

Ghost Story

First Chapter Of A Weird Novel In Progress

- P. Raja

The first ever ghost story I had the thrill of listening to was narrated by my mother. Like many mothers, my mother too was a storyteller... a very good one at that. It is not that that she could not lull me into sleep with her melodious voice that still continues to haunt me even after I have crossed five decades of my sojourn on Earth; but she could keep her listener spell-bound with her gimmicks and also by her special sound effects.

She mimicked the voice of the ferocious wind and the rubbing together of the wings of the cicada. She knew when to be silent. And her silence was as dark as the night itself.

"Years ago when I was a little girl, I saw a ghost. That was the first ghost I ever saw in my life. But it was not the last ghost," began my mother.

"What is a ghost?" I asked as ignorant as ever.

"Listen! Stop asking questions. At the end of the story you will know what a ghost is. Now listen," she said with a smile.

"In those days of no electricity, hurricane lamps and earthen oil lamps served the purpose of driving away darkness. People who stirred out of their houses in the dark for one reason or the other, invariably carried a hurricane lamp in their hands. They also carried a stick which had a few tiny jingling bells tied to the sides of the stick, so that when they walked they tapped the ground and the jingling noise of the bells drove creepy crawlies away. If the stick saved them from poisonous insects, the hurricane lamps saved them from falling into ditches which were plenty on the path. And both the weapons joined hands to dispel ghosts.

"Once I had a stomach disorder, may be because I overate on that day for my mother was an excellent cook. I woke up with a start and felt the urge to ease myself. I didn't dare to wake up anyone in the house for they were all fast asleep.

"I had to cross the backyard of my house, open the bamboo fence gate and then move into the nearby wood, the only place for all the people in the village to deposit night soil. Without making the least noise I tip-toed my way out with a hurricane lamp.

"The place was so dark that one could not see one's own palm. I had to lift my lamp to dangle it close to my face so as to know my way. The wind was chill and as I entered the wood I could hear the music of bamboo plants. The fully grown plants were perhaps hugging and kissing each other and in their wild ecstasy making eerie sounds. Such a weird sound the wind carried on its wings was enough to put any newcomer take to his heels even in broad daylight. But we were accustomed to all such sounds even, in the dead of night. Our way of living demanded it.

"My mother being a highly-respected country physician, very good at treating bites, especially dog and snake, took her children along into the wood in search of herbs. This she did only after midnight for she strongly believed that the herbs rejuvenated only after that hour and were able to regain their power lost during sunshine. And we were only lamp bearers to her and she always encouraged her children to turn a deaf ear to all such intimidating sounds for they would only cripple our audacity. Creech... Creech... reech... those were the cicadas. Jal... Jal... Jal... Anybody could easily mistake the sound for tinkling anklets of a woman dancing or running. But we knew that they were sounds made by beetles keen on attracting attention. While such horrendous sounds would easily make many of my playmates dirty their underwear, we were really amazed at the courage we had. Thanks to my mother who instilled courage and hope into us.

And on that night when I went out to ease myself, the cicadas joined hands with the beetles. Since I knew the musicians of the weird orchestra, no iota of fear gripped my heart.

I sat on my haunches and then, woo... woo... it was the wailing sound of the siren from the nearby cotton mill. I began to wonder what time was it. Was it 3.30 a.m or 5.00 a.m? I could think of only those two timings at that odd hour. And I saw someone sitting on his haunches at a stone's throw.

My lamp helplessly watched me screw up my eyes as I tried to decipher who was there. To my great surprise, the man I was trying to have a better look, stood up. He was quite tall with only a dhoti on. But for the dhoti, as white as a streak of lightning, he was naked. He had a piece of cloth tied to his head to resemble a turban. God knows whether it was his own loincloth, as men used to wear it like that at the early hours when they moved out of their houses to ease themselves.

The man who stood up began to move towards me. For every forward step he took he grew a foot or so in height.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was happening as if in a dream with a pinch of magic. Fear gripped me and the next moment I stood up, ready to run for my life. Who can be more dangerous than men to women at such odd hours especially at the loneliness of the wood?

When the tall figure that has grown taller than the tallest palmyra tree in the wood, developed swift feet and was just a disastrous distance away, my feet developed wings.

I ran faster than my fastest feet could carry me, though I was not sure whether I could make my escape from the long-footed and long handed apparition. Yet I didn't lose hope.

My vigilant ears could make out the thud - thud noise of footsteps at my back close at my heels. For the first time I understood that I was capable of running without my feet touching the ground.

As I ran I screamed, yelled, wailed and cried. I had almost crossed the wood when I stumped against a root that stood protruding from above the ground and I fell. Before I could raise myself up I turned back my head to see if I had made my escape. The tallest of the tall ghosts was closing in on me.

My heart thumping louder I stood up and took to my heels again without even examining whether I was wounded or bleeding from the bruises.

I saw something stretching from behind over my right shoulder. From the corner of my right eye I saw a long hand trying to overtake me, perhaps to grab me.

I breathed heavily like a terribly tired dog. I did run, of course. In a few seconds, I reached the fence, pushed the wicket gate open and ran into the backyard of my house.

As I entered the backyard, the Sun too rose dispelling darkness. Huffing and puffing, I slumped onto a cane chair inside my house.

My mother who had just finished drawing her usual mammoth kolam in the front yard of the house, made her appearance with a broom in one hand and an empty pitcher in the other.

Seeing my plight she dropped the pitcher and the broom to the floor and cried: "Eh... eh...eh! What happened?"

With a wave of my hand I motioned her to wait for a few seconds. She gave me an inquisitive look. I was still gasping for breath. It took quite a long time for me to breath normal and I saw my mother helplessly watch my plight.

I rehearsed to her from a to z, with bulging eyes and with a frightened face.

On hearing my story with rapt attention my mother laughed like a shower of granites falling on a hot tin roof.

"Oh! That's only a shit eating ghost. Nothing to fear. It chased you to pull the shit out of you. And you, out of sheer fear, indirectly refused to give the needy ghost

what it wanted” she again broke into a guffaw, while I fell to the floor with a thud. I was told later that I swooned. And no amount of water splashed on my face and later poured on my head ever brought me back to my senses till the temple poojari came home, with a bunch of neem leaves and a pouch full of ash.

The poojari took a fistful of ash, recited mantras and then blew it on to my face. I must have looked like a white apparition. The bunch of neem leaves in his hand in the first round served as a fan on my face but in the second round metamorphosed itself into a whip. Every blow fell in my face like pinpricks with a sharp slashing sound. It gave me excruciating pain. The leaves that tore away from the bunch fell pell-mell, reminding me of a battlefield full of mutilated bodies of soldiers.

I stood up and made preparations to run away from the scene. But the poojari was all alert and he caught me by my long hair and forced me sit. I began to scream in pain.

“Huh!... Is it that much painful? Then leave this girl and go away this very moment. You don't know how cruel I could be towards spirits like you? Now tell me where are you from? And who are you?” howled the poojari.

“Believe me... I am no spirit. I am a live girl... I am Saguntala... And I am from this house. Don't torture me, please”, I pleaded with the poojari.

The merciless poojari raised his voice a few decibels and said: “You are a first rate liar. You better keep away from this little girl or else I know how to pull you out of her body and throw you back into your den. Go away before I do it for you.” He then roared at the pitch of his voice “Quick! Quick... be quick... else you can't even get into your world again. I will nail you to a tree. You will be doomed for ever.”

I was in a fix. I was not sure what the poojari would do to me.

A few months before this incident took place. I saw him brand a girl of my age with a red hot iron, all with the purpose of exorcising the evil spirit that was reportedly haunting her. She fell down with a thud and swooned. The poojari took a camphor, ignited it and placed it in the palm of his right hand. He then drew three circles in the air all the time reciting mantras and finally tossed the burning camphor into his wide opened mouth – He leaned back and smiled. Slowly his smile turned into laughter till it became an uproarious one at that. “Ha... Ha... Ha... Ha...”

When everyone was looking askance at the poojari he howled in a thunderous voice: “I have won you... I have won you. You 'll be in my den forever as my slave.”

Having witnessed such a scene before, a ruse flashed across my mind. I cried in a loud tone: “Oh, no! oh, no! Don't brand me again with that red hot iron. I can't bear it anymore. You are the cruelest of exorcists I have ever seen in my life. Leave me to myself. I am going... I am gone.”

I fell down and swooned. The poojari didn't know that I was pretending; neither did any one in the crowd enjoying the scene.

“I know... I know who you are. You must be the same spirit that I drove out a few weeks ago.” He then finished his preliminaries of lighting camphor, reciting mantras and then gobbling it up. After his customary uproarious laughter, he said in his guttural voice: “I have won you... I have won you again. But this time I'll show no mercy to you. No mercy for the adamant spirit.” So saying, he held me by my hair and pulled out as many as he could 'in one go'.

I stomachached the pain, woke up with a start and innocently and ignorantly looked for my mother. She came rushing towards me and took me into her ever loving affectionate hands, and showered kisses on my forehead and cheeks.

“She is quite normal now. You can take her home,” said the poojari and blew a handful of ash onto my head and face.

“That was how I made my great escape from the cruel hands of the poojari. In

fact, poojaris are crueller than the haunting spirits,” said my mother and heaved a sigh.

I was not ready to leave her at that. I became more curious than ever and asked: “What would the poojari do with the strand of hair he had pulled out of my head?” “Oh, that! That he would take to the nearby palmyra tree with no companions. He would have the strand of hair nailed into the tree. By doing such a thing he made us believe that he had saved us from an impending disaster. For all such acts of exorcism, he charged a cockerel and a big fat hen. Above all we had to pay him 4 annas.

Years later when I rehearsed my mother's experience with a ghost and a poojari to my uncle Samarapuri, he came out with his weird experience with a ghost.

Samarapuri was dark complexioned, short statured but well built. He was not visible in the dark unless the moon, particularly chose him to shower her cool rays. He himself would easily pass for an apparition in the midst of people who see him for the first time. Most often he was seen with his clean white dhoti kilted up and he hated to put on any shirt. He had a white towel which went round his hip when he was at work in the paddy field. The very same towel covered his torso when he moved around the village on business errands. And the same towel became his headgear when he sat on branches of trees eating their fruits, already tasted and abandoned by squirrels.

He spent the nights on the big broad pial of my grandma's palatial house. Adjacent to the house ran a lane that led to the wood, the very same wood my mother had bitter experiences with the shit-eating ghost.

Samarapuri was asleep when he heard someone call him by his name. The voice sounded as though it came from the other world and he cared a hair for it. The voice sounded again and this time it was louder than before. When he realized that the call was from his father, he woke up with a start.

He sat up. He saw his father standing on the muddy road. He squeezed his eyelids and looked at his father again.

“Hei! Come on...Light up that lantern by your side and bring it along,” said his father.

“Where are we going, pa?” It was the innocent Samrapuri.

“I feel uneasy in the stomach. I need to go to the woods to ease myself. Give me company. Bring with you the burning lantern,” said his father.

Samarapuri looked around. The parading Moon was quite bright, trying its best to show everything in its proper shape and colour as the sun would during his duty hours. “The moon is so bright... Why do you need me at this hour?” asked the impertinent Samarapuri.

His father didn't answer.

“Who can be a better companion then the Moon? Pa! On many occasions like this when I asked for your company, you gave me the lantern and advised me not to be afraid of the dark and face the world as a man should... And now you need my company eh! Ha! Ha! Ha! What a funny world? Ha! Ha! Ha!” Samarapuri laughed. His father too as if he wanted to digest his son's dig laughed uproariously.

“Hei! Come on...This is no time for joke...Bring the lantern along,” he said and moved away quite fast.

Samarapuri simply obeyed. He took the lantern and raised the wick a little up so that there could be more light and began walking behind his father nurturing no grudge.

Poor Samarapuri couldn't cope with his father's speed as his steps were quite long and fast. In fact, he was fleeing. Samarapuri was almost running after his father with the lantern dangling from his left hand.

“Why is he moving so fast?” Samarapuri asked himself. “He must be really sick,” he answered his own question. Seconds later, he thought why that old man was not stopping to ease himself. His father was not of that type to shy away from



human presence or hide behind trees to answer nature calls. He never even bothered about the presence of women, when his bladder declared emergency. Why should such a man go farther and farther into the wood and that too at dead of night? Was he afraid of the moon playing hide and seek amidst the fluffy cotton bale like clouds?

The cicadas all of a sudden began to chirp and a stray owl on wings let out two blood-curdling hoots. The frogs began to croak and sent jitters down my spine. "I was scared of croaking frogs because those ignoramuses do not in the least know that they were inviting trouble. Their croaking is simply a dining bell for snakes. And when snakes rush for their food, they do not spare the human trespassers," sermonized Samarapuri.

Oh! Is that the reason why Samarapuri's father was moving with such long and fast steps?

Samarapuri had the shock of his life, when he saw his father cross a well without any effort.

A well in the wood! Surprising indeed! No one knew when the well was dug and for what reason! During rainy days, rain water found its way into the well and filled the huge well. Since, it had a ground level mouth, many stepped into it unaware of its existence. They never came back alive to tell any story about it. But people concocted several stories about the well with the spirits and the goblins that were haunting it.

Samarapuri was shocked to his coccyx bone because no human being would ever be able to cross that huge mouthed well without falling into it. Stunned he stood, this time gazing at his father's amazing activity. But his father was going ahead, without even turning his head once to see if his son was following him or not.

How did his father cross that wide mouthed huge well with little or no effort when no one else escaped from its mouth?

The very thought was enough to make him freeze. And he froze.

As Samarapuri finished narrating his story, I was still in a fix for I was not sure what he saw and what was it that made him freeze.

I gave him an inquiring look. Samarapuri read my curiosity filled eyes. He wound up the tale by saying: I froze because I realized that my father died long ago when I was still in my teens.

It was time for me to freeze.

The Queen of Kittur

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The Queen of Kittur highlights the theme of honour and glory; patriotism and freedom; betrayal and defeat of the royal family of Kittur kingdom. The Spirit of freedom represented by Rani Chennamma holds mirror to the female heroism of India and serves as a model to the entire womankind.

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