

The Prismatic Pain

- P. Raja

Stunned stood Sundaram.

For a minute or so, his healthy eyes saw nothing but vacuum. His mind was a complete blank.

What pushed him to such a regretful situation was an unwarranted act of his father, Ramadurai. Like everybody else, Sundaram treated his father as his hero and worshipped him in his heart of hearts. To make it short, he was a role model for the young man.

An aimless life is a useless life... Sundaram had heard his father say thus oft and on. He used to repeat it to his friends, explicate it with the examples passed on by his father and spoke at length of his own aim in life. He also narrated to his friends all that his father had said about the way of the world and the right path to be chosen for a better way of living.

He distinctly remembered his father's words on the importance of the body and the proper way of maintaining it.

"Listen, Sunda! God has blessed us with a body and no part of it can be discarded. He has measured everything both inside and outside and put them all in their proper places. If you lose any chunk of your body then you become a cripple for life. Therein lies the greatness of the creator." Ramadurai paused raising both his hands towards the Heavens, with a sense of seriousness on his face.

Sundaram looked intently at his father and asked in a mischievous tone, "But you rush me to the barber's shop once in three weeks and every Sunday after bath you 'cut' my nails."

Ramadurai was unable to control his laughter.

"Why do you laugh, father? Aren't hair and nails part of our body?"

"True, my boy! But they grow. They grow even after we die," replied Ramadurai.

"Oh, is that why people offer their hair to the gods in the temple?" Sundaram mumbled. A steely glint began to shine in his eyes.

"They can't afford to offer their head or thumb, though there are tall tales about the offering of such parts to the Divine." Ramadurai made a snide remark.

"But you don't allow me to grow long hair or sharp nails, like many of the heroes I come across in comics and movies." Sundaram poured out his heart.

"I told you, Sunda, all that grows have to be cut... Don't we cut our rose plants in our terrace garden to size, so that there will be fine buds and blooms?" said Ramadurai with exemplary self-assurance.

Sundaram smiled tremulously. He looked at his father from the corners of his eyes and said, "But father, you said, our brain too grows." A mischievous smile began to occupy his face.

"It has to...my boy," replied Ramadurai in a measured voice. "If it does not grow, we will then pass for idiots. But this growth is different from the one we are talking about."

Sundaram wrinkled up his eyebrows. Ramadurai understood that his son needed a short lecture.

"Everyone of us is endowed with a brain that weighs equally with the others. That is what we call physical growth. But there is another growth called mental growth. This refers to the quality of the brain."

Sundaram shook his head either way and betrayed his ignorance. His father came

to realize that his son needed further explanation. He was after all a boy and these things might go over his head, unless explained properly by a proper person.

"Now listen, Sunda! If I throw a volley ball at you, how do you catch it?"

Sundaram who was listening with a lot of interest answered immediately, "With both my hands, father."

"Good! And if I give a toffee to you?" His voice was a musical drag.

"I will receive it with my cupped hand." Sundaram said with a sense of joy.

"Very good! If I give you a one end of a piece of thread?"

"Ah! With the forefinger and thumb," pat came the answer.

"Excellent, my boy. That shows the growth of your brain. Had I asked you such questions a couple of years before, you would have given me only wrong answers."

"Wrong answers! What do you say, Father! How do you know that I would have given you wrong answers?"

"I know... because you were too young for such questions."

"Young may be... but not too young for your questions. Perhaps your father thought so when you were young and so did not ask you such questions. But we kids these days are different from the run of the mill children. And so, father, don't ever underestimate my worth."

Ramadurai was bamboozled by such an answer. It was rather unexpected. He took time to respond. But he did it differently: "You see, how your brain has developed! Ha...Ha...Ha..." He added after a pause, "I am proud of you, my son. You are really a precocious child."

Sundaram had such a fine relationship with his father. Ramadurai was everything to Sundaram. He adored him in all possible ways and sometimes called him his god. Ramadurai too treated Sundaram as a friend. In addition, he was philosopher and guide to the young man.

No wonder that Sundaram was shocked to see his father indulge in such an unexpected action, unwarranted of him.

"What have you done? What have you done?" screamed Sundaram at his father, as he came out of his daze.

Ramadurai looked at his son. Sundaram was standing with his eyes closed and his body was trembling. Was he on the verge of shedding tears? He moved toward his son. He then bent down and looked intently at him. "Are you scared, my son?" He asked.

Sundaram nodded his head. His eyes were fear filled.

Ramadurai lifted his son a little up, hugged him and then pressed his head against his hairy chest. But Sundaram released himself quickly and looked daggers at his father.

"Why do you look at me like that?" Ramadurai asked.

"You say one thing and do another," the boy said. "You used to say every part of our body is essential and that they have to remain in tact. If a man loses even his pinky, then he is no more a complete man."

"True! I do not go back on my words, my boy. Pinky or thumb... they should be in tact. Let me tell you something more. One can still breathe even if one's nose is cut off. One can still hear even if one's ears are lopped off. But you can imagine how ugly one would look without nose and ears. In god's creation, everything was put in its proper place. You lose a part, you lose your shape. Every shape is divinely." Ramadurai declared with an amiable smile.

"Hm...ah...Going by that logic, the scorpion too needs its tail. Why did you cut off its tail with that scissors you use for trimming your moustaches?" Sunda's voice emitted fire.

Ramadurai felt that he was trapped. A wave of guilt rose in him and he fumbled for words. "Oh, sonny! You do not know how poisonous that scorpion is! It deserves only such a treatment for entering our home."

"You could have very well crushed it to death. Everything would have been over with that poisonous insect by this time. But what did you do to that poor creature? You have maimed its tail."

"Not its tail... only its sting," corrected the father.

"It all means the same, father! I remember a story you once told me of a sage taking his morning bath in a pond when he saw a scorpion that accidentally fell in water, struggling for its life. The sage took pity on the insect, and allowed it to climb onto his palm. The next moment, the scorpion with a swish of its tail stung the palm of the sage. He shook his hand vigorously in pain and the insect once again landed on water and struggled for its life. The good-hearted sage took pity on it again and tried to help by allowing it to climb on to his accusing finger. The scorpion reached for the finger and again stung him. Writhing in pain, the sage understood that it was its nature to sting. And after all, what is the sting for? When you finished the story, my dear pa, you said "What are scorpions without their stings? What are snakes without their fangs?"

Ramadurai dropped languidly onto the couch. He kept his arms folded against his chest, his legs crossed and his right leg swinging resolutely.

"I cut off the sting because I didn't want to kill the scorpion," Ramadurai said.

"You could have very well killed it, father. Now the scorpion may not have second thoughts in becoming food for the hen at the backyard."

A mild tremor seemed to roll down Ramadurai's body. He began to swing his leg even more resolutely. Seconds later, he sprang from the couch and searched for the scorpion on the wall.

"What if the sting is gone! It will grow again," he said casually without looking at the face of his son.

"No. You lie. You once told me that only geckos are blessed with new tail, once they lose theirs in accidents and that no scorpion would ever be blessed with a sting once again," retorted Sundaram.

Amazed at the memory of his son, Ramadurai smiled to himself and continued his search for the scorpion.

The scorpion was found moving in a circle, perhaps searching for its lost sting.

Stealthily, Ramadurai approached the wall. His movement slowed to an indolent glide. He took the scorpion by its tail and dangled it before his son. "Now you see! The deadly scorpion is a harmless creature." He punctuated his bravado with a reckless cackle. "But father, what are we without our limbs? For a scorpion, its tail is a very important limb. It is nothing without it. And you too would not have dared to touch it. I know you are not as foolish as the sage in your story."

Ramadurai moaned and threw the helpless scorpion to the floor.

Sundaram picked it up by its tail and rushed to the backyard of the house.

When he came back into the house, his father saw a smile lingering on his face.

"What have you done to the scorpion?" Ramadurai asked, glancing furtively over his glasses in his son's direction.

"What you failed to do," Sundaram whispered with the weak jubilation of a warrior who returns from the field with the head of the enemy somehow in his own hands.

Both father and son heard the hen at the backyard cackle... A cock crowed.

