

Pushpa looked forward to Saturday evenings. Saturdays filled her with expectations of her amma going out, leaving her all by herself at night. Not that she was that lucky every Saturday; all depended on Sivamama coming with his cycle rickshaw to fetch amma. Every day on Pushpa's way back home from the bungalow where she worked, she prayed in the Amman Kovil for Sivamama to come the next day. Of course, Saturdays meant additional work for Pushpa. But as long as amma went out, she did not mind the trouble.

First of all, Pushpa had to help amma prepare to go out, she had to collect water from the road-side hand-pump, then heat it for amma's weekly head-bath. Heating water was always a time-consuming and tedious process. She had to arrange three huge bricks to make a stove, then collect dry twigs, coconut-shells, waste paper and blow on them with all her might to get the fire going to heat the water. When the water boiled, she had to pour in the right amount of cold water to get the temperature just right; otherwise amma would beat her badly. She had to help amma in bathing too, which she enjoyed as she could smell the soap she saw on TV in memsaab's bungalow. Her amma had no sense of shame; she would stand in front of Pushpa with just a small loincloth around her waist, her firm breasts thrusting forward, her shapely thighs and arms exposed. Pushpa had to soap her body and apply *shikakai* to her lustrous black hair. Pushpa admired her amma's hair and beauty. True, amma was not fair-complexioned like her memsaab. She was

dark, very dark, but she was slim and had very long hair. Her memsaab had very short, bobbed hair, like a boy's. Though fair, she was fat, very fat, and moved clumsily. Pushpa admired her memsaab only when she drove her car. Sitting on the back seat, on their weekly drive to the market, Pushpa admired her memsaab's fair hands and fingers with their long, painted nails, turning the steering wheel this way and that way. But her amma had slim, shapely hands with orange fingertips because she used *mehndi* so often. If only her amma could show her a little love and kindness!

Dreams Shattered

○ Sreedevi Krishnan

Memsaab was certainly kinder than her amma. Though Pushpa had to work quite a lot in the bungalow, she was given food and, for Diwali, a new blouse and *pavadai*. Memsaab even tipped her ten rupees whenever there were 'meetings' in her bungalow. True, on meeting days Pushpa had to do a lot of extra work, polishing the brass curios, taking trays laden with teacups and saucers and paper plates with snacks and sweets to the guests. The cook of the bungalow, who had passed his matriculation, said the meetings were very important and were meant to change the plight of

women in society. He also said memsaab gave speeches and wrote in women's magazines about women's problems. Though Pushpa did not understand anything from the talk she happened to hear while serving tea, she knew it was all something great, as they always spoke in English, raising their squeaky voices. Pushpa was really curious to know how these meetings changed the fate of women, but she did not dare to ask the cook. If she annoyed the cook, he was powerful enough to deprive her of her usual quota of food. Between her memsaab and her amma, Pushpa preferred memsaab. At



least she did not beat her like her amma did; she smiled at her after every meeting and said, “Thank you, Pushpa, here, take this money and go for a movie at your neighbour’s house.”

Pushpa was lucky that those meetings in the bungalow generally coincided with her amma’s outings on Saturdays. Once she had helped amma with her elaborate hot-water bath, Pushpa loved to watch her getting ready. After her bath, amma would put talcum powder generously not only on her face but also on her armpits, stomach, in between her thighs and legs. She would put on her dark red blouse and yellow silk *sari* and stand before the oval-shaped mirror, adjusting her make-up; she would tie a red ribbon on her still-wet long hair, entwine a lot of jasmine blossoms around it, put a decorative sticker *bindi* on her forehead, pencil her arched eyebrows and apply *kajal* to her large, luminous eyes. She would even put on lipstick and then she would wait impatiently for the arrival of Sivamama and his cycle rickshaw. Finally, when Sivamama arrived, she would quickly remove the *mangala suthra* she wore on a yellow thread and would hide it in the old steel trunk. Pushpa always thought that amma looked prettier without it because otherwise that dirty, thick, yellow thread on her neck hid her gold chain. Amma never forgot to give last-minute instructions to Pushpa.

“Pushpa, eat the rice and dry fish curry. Don’t sleep off like a log. Get up early and collect water. Run to the pilot’s flat and finish the work there before going to your bungalow. Take care not to annoy the pilot memsaab, who’s very finicky. If I hear any adverse report from her, I’ll simply kill you, you know that, ah?” Then she would add, “All because of that bastard who left me and went off to Madurai,” and she would go on and on till Sivamama screamed, “Enough of your instructions, come soon,

Akka, we can’t afford to make these rich people wait for us.”

When amma went, Pushpa heaved a sigh of relief and ran to her neighbour’s house where, for two rupees, she could watch a Tamil movie on video. Pushpa did not know where amma went or what she did. She was very happy that amma would not return that night, so that she could watch the movie in peace. If Sivamama did not come on a Saturday, Pushpa would at the mercy of amma’s wrath; she would beat her with whatever was available in the kitchen – broom, coconut-scraper, firewood. Once, she was beaten so badly that she could not even go to work for a couple of days. But she secretly enjoyed that time, because amma had to do all the



housework, right from collecting water from the pump to cooking rice-gruel and dry fish at night. She was glad that she could at least make her amma understand the amount of work she had to do every day. Amma never lent her a helping hand. After finishing her part-time job in the pilot’s flat, she either indulged in gossip or ran to her neighbour’s house to squat on the floor and gape at the TV or watch videos. Amma never took Pushpa with her for any of these sessions. She was always cruel to her. She stopped her studies when she was

barely six, took her along every day to the bungalow where she worked and trained her to do all her jobs. Though only thirteen, Pushpa was now an expert in the work. Her memsaab knew her worth; that was why she always made it a point to give her ten rupees after every meeting. Pushpa, of course, had to hide the money from amma, or she would snatch it off her.

Pushpa was inclined to believe the old woman in the next hut, who said that amma was not her real mother. Whenever the old woman got a chance, she showed her her toothless gums and said, “Pushpa, that whore is not your mother; how can a mother be so cruel to her own child? She never gave birth to you, I’m sure of that. Next time you soap her dirty body, look for stretch marks on her tummy; there’ll be nothing, I’m sure. No woman can have such a flat tummy and a figure like your amma’s after delivery. I’ve been here for the past eleven years and I’ve never set eyes on her husband, your so-called father, so far. God knows who tied that *thali* she wears! Thoo, thoo!” she spat betel-stained, red-coloured saliva. Pushpa guessed that it was the truth. But she did not dare to ask amma. Amma seemed to be always angry with her. However, hard she tried to please her, amma found fault with her, nearly starved her at night. She would say, “You eat the whole day in that bungalow. If you eat at night also, you won’t work.” If amma went out, she could eat nicely, could be all by herself. She was not at all scared at night. She loved to keep awake, remembering the love scenes of Rajnikanth and Sridevi. She liked Rajnikanth very much. Pushpa prayed in the Amman Kovil every day that she should get a husband like Rajnikanth. In one movie Sridevi, the heroine, prayed all Fridays to the Goddess and the Goddess appeared before her and granted all her wishes.

The Goddess looked more beautiful than the Kovil Amman. Kovil Amman was usually adorned with a *pavadai* of cheap, red cloth or with *neem* leaves. Pushpa did not like the jet-black idol. That Amman in the Kovil with her turmeric and vermilion resembled her amma and the women in the neighbouring huts. But in the movie K.R. Vijaya was beautiful with her glittering jewellery and dark red *zari sari*. So when Pushpa prayed, she liked to recollect the Goddess' face in the movie. She prayed sincerely that her suffering should come to an end,

that she should get saris and jewellery like the Goddess and should get married to some one like Rajnikanth. She adored Rajnikanth, his hairstyle and his moustache and the way he talked, walked and danced around with Sridevi. Pushpa also wanted to live in a big bungalow, like the one in which she worked. She always admired the smooth, shining floors of the bungalow while swabbing them. Even the bathrooms looked very posh with showers and bathtubs. She envied every woman who could wear silk *saris* and jewellery and live in posh bungalows, drive cars and order around servants. She knew that Amman was so

powerful. Wouldn't she answer Pushpa's sincere prayers?

Then one day the great event happened. That again was a Saturday. Pushpa felt very tired after her work in the bungalow. Since it was a 'meeting day' she had to polish the brass curios, change the cushion covers, vacuum the carpet, arrange the potted plants and wash innumerable cups and saucers. The cook had already warned her that the meeting was very important, that it

would even be covered on TV. He said memsaab and her friends were all protesting against the kidnapping and rape of a minor girl. Pushpa did not understand any of it; all she knew was that she had a lot of extra work. Moreover, the unusual excitement of the TV coverage had made her memsaab forget her usual tip of ten rupees. So Pushpa was slightly depressed. Added to that, she felt a sharp, shooting pain at the pit of her stomach.

As soon as Pushpa reached her hut, she collected water, heated it and

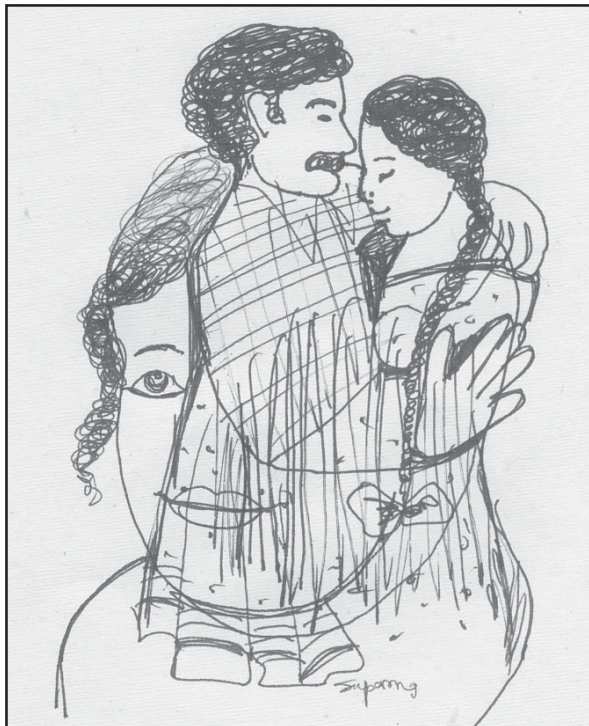
laughed and laughed, opening her toothless mouth wider and wider. Pushpa had to shake the old woman, almost hurting her shoulders, to stop her uncontrollable laughter. Then, in between laughter, the old woman nodded her head and said, "Good, good, oh that's it! I suspected it; even my ageing eyes could see the change in you. I was wondering why you're less ugly now-a-days, at times you even look pretty; your skeleton body is getting filled out fast; very good. So my dear young girl's going to outsmart her amma, her time has come,

ha ha ha." Then she added hastily, "Don't worry girl, you've become a big girl. All girls get blood like this once a month for about a week. Your good fortune has begun. Just you wait and see. From now on your amma will give you all the love, affection and care in the world. This old woman doesn't lie."

Pushpa did not believe the old woman then. But it was true. In the morning, when amma came, she made all the fuss in the world about Pushpa's illness. Pushpa was given raw egg in milk, jaggery and bananas. She was even asked to rest. In a voice filled with affection, love and care, her amma said, "You don't

go to work for three days, we've to celebrate your becoming a big girl. I must ask at least two month's advance from your memsaab, I'll buy you a new *pavadai* set."

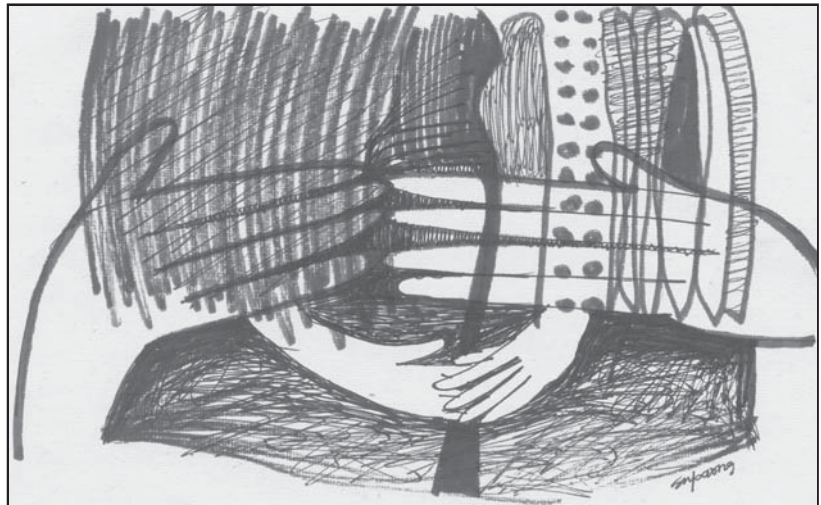
Pushpa had a wonderful time. For three long days she was treated like a queen. Amma too took leave for a couple of days to attend to her. She was given rice, fresh fish curry and sweets. Amma invited a few of her friends, including the old woman, for lunch. That Saturday, when



helped her amma with her bath and make-up. Though she felt very uncomfortable, she did not dare to express her uneasiness. Once amma went away in the cycle-rickshaw, Pushpa cried and cried, pressing her stomach with her hard pillow. Slowly she dozed off. When she got up a little later, she noticed bloodstains on her white *pavadai*. She ran horrified to the old woman next door and narrated the whole episode. Much to her annoyance, the old woman

Sivamama came to pick amma up, she said something in hushed tones to him and they both guffawed. Mama then pinched Pushpa's cheek and said, "Hey Pushpa, big girl, I'll get you a present next time, when I visit you." Everything was like a dream. True to her word, amma bought her a red blouse, a long red skirt with white polka dots on it and a red silk half-sari. Pushpa was excited beyond words; this was the first time she'd ever got a brand new dress. All these years, she'd worn the discarded dresses from the pilot's daughter, who was tall and rather on the fat side. Naturally Pushpa in her ill-fitting clothes was a source of constant amusement to all. Dressed up in her new dress, her hair oiled, plaited and decorated with jasmine buds, she even watched a Rajnikanth-Sridevi movie. In the merry-making, Pushpa forgot all her discomfort, the nasty trickling of blood and the severe cramps in her stomach. In fact she enjoyed her new status and the attention she got from every one. Amma told her she should not pray or stand near the Kovil when she got the same trouble next month, as it would lead to Amman's wrath. Pushpa could not understand why Amman should get angry with her if she went to the Kovil on those days, but she decided to obey the command of her infallible amma.

A couple of months passed and, one fine day, Pushpa's prayers were answered. A young man who looked just like Rajnikanth came to her hut. Sivamama brought him along with him. When that man looked her up and down with his piercing eyes, Pushpa blushed. He looked every inch a hero, just like Rajnikanth, the same hairstyle, the same mannerisms. Pushpa was thrilled by the hero's presence in her humble hut. When amma and Sivamama left for some shopping, leaving her alone with the hero, she was ecstatic. But she was



scared that he could hear the loud pounding of her heart. She looked down, half-closed her eyes. She was afraid to look up and break the spell. He held her – a man, no, her hero, holding her!! He slowly put his hand under her chin and raised her face, pleading with her to open her beautiful eyes and look at him. She opened her eyes and their eyes met. He pulled her closer to him and kissed her on her lips. She felt his exploring fingers all over her body. She heard him saying over and over again, "You're beautiful, don't feel shy, look up, look at me, don't you like me?"

"Of course I like you, I love you, I adore you, you are the man of my dreams, my prince, my lord, my Rajnikanth, I'm your slave. Amman has answered my prayers at last," she wanted to say, but the words stuck to her lips. It was sheer ecstasy.

It was incredible, how much and how quickly Pushpa changed after that night. She was in a world of her own, a world in which no one existed except her and Rajnikanth. She took the small mirror in her hand and examined each part of her body which she had surrendered so totally to her lord. She realised for the first time that she exuded an unusual allure. She had a shining, flawless complexion. Her eyes sparkled with *kajal*, and the white stones, clustered like a shining

bee on her right nostril, gave a special charm to her straight nose. She also noticed a sexy cleft dividing her chin. She wore a new string of pearls, a pair of pearl earrings and lots of glass bangles which Rajnikanth himself brought for her. She was the happiest girl on earth now, none could mar her happiness. That weekend her prince said he would take her to Bombay, his work place, to leave her for a while with his aunt. Pushpa wanted to discuss the details of their marriage but was too shy to ask. Further, she did not want to break the short magic spell provided by amma's absence.

Pushpa's amma too changed a lot. She not only did not beat her, but she was very kind. Amma's old trunk was polished and neatly packed with red, blue, green and yellow synthetic saris with matching blouses and petticoats, brassieres with padded cups, powder, new slippers and lots of fake jewellery. Pushpa knew that it was not amma's money that was spent so lavishly on her; amma was generous with Rajnikanth's money, probably given with special instructions to equip his bride-to-be. Pushpa saw, with her own eyes, Rajnikanth handing over bundles of currency, she had no idea how much. Neither did she care to find out. She was in a dream world where nothing mattered. At last Amman had



answered all her prayers and she was going to get a rich, loving, caring, fashionably dressed husband.

When Pushpa took her leave from the old woman, she shook her head and said, "I wish you could stay back child, but you can't. This old woman's eyes can't see clearly anymore but I guess you're charming and young and, after all, Nature is very generous to every woman at your age. As they say, even a donkey will be beautiful at the age of sixteen. But pretty looks and an illiterate orphan girl is no combination, my child." Pushpa did not bother to listen much more to the old woman's gibberish. As amma correctly said, she certainly was a jealous old hag.

In the train, Rajnikanth and Pushpa sat in separate compartments. As instructed by her lord, she did not talk to anyone on the long journey, neither did she miss anyone at home. She was in fact very happy to leave behind the wretched hut, the starvation, amma's beatings and the drudgery in the bungalow. Though amma had changed in the past two months, Pushpa simply could not rely on that change, which could very well be a temporary one. Actually she considered herself very lucky to have

come away, that too with a man she adored.

In the hotel room in Bombay, Pushpa was very happy. She surveyed the small, cosy bedroom with its twin beds, soft mattresses, and attached bathroom, with bathtub and shower. Extremely pleased with her dream room, she removed her clothes in a jiffy and ran to the bathroom for a nice shower. She loved the feeling of hot water trickling down from the shower over her tired body, making her fresh and energetic. She reminisced about her pleasant experiences after Rajnikanth came into her life and felt that all her dreams had come true. She could not help humming a tune from a popular Tamil movie. When she heard Rajnikanth's footsteps, she hastily draped a towel around herself and ran to the adjoining bedroom, water dripping from her body everywhere. Then, quite unexpectedly, Pushpa saw, through the corner of her eye, Rajnikanth pull out a small bottle of liquor from a brown packet. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he almost ordered Pushpa to fetch a glass from the table. When she hesitated, he said in his baritone voice, "Haven't you seen, in the movies, your hero Rajnikanth drinking? The only difference is I don't

dance around the tree with you and the music is from my transistor, okay, my sweet heart?" And he laughed loudly.

After a few drinks, Rajnikanth pulled Pushpa to the bed and made love to her, until all the accumulated lust was drained out of his system. She wondered what happened, why he was in such a hurry to have sex, without a word of affection or endearment; he did not comment on her beautiful figure or say a word about their impending marriage. All he said after love-making, in a matter-of-fact tone, was, "Be a good girl and behave yourself. In my aunt's place, there will be more girls like you. They talk mostly Hindi; never mind; my aunt knows a bit of Tamil. I'll visit you every now and then; after all I have successfully initiated you into the dream world, dear – really a unique honour, my sweetheart". He laughed louder and louder. After a while a bewildered Pushpa could hear his snoring.

Pushpa lay awake for a long time beside Rajnikanth. Her head throbbed and her body ached. Slowly, slowly she closed her eyes. She saw a handsome, smiling, singing Rajnikanth whirling her off her feet, kissing her all over, his hands exploring the perfect curves of her body. She writhed with pleasure. But suddenly her Rajnikanth became a hairy man, double his original size, smelling of alcohol, suffocating her and trying to murder her in his embrace. She tried in vain to free herself. She prayed to Amman, the black idol in the Kovil, to help her, but the idol's face changed into K.R.Vijaya's, smiling beatifically, just like in the movies. "Is this really happening to me? Is this a fact or fantasy, a dream or reality?" Pushpa tried hard to remember, but her confused brain refused to give any clue, though the reality was snoring blissfully beside her.

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