

THE GENESIS OF A STORY

This morning Kumbamuni unusually woke up at eight-thirty. He has no teeth, so there is no need for a brush or tooth paste. He cleaned the gums with index finger, rinsed the mouth and face, walked up to the front porch and rested on a cane chair. He propped up both legs against a nearby stool. A baby goat standing close to the fence and munching on a sprig of horse-radish stared at him; seemingly recognizing him as a writer, it bleated.

Kumbamuni would normally get up at eleven; he would start the day munching on a fried green-chili soaked in buttermilk and, while he savored that moment as if coming out of intoxication, his cook would readily hand him a cup of hot, strong coffee. The cook knew *Pattaa*'s instincts and writing habits, so he would emerge in no time from the kitchen, dragging his swelling feet toward the house-owner, and readily serve him coffee.

But today the early rise from bed and the absence of a hot cup of coffee was too much to bear and Kumbamuni - a man given to profane vocabulary and easy theatrical enthusiasm - exploded: "The cook's nowhere to be found; I don't know where the hell he is!" he sneered. "I too can't blame him. This is how things are. I always end up waiting for things to happen!"

He bestirred in the chair with a sigh, "These hemorrhoids are killing me." Again, he uttered an expletive under breath.

The mail received the previous day still lay on the stool, unread. Kumbamuni had left his areca-nut cracker as a paper weight to hold the letters in place. He picked up the first, opened, and read it: it was a request for a short story - 'not exceeding a thousand words - for the upcoming Deepavali issue'. Again, Kumbamuni hurled a curse at that far away magazine-editor, and grumbled, "Maybe the fellow worked as a school teacher when he set a limit of a thousand words for an essay from his pupils and graded them accordingly. What a joke! Are we now talking about building something like a house - putting one brick after another?"

He tore open the next envelope; it too asked for a short story and a copy of a hand-drawn sketch fell out on the floor. Some kid from the eighth standard had probably drawn it: it showed a mango tree from which a fruit had fallen on the ground, a fence, a guard with a turban and a few boys watching their companion perched on one of the tree branches; billows of mist hanging in the sky - here and there - rounded off the sketch.

Presently the mother joined her baby goat near the fence and both emitted bleats in unison. ‘This editor lacks even the intelligence of a goat,’ Kumbamuni mused, ‘He wants me to write a story based on a sketch!’

‘It has been twenty-three months since the last short story was written,’ Kumbamuni recalled. ‘Some I have rejected myself and the rest have already been bound together in a single volume of eighty short stories. I could have scrapped a few more, but didn’t; haven’t we heard the saying – a crow always thinks her baby is a marvel of gold? It’s the jerk who always thinks his piece is worth in gold . . . There are many who are living with their ‘chicks’ - and doing nothing; they don’t know how to use them. Didn’t our great *Tiruvalluvar* say ‘One judges who are worthy and who are unworthy only by what survives after their death - the good and bad things people say about them’? Many seem to think the word *eccam* (in Tamil) for the survivors actually means refuse - all kinds - the bird’s droppings, animal waste, feces and that kind of things . . . The scholar’s interpretation of what survives people is their offspring. But, then, what happens to people like me - who are childless? Did *Tiruvalluvar* have any children? What about *Periyar*? These highbrows . . . What did they do? They have skillfully pushed around all stories and songs and rendered them meaningless to common folks . . .’

Kumbamuni grew restless; he desperately wanted to chew some betel leaves, but Tavasi Pillai, the in-house cook, was nowhere to be seen. Now a few more goats gathered around the fence. ‘Their lot is much easier,’ grugged Kumbamuni. ‘They can eat anything and survive; their life-term, at most, is only thirty or forty years. . .’

‘What good are these stories, anyway?’ he mused. ‘They disappear in no time - like farts. People say every short story begins with a birth-pang. Still, you can write only if you have something locked up inside you - something really important.’ Kumbamuni felt let down: ‘Does anyone care if I write? Who does? Didn’t *Tayumanavar* say, ‘It is only when you think hard can you hope to eat well and enjoy sound sleep.’ Now I am just eking out my life. I can hardly eat or hope for a decent cloth to cover my rear. Presently we have many promising writers - Nakulan, Madhavan, Sarvakan, and others. Did I ever finish my fifth standard?’

‘Finally, everything comes to nothing . . . Legend has it that the only book Lord Siva ever signed was *Tiruvachagam*. . . Hey, what gives? Did he keep it as a pocket book or was it one big volume? By the way, can you spend all your time reading *Tiruvachagam*? Doesn’t time stand still?’

The street vendor peddling her wares was shouting, "Garden spinach . . . Garden spinach . . ." She asked Kumbamuni, "Do you want some? This is very fresh and handy stuff . . ."

"Stop bugging me . . ."

"You have to only fry it with a pinch of asafetida . . . Will smell great . . ."

"Will you fry it for me?"

"What impudence! Why can't you just move your ass?"

"I have something on my ass. Will you wipe it off?"

"Why should anyone even talk to you? You are full of fart . . ."

The hawker walked away.

'See, this is what the world does to me. Why can't they leave me alone?'

Kumbamuni, again, retreated into reverie, his mind jumping effortlessly from one thought to another.

'Have you heard of Saul Bellow? He fathered a child when he was eighty-one! I can hardly get up and move around. . I have had enough . . . I ploughed land for nearly thirty years . . . Now, this is the best thing about being a writer. . . You get no pension, but you can write till your last breath of life. That's the reason people keep asking me for a story for their Pongal and Deepavali issues. The stories appearing in special issues are really good. The others in regular weeklies are shallow and show no taste. The young writers show talent, they churn out good stories, but do you ever see them published in any special issues? No, no editor would solicit them from authors when they are young; after thirty years, when they have grown senile, become toothless and spend their golden years chewing food like a cow ruminating grass, they would be approached for their contributions . . .'

'Did anybody solicit my stories twenty years ago? I went out on my own to meet with editors, but not even one of them saw me in person. Who showed any interest? Today I am asked to send my piece for the special issues within four days. My astrologer tells me this happens because the planets are not in proper alignment . . . '

'Did my short stories ever make any money? Nowadays even a mediocre magazine offers me two hundred rupees; occasionally, a generous editor pays two thousand. Still, I get no steady income. I have heard about some Malayali writers: they write only for the special *Onam* issue; they turn out five stories in a year and still make a lot: ten thousand rupees! You can enjoy good food and have sound sleep with that kind of money . . . '

Some betel juice escaped from the corner of Kumbamuni's mouth and landed on his chest around a cluster of gray strands. He took off his shoulder-garment and wiped it clean. He was toying with the idea whether he should return to bed and wake up again at his accustomed time. 'Will I fall asleep again if I tried?' he doubted. 'Maybe the other writers who will contribute to this special Deepavali issue are facing the same problem; but they too have made a commitment. Now, you can't be too sure that someone will read your story in full; it is good enough that your name will appear with the byline. The editor has only four pages for the story - and he needs a page for an illustration - so he condenses your story within the space allowed. The last time I used the word *buttocks*, an assistant editor altered it as *behind*. I have a question for him: do both the words mean the same thing? If one says 'behind the temple', can you substitute one with the other? Maybe he preferred a Sanskrit word. Luckily, he didn't object to the other Sanskrit words in my story; he probably didn't grasp their full meaning or thought there are no vulgar words in Sanskrit.'

Kumbamuni went to the backyard, spat out the betel juice in a corner near a pillar and washed his mouth with some water from a small vessel. He also drank a few mouthfuls.

'I can no more motivate myself to turn out stories as before,' he ruefully admitted. "Maybe I can revise some old ones. Certainly I must try to write a long story before I die. Let someone do research and figure out what is in my writings. Now my mind is dry - like the *naan* you get to eat in North Indian train journeys . . . Of course, one can certainly write from real-life experiences, but that has to be handled with imagination. That is what I call technique - and it is known by many different names. At this age, I can't afford to try anything strange or unconventional. Am I not living all these years in the same old house that needs fixing? I have no means to replace even the crumbled tiles. There has been hardly any repair in the last forty years."

'Maybe Tavasi Pillai can give me some ideas . . . He is nosy and can enlighten me with some gossip . . . I have already written stories with themes on the scourges of dowry, mother-in-laws and unemployment. I can write more based on themes of hunger and sex - the eternal problems plaguing humanity. And caste. But I can do so only within the framework of my own caste.'

Kumbamuni cringed with shame when he mulled over his poverty. Some twenty years ago, he took a vow that he would never write for money.

‘Can a writer trade his knowledge - the gift of *Goddess Saraswati* - for money?’ he wondered. ‘Well, nowadays, everything - including *Saraswati* - is up for sale! Today, with just two short stories I can make all that I had earned from all those eighty. But I don’t feel inspired. I have the same problem when it comes to attending to my call of nature early in the morning. I have tried everything - fruits, leafy and green vegetables, spinach - nothing seems to work. After all we are talking about feces - but they too do not answer to my plea.’

‘I have heard about song-writers in film industry hiring assistants - on a regular salary basis - to help them write lyrics. Can I afford that? Even if I want to share the money 50-50, nobody is available. Is it tough to set score for film music? In the good old days music composers like G. Ramanathan or C.R. Subbaraman easily set tunes for lyrics. Nowadays folks want to set tunes for essays! How funny! It is not easy . . . It will be easier to set the tune for *Mu.Va’s* novel . . . Only now can one understand what a tough task our *Ilayaraja* is facing’

Tavasi Pillai was now entering the house - limping all the way.

“Oh, you are here! Has the daybreak finally arrived?”

“No, *Pattaa* . . . I can barely walk”

“Why don’t you get a baby-walker?”

“Don’t talk funny . . . I thought of getting some vegetables . . . The vendor has not come yet.”

“Well, one never gets what he wants . . . Happens all the time . . . I haven’t had yet a cup of coffee”

“*Pattaa* . . . you will have it in no time.”

Kumbamuni, with the shoulder-garment, held the cup of hot coffee and sipped a mouthful.

“*Pattaa* . . . How come you got up so early this morning?”

“Well, they have asked me two stories for *Deepavali* issue.”

“Are they paying you? Or just freebies?”

“I will get two thousand rupees.”

“Don’t give me that crap. When did they ever pay you two thousand rupees? You will have to write ten stories to earn that kind of money.”

“Why would I lie to you? Don’t you know inflation has boosted the prices?”

“You mean the prices of paper and ink have sky-rocketed?”

“You moron! You want to make a fool of me? Go back to the kitchen!”

“Then, why don’t you turn something quick? Why do you have to indulge in something big like *Tolkappier*?”

“I thought you know only how to make strong coffee. Where did you hear about *Tolkappier*?”

“Well, I have heard you mention that name a couple of times. Anyway, what is so special about it? Come up with something quick . . .”

“I can’t think of anything new . . . Tell me if you have heard any village gossip. We can get going . . .”

“If I can think of some story idea, why would I have to work as your cook? I will write and win all the prizes.”

“Yes, you will win the prize! Some prize! Seriously, let us talk about my next story.”

“Remember our friend Sudalaimuthu Thevar? His daughter eloped with the boy who used to live across our house. Why don’t you write about it?”

“No, that would not be proper. Don’t you know Sundara Ramasami wrote a story on that very theme and got into hot waters? Do you want me to go through the same slog?”

“Then, what about this? Kuttalam Pillai’s sister - the widow - who had an affair, became pregnant and committed suicide after swallowing oleander weeds?”

“That too is out of limits . . .”

“I am not sure when I can return to the kitchen,” Tavasi Pillai feigned impatience. “Remember Pichai Konar’s cow which gave birth to a calf - buffalo? Why not write about it?”

“That is science-fiction . . . Only Sujata can write that kind of stuff.”

“You were saying you wanted to write a story.”

“Yes, a story - but it should have some literary merit. You can’t write on each and everything that comes to mind .”

“You mean like that Nanji Nadan - the son of Ganapathy who lives on the Northside of the street?”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” exclaimed Kumbamuni. “I knew him when he was a kid roaming the streets with a half pant torn in the rear. He had some kind of skin disease. He would often come to me if he had any questions. I would simply hide all books when I see him coming. He is a real thief.”

“Still, he has written some seven or eight books . . . Didn’t he?”

“He did nothing of that sort. Don’t you know the real story? There is an author called Jeyamohan. He wrote a lot but didn’t know who would publish his stuff. He would hand over it to this fellow who would then publish them under his own name.”

“Was that a deal between the two? How did that really work out? Were there no problems? Now, why don’t you try the same deal with that Jeyamohan? Ask him a half-dozen stories. You can split the money 50-50; what do you think?”

“You don’t know anything . . . Do you think he will oblige me?”

“Why not?”

“You are a moron! You are fit only to make chutney, why did I ever talk to you about a story?”

“How about this one? Remember that fellow Samikkannu who was broke, couldn’t sell his paddy, then tried to steal money from the *Pulaiman* temple *hundi*? “

“That might make a good story, but it won’t sell. Maybe I can rework that incident . . . Do you know what is *post-modernism* and *magical realism*?”

“In that case you may rewrite your Maya Bazaar story . . . How long will I have to endure this?” Tavasi Pillai sighed.

“Ha, that’s a good point you have just now made! Now your brain is working . . .”

“What have you been thinking? You thought only the writer has brains and one doesn’t need it to make chutney?”

“Okay, no more talking . . . Go and fetch me a cup of coffee.”

Kumbamuni got ready to pen his eighty-first short story, with a lead, “All over the world . . .”

(Original title: *kathai ezuthuvathan kathai*)