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A Blood-hued Dawn

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Sleep eluded Sumati. Ramulu had informed her that some work needed to be done at the Master's house; he would stay there only to return in the morning. The Master possessed about a hundred richshaws which he leased out to people in Cuttack; Ramulu had got hold of one of those. Earlier he used to pull the rickshaw only during the daytime, but now, with the Master's grace, he pulled the rickshaw both during the day and night. He paid six rupees towards the rent but kept the entire night's earnings with him. The Master, in recognition of his honesty and hardwork, didn't demand any rent for the night shift.

Sumati, before coming to Ramulu's house, was a daily wage earner. Now, she devoted all her time to her family. Throughout the day she engaged herself in different activities for the comfort of Ramulu and for the improvement of her one-roomed hut. She kept herself busy in various chores such as cleaning the house, carrying water from the tap, and cooking. Ramulu left home early after eating *pakhala*, to return only at sundown. When evening fell, she would bow her head and pay her obeissance at the base of the sacred Tulsi plant placed on a platform. In the mean time, the fatigued Ramulu would return and sit on the verandah. He would unwind the knot of the package and pour on the ground fresh vegetables, dal, rice etc. procured from the market. He would tie his day's earnings in one corner of Sumati's saree. With her husband's earnings in her possession, Sumati's mind would soar to the seventh heaven. Soon after, they would find themselves lost in mundane affairs of daily life. Ramulu would depart once again when night descended.



Night always made Sumati feel restless. Sleep eluded her eyes. She would grow apprehensive at the thought of spending the night alone in the hut. She had told Ramulu many times, “Why are you pulling the rickshaw at night? We can somehow manage ourselves with the earnings of the day shift. I really feel scared at night. I can’t sleep at all. Henceforth, don’t go out at night.” Pressing Sumati’s soft cheeks fondly, Ramulu would answer, “If I don’t go, what would happen to the new member going to enter our lives in a few days from now. What would happen if we don’t save something for him?...” Sumati would blush and seek shelter in Ramulu’s bosom. Besides, the Master also lent a helping hand at the time of their trouble. Where was the harm if they could save some money?

Sumati would console herself.

Night deepened. Sleep eluded Sumati’s eyes. Sumati had nothing to do except changing sides on the bed. Ramulu had already informed that he wouldn’t return. Sumati didn’t feel like cooking anything. She ate the leftover food adding some water to it, alongwith an onion and some salt. It would be dawn by the time Ramulu returned. Sumati kept herself busy thinking about the yet-to-be-born child. Ramulu was telling her that day ... “I wish it were a boy...” Sumati felt cheerful within. Sleep came to her eyes. She started dreaming with her eyes shut.

Suddenly she heard a knock on the door. Was it Ramulu? But he had informed her earlier that he wouldn’t return at night. Who was calling her, then, at this hour of night? Sumati wiped her sleepy eyes clean and listened carefully to the knocking sound again. She felt as if someone was whispering her name. No, this wasn’t Ramulu’s voice. Raising the wick of the lantern, and arranging the saree, she looked outside through the crack on the door and found, to her surprise, the Master of Ramulu. Rambabu! What brought him here at the dead of night? Was Ramulu in trouble? While pulling the rickshaw throughout the night, did he have any ...? Oh! Why such ominous thoughts clouded her mind? Not being able to discern the situation, she opened the door. Rambabu stood in front of her. Before she could prostrate before him, Rambabu had already entered the hut. “Master ... What brings you here? ... at this hour of the night... Ramulu...” Rambabu wasn’t even



in the condition to answer so many questions. His face smelt of liquor. He walked unsteadily, towards the bed. Sumati's blood froze; words didn't emerge from her mouth. She couldn't think what to do. Rambabu spoke continuously, "Ramulu won't come to you tonight, Suma. I made him drink a lot of *Handia*. Make me happy for the night. I'll construct a house for you; I'll fill your coffers; I'll buy a gold chain for your child; I'll buy you gold bangles." While babbling like this, Rambabu slowly proceeded towards her. Sumati felt confused. She didn't know what to do. She grabbed the vegetable cutter lying within her reach and hurled it at Rambabu's head. Rambabu clutched at the cutter; his hand was badly cut. He fell on the floor with a bang. "You, bloody rascal old man. Get out of my house. If you dare enter my house another day ...I'll show you what I can do." Rambabu regained consciousness. Night was about to end. Rambabu walked through the open door. Drops of blood lay on the ground ... the bed lay untidy... Sumati fell on the floor, screaming loudly.

The delicate rays of the early morning sun entered the low thatched house of Sumati. By the time Sumati came back to her senses, it was morning. Sumati remembered God... "Hasn't Ramulu come back till now? Why does God punish a simple, innocent person like him? So what, if we are poor? Why shouldn't we have God's grace?"

Sumati started hating the very notion of God. Her mind was filled with thoughts of revenge. If the Master came back to take revenge on her, she would face him boldly. An uncommon desire for revenge burned fiercely within her. Let Ramulu come back; she would tell him everything. Sitting at his feet, she would entreat him, convince him not to go out at night leaving her alone... She will tell him, "We don't need money; we need self respect. You needn't pull the rickshaw at night. We can spend our time gracefully. If needed, I can also earn some money working at someone's house."

Sumati stepped out of the hut sluggishly. And lo! Someone was sleeping on the verandah. It's Ramulu... Sumati was taken aback. Ramulu's face still smelt of *handia*. He was the man of her heart... taking advantage of his simplicity the Master dared to do what he did yesterday. Tears



welled up in Sumati's eyes. If Ramulu misunderstood her; if he misinterpreted her words ... what would she do? Where would she go? ... Sumati's head reeled. A wild storm gathered in her mind.

She dragged Ramulu to her bed; she sprinkled water on his face. She moved her fingers gently over his hands and legs; she fanned him with a hand fan. Ramulu, after sometime, twisted and turned; tried to get up but failed in his attempt and fell asleep once again.

Sumati made some hot red tea for him. She asked him to get up and sit. Ramulu twisted his body once again, yawned and got up. He said, "Sumati... Our Master is excellent. He gave me food and drink yesterday. I wish you could just go and pay a visit..." Ramulu laughed loudly. "The Master gave me a lot of *handia* to drink yesterday and I don't know when I reached home... walking."

Sumati was losing patience. She couldn't control herself. She said, "Master came here yesterday. He offered to make me a queen if I satisfied him." Ramulu made fun of her by saying, "Oh! You agreed to the proposal." Sumati lost patience and narrated the entire incident of the previous night from beginning to end.

Ramulu was fully awake now. He became extremely agitated. He roared, "Rascal! that's why he made me terribly drunk with handia." Sumati pleaded with him, "Let's shift from here. Search for another Master. You needn't pull the rickshaw during the night. If needed I'll work in someone's house." Ramulu wasn't in a state to listen to anything. Fetching the axe from the roof and putting it on his shoulder, he stepped at once out of the house.

Sumati grew worried. Ramababu had high connections. He was surrounded by many goons. "If something happens to Ramulu ... Oh my God! What did I do?"

Sumati struck her head on the wall.

The day was getting warmer. Rambabu was seeing off the rickshaws, with a bandaged hand. Before he could reach Ramulu, Ramulu threw the axe aiming at his head. Before Rambabu could



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ready himself to prevent the blow, he was struck on his head fiercely. A gush of blood ran through the shop. Rambabau lay unconscious on the floor... Ramulu gave out a cry of victory, a cry of satisfaction at having avenged the wrong. He might be jailed; he might be hanged to death. He wasn't sad... he wasn't repentant... Ramulu looked back. A crowd had gathered... police had arrived. Ramulu raised his hand in supplication to the Lord before climbing into the police jeep.