villagers had been welcoming and supportive. Her marriage had been stable. Farming had demanded a lot from them, but the land was generous and they usually had enough to eat. If Dhanshyam had not died, maybe things would have turned around. The state was now building new highways and buying up everyone's land. Perhaps some money would have come their way.

Dhanshyam, her husband of twenty years, had died in debt. The lands had been mortgaged long ago. His family had little use for her or her daughters. She had hung around for some time after Dhanshyam's death, but things just seemed to get worse. So she decided to return home and live with her mother. Her natal home Amoha, was only fifteen kilometres from her marital home. Yet it had meant a long trudge, although Dhanshyam's family were glad to drop her and her daughters and their belongings, part of the way. Her mother was pleased to see her. Baba was no more. Her brother was around, he spoke little and there were his wife and children, but at least he hadn't sent her away. Everyone in Amoha welcomed her back. They were all happy to see her.

Everyone including Shyamlal. Shyamlal was single. He lived with his father and brother and did very little work. He wandered around the village, fell into conversation with anyone he met and was now a confirmed idler. How many times Mai whispered to her: "Thank God we found you a husband. Shyamlal would have brought ruin upon us all."

Sometimes she wondered if things would have been different if Shyamlal and she had been married. What had changed him into this aimless man, living under his father and brother's roof, and contributing so little on his own?

The first few times after she returned to her village, she had seen him only in the distance. Shyamlal had initially steered clear of her. After the first few months, when he understood that her husband was dead and that she had moved back with her daughters for good, he had begun to turn up at odd places. Soon, they slid back into their old association, and all the while she had wondered if she was doing the right thing. At first, she had struggled and refused to engage with him.

Shyamlal had been persistent. He would barge in on her when she was working in the house. Often, if she was in the fields he would waylay her. He had held her close against the old edict and spoken of his hunger for her. She had responded hesitantly, filled with guilt over her betrayal of her dead husband. Shyamlal reminded her that had not been for her coercive parents, she would have been his wife. It was not very clear what she succumbed to; his persuasions, her sense that it had been unfair to him or her own welcoming, hungry body? Perhaps it was a combination of all these.

She traced the lines on the rock absently, wondering if all the laws laid down on it had been followed. *Did the king's subjects obey his prescriptions? Were they penalised if they broke the rules? How did the king find out?*

Shyamlal laughed and dragged her into his arms once more. He grew increasingly more aggressive with the passing of each day, almost as if he were claiming from her something that was due to him. Their meetings continued and they were clandestine

lovers once more. Shyamlal's attentions however shifted as time passed.. The ardent lover was quickly replaced by a manipulative schemer. Gowri grew weary of his insidious demands. Also, she was no longer the ignorant fourteen year old he had courted. Twenty years of marriage and children had changed her perspective. She took a decision to keep away from Shyamlal and informed him about it. Shyamlal had continued to stalk her Insistently in the beginning, but in the recent past, he had begun to stay away. She had felt an overwhelming sense of relief .

Then she had noticed him following her older daughter. When she confronted him, he had laughed. "Reet is now the same age you were before you left Amoha. When Yukti begins to fill out nicely, it will become difficult to tell the difference between the two of them," he had remarked. Outraged, she had hit him and then threatened him. Shyamlal refused to take the hint. He often waylaid the girls on their way back from school. Yesterday, he had accosted Reet on the way home and put his arms around her waist and tried to draw her into the field , pinching and, squeezing her. Discomfited Reet had him pushed away, run back home and burst into tears on seeing her mother.

Gowri stepped out immediately to accost Shyamlal. He wasn't anywhere on the field. She simmered with silent rage all through the night. In the morning, when her daughters left for school, he had come in stealthily, hoping to persuade her into a morning liaison. Gowri confronted him over his attempts to molest Reet . Hearing her accusation, he had chortled.

"She looks like you did once!" He had responded. "So what if I couldn't marry you? I can make a very good match with your daughter, can I not? Either of them, or both hmmm!"

He nuzzled his mouth at the nape of her neck. Gowri pushed him away warningly. "Stay away from the girls Shyamlal. You will have nothing to do with my daughters! "

Shyamlal chuckled again as he grabbed her. "Why? What will you do? You can't stop me from wanting your daughters!"

Gowri trembled with rage. Overpowering waves of heat rushed to her head. Breaking away from Shyamlal, she picked up an axe lying nearby, used for chopping the daily wood. Swerving around, she swung it in Shyamlal's direction. He stumbled back and fell landing on the small of his back, looking astonished.

Gowri swung the axe in the direction of his head and at his shoulders in a frenzy, Little spots of blood began to spurt and splatter. There was not even a whimper from him. She stopped only when his head hung limp to one side. Bloody and exhausted, she now gazed into the void. What would happen now to her? To her daughters? Oddly, she also felt a momentary calm. Her daughters would come to no harm. She had saved them and herself by stopping the demon threatening all of them.

Enmeshing her fingers into his hair, she tugged at Shyamlal's head, yanked it off his body and strode out in the direction of the temple. She must make an offering of the demon's head to Roopnath. He would surely understand. How many demons, Roopnath had regularly granted boons to, and then waited for his fellow gods to vanquish new demons drunk with powers he had bequeathed.

Would Ashoka, the king of the cold stone edicts understand her better? Would he have been merciful? The thought struck her as she moved out of the yard. After all, he had known what it was to kill in order to be safe. How many of his fellow men he had killed in order to make his way to the throne. However, she was neither a god nor a king. She was not even a goddess or a queen. Only they were allowed to vanquish their enemies...

She had tried to live by the rules. She had followed instructions, obeyed her parents, respected her elders, married the man chosen for her, been faithful to him, raised their daughters and propitiated the gods, week after week. All she had wanted was a continuance of her small slice of life, and the hope that some slivers of joy and pleasure

would come her way. Even that had happened with so much difficulty. Maybe, she had asked for too much, hoped for too much!

She tried to remember... What was it that Mai had always warned her about?.." *"Even goddesses and queens went through all manner of difficult times. Parvathi struggled for months in the forest to woo Shiva. Sita was banished by Ram after walking through fire. Unhappy, uncomfortable and pregnant she had given birth to twin babies and raised them , fatherless. Being a woman meant a life of inordinate hardship It didn't matter whether you were a queen or not. Suffering was woven into womens' lives."*

Gowri shivered as she remembered her mother's words from older conversations.

She felt light headed still and free, almost as if she inched forward now, a little ahead of the goddesses and queens. She had struggled, she had endured but she had dreamt, protested and resisted. Hers had not been passive acceptance.

She was very near the temple now. She would go in and offer the severed head to Roopnath. He would know what to do.

She could see the temple now, beckoning to her, a promising sanctuary. The bright sun warmed her skin and the rich, blue, cloudless sky dazzled her eyes with its brilliance. Why was there such a large crowd around the temple today? She remembered that it was the day of the fair. Lots of people were emptying out of a bus and milling around. Vendors squatted in front of baskets or stood beside carts, selling flowers, fruit and roasted gram, while children ran to and fro. Everyone stopped to stare at her. Impelled by shock and curiosity, the crowd began to push in her direction.

“ Yeh kya hai ?” * someone asked her, pointing at what she held in her arms. “ Shyamlal ka sar! Ab isey Roopnath ko chadaoongi !” ** she replied, holding herself stiffly.

Gasps of shock rose from the crowd. Everyone looked at her aghast. Hurried consultations began. Two men stepped out of the group and reached for her, holding her arms on either side. She had never seen them before.” Chal, Thaney,” *** They instructed brusquely and began marching her off in the direction of the local police station.

Gowri resisted, wondering if she should make a run for the temple altar, but the men gripping her arms, showed little signs of letting go. Still clutching Shyamlal’s head, she allowed herself to be escorted to the police station..

*What is this?

** Shyamlal’s head. It is an offering for Roopnath (Shiva)

*** We will escort you to jail.

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