

**THAILA RAMANUJAM**

## **Queen of the Skies**

For the third day in a row, I watch my husband pace up and down our backyard. Our cow just had a calf, and the newborn leaps with joy and runs around him in unpredictable loops. I doubt he notices her at all. He is lost in his own world.

Periodically he rests underneath the drumstick tree that pretends to be an umbrella over our watering well. This is caterpillar season. Those tiny woolen balls carpet the trees by the thousands, and need to be smoked out. If one of them rubs against your skin, you will want to peel your skin off. The intense itch will remain for days.

I hold my breath every time I see my husband hover around that tree, blissfully unaware of such avoidable trials. When he is in the type of mood he's been in for the past three days, he is deaf to my warnings, and disappears into an invisible cocoon. There is no instructing a writer about the ways of this world. I know this much, having been married to one for the past twelve years. I understand now why some people become writers. To simultaneously live in their own world and in ours too.

"How about some coffee?" I call out to him. He stares at me, unsure what the answer is.

"I'll bring it to you," I say, deciding for him. He has a very weak and delicate constitution. He would gladly admit to this.

**KARTIKA  REVIEW**

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“A feather could touch me at an awkward angle and I’m prostrate for a couple of days,” he says. My husband is always laughing at himself.

I want to tell him that if tenderness were the measure of one’s strength, he would be King Kong. But I can never tell him that. You never state the obvious to my husband. You just marinate these thoughts in your heart so they grow more delectable with time. I think these thoughts when I cook his meals.

He’s barely eaten or slept since the cable arrived three days ago, announcing that his best friend and soul mate, the famous children’s book writer Unni, had passed away in his sleep. He was only forty-five years old. Today is his memorial service, and my husband will be rendering his tribute.

“Even a stray dog gets a better send-off than a writer these days,” said my husband last night, as he stayed up working on his talk. My husband writes beautifully, I am told. Someone once told me that it was worth dying just to have my husband write a tribute for them. I wish I could see the beauty of it. I would be willing to die too.

But I’d better not, because no one will take care of my husband. And he needs someone to take care of him so he can continue with his work. Only I wish I understood everything he writes.

When his work is finished, he leaves the manuscripts on the top of his desk. I touch the pages gently, rubbing my hands over the words, trying to outline them with my fingers. It feels magical, but I don’t know why. I do try to read the words, and each is like a rare pearl, I know. But somehow when he strings them together, they don’t make a meaningful strand for me. He must understand how helpless I feel. But he is too sensitive to insult me by trying to explain it to me.

“Keep reading,” he says, with a kind nod of his head, as though some day I’ll learn to suddenly see the surface of the moon with my naked eye.



Unni arrived at our doorstep with a three-day beard growth. This was when I first met him, many years ago. If my husband hadn’t intervened, I would have thought he was a beggar seeking alms.

“Don’t be such a fool,” my husband rebuked me, grinding his teeth so hard that I thought they would fall out of his mouth.

“Sorry,” I said, meekly putting away the sack of rice I had prepared for the beggar. From what my husband had said, and how he had put him on a pedestal, I expected the man to be somehow extraordinary.

“You expected him to come to our house on a celestial ship or what? He is a writer, Malathi. God doesn’t intervene in his business.”

I understood that my husband was very excited to finally meet him. That the man had come looking for him in his own house. So I didn’t want to stand there explaining my foolish reaction. Instead I said, “Bring him in when you’re ready. I’ll serve the best meal I can.”

It was a rainy day and Unni was drenched. My husband offered a change of clothes, but he sat in the front porch for a long while, dripping wet and singing to himself. My husband left him alone. Unni’s eyes were closed half the time, and his hands made funny gestures as though he was carving something out of air. I watched him through the window in my kitchen as I grated coconut. I seemed to understand why birds sang when it rained.

That visit lasted three days. My husband and Unni moved through the house, lingering in each location for some unspecified amount of time. Then they sailed away as a pair to another location, talking incessantly. I would hear my husband howl with laughter and if I peeked in, I would see Unni pretending to be a *Kathakali* dancer, his hands extended like the wings of an eagle, and making tremulous moves with his fingers. Even though he wasn’t wearing a face mask he had the expression of someone who did. I have never before seen anyone do something like that. I would walk away before the men caught me observing them.

During those days they didn’t want to waste their precious time eating or doing whatever else non-writers did when they got together. They never slept and I could hear the boom of their voices carry over across the hallway from the room where I slept alone. They talked and talked as though the earth would stop turning if they stopped talking. And when the rest of the world collapsed into a deep slumber, they went out on long walks. And when Unni finally left after three days, my husband acted like he had loaned him a vital part of his body, and did not know how to carry on in its absence.

They would meet sporadically after that. Unni would show up. Sometimes he stayed for days and sometimes he left right away. One day, I was getting sick for no reason at all and rushed to the garden and hid behind the well. I stooped over, retched, and threw up. When I

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

stood up, Unni was sitting on the screen cover of our well as though he were a saint in deep penance.

I was shocked, partly because I have never seen anything but birds perch on the wrought iron screen before. There was a gaping hole on that cover. If you slipped, you'd discover your mistake only after it was too late. But this possibility did not seem to bother Unni. He sat motionless.

I was sorry that he had caught me in the midst of such an unfortunate event. No one looks graceful vomiting. I thrust my saree *palu* against my mouth and started to run.

“Don’t mind this,” he said, his eyes still closed. “My wife does this once a year. I know all about this.”

I ignored him and continued to run towards the house.

“Congratulations. It’ll be a baby girl and she’ll be the queen of the night.”

I turned around just for a moment, as that thought had not occurred to me. I remember catching a quick glimpse of that night because it looked like someone had poured molten silver all around the edges. The sky was beaming with so many million stars. “She would have to be the queen of all this,” I thought, as my legs carried me away as fast as it could. I never told my husband about this incident, but we named our beautiful daughter Rani.



Rani, now eleven and looking more like a disgruntled employee than a commanding queen, sits on the laundry stone, brushing her teeth. I am drawing water from the well for her highness to bathe. A plate of *idlis* sits on the parapet wall waiting for her. A crow sits next to her and cricks his head around, eyeing what could easily be turned into his meal.

“Crows these days think they are human, ever since we started acting like one of them.” I remember my husband telling me this. He always made me look at things differently. I only think to chase those annoying things away. But now after he told me that, I imagine the faces of people I don’t like when I chase them around.

“No, don’t chase him,” Rani says, looking at me with contempt. “I like the bird.” I wonder if she likes him for the crow he is or the human he wants to be.

Rani usually makes her choice of breakfast by studying the many fruit trees in our backyard. Sapota, mango, guava, banana, pomegranate. She then climbs a tree and picks her own fruit of choice. But today she shakes her head every time I phrase a question. “No *idlis*, no fruits, don’t chase the bird, won’t take a bath” as though she were an epileptic. I have been studying her closely for the past three days to see how Uncle Unni’s death has affected her. Her face is as expressive as the *Vivekanada* rock after sunset.

She makes an ugly face at my husband as he walks past, unaware of our presence. Her expression carries a deep resentment that I had never seen my child express.

“What for, that face?” I ask, too shocked to say anything else. I am glad my husband did not see her betray him in this fashion. He would be crushed if he saw his Rani with that awful face aimed at him.

Yesterday, when I complained about her, my husband told me that she was only a baby who doesn’t understand the permanence of death.

I look at my daughter’s face, and my heart starts to quiver, and it strikes me suddenly that I am capable of smacking her.

“Want to go the memorial service with your Appa, you ingrate?” I ask her. “He expects you to share a word or two at the meeting with his friends about your experience with Uncle Unni. Are you going to do that or are you going to just sit here making ugly faces?”

She walks away without saying anything.

“Where you trotting off, your highness?” I scream after her.

“What for all this?” my husband says. “Just a child, she is. She’ll go when I go.”

I see his face and how his eyes have soaked up all the sorrows of the world, like a blotting paper. And now he doesn’t have a friend to share it with. His princess could at least show him some mercy.

I walk to Rani’s room after bringing coffee to my husband. Rani is sitting on her swing, painting her nails.

“One nice word, one nice face. Does it cost you much, crazy girl?”

I open the curtains and look outside. The sky is turning charcoal. I turn around just in time to catch the cheeky girl make another blatant face at me.

A thick layer of baby talc is caked on her face and her lips have some *kumkum* smeared on them, making them look like hibiscus buds. She is a coquettish cat complete with whiskers.

“Again, you do that ugly face?” I grab her two braids. “No respect for the man. Or for me.”

I tug at her braids, maybe it was a little harder than I intended, but the blood-curdling scream was something else. Her eyes spit out fire and hatred and she seems to say, “I know you.”

“Close your eyes shut before they burn themselves into cinders,” I say, and walk away after slamming the door shut. She really did not have to be so inconsiderate.



When Rani was a baby, my husband would not even come close to her for fear she would shatter if he touched her delicate body. But Unni walked into the back room unannounced one day, picked up the baby, and walked away. He spent the rest of the afternoon holding her as he strolled through the orchard inspecting the trees, chatting with the butterflies.

“Now you have serious competition,” I told my husband, who couldn’t wait for his friend to abandon his child-rearing responsibilities and spend time with him.

“No wonder he captures a child’s world so completely. He is the one who creates that world for them,” my husband said. “Me? I live in mortal fear that a child will see through me and expose me.”

“How come we never meet Unni’s family?” I asked.

My husband said something vague. I don’t remember what. We never met his family.

As Rani grew up, Unni always came deep into the house and insisted on spending some time with both Rani and me, entertaining us in our

natural habitat—the kitchen, the storeroom, and the *pooja* room. He told us stories about his many children. He kept adding a new name to his brood every so often. He usually sat on the grinding stone and husked the coconuts for me with his bare hands. He insisted on tasting the dish I was making, even before it was finished. My husband has never been one to enter my world at all. I was always shocked that a strange man would take such liberties, but I knew better than to question the decisions that writers make.

Besides we loved his family through him.

He might say when he settled down to talk about his family. “Sita, my oldest? Two pre-molars gone. You can drive a bullock cart through the gap.” Or “Mina called the train that goes through our town, a giant caterpillar. Imagine the size of the cocoon it would make!”

Rani would squat on the ground beside him, her hands wrapped around her scabby, dirty knees, two mountain peaks and a little face shining like a rising sun. And if you observed the play of expressions on her face, you would think she was watching spectacular fireworks during *Divali*.

When Unni was gone for prolonged periods, Rani and I talked about his family until the next visit, when he returned to update his stories.

Rani knew what his oldest daughter Sita would do or say when confronted with any given problem.

“Manu would never have pushed his brother inside the river,” Rani would say on a stormy night, when we talked about Unni’s family.

“How did the baby boy get lost then?” I would ask.

“I bet it was the mad man next door who locked him up in his cow shed. Remember? The one with a long beard?” Rani would say with the authority given to her by Uncle Unni, who had made these people come alive for her.

One day I caught Rani hugging a drawing book. She hesitated to show it to me. I was insistent.

The cover had many dried leaves pasted on it. The title read, “Uncle Unni’s family.” Rani had a page dedicated for every member of that family. Each member was an article: a saw, a wrench, a screw, a spanner.

“Is this a garden tool box or a human family?” I teased.  
Rani pouted.

“Does Uncle Unni know his loved ones are digging and drilling tools now?”

“He says he even likes the expressions on their faces,” Rani said in a *What-would-you-know-about-such-things, Amma*, tone of voice. “He says, how perfect! But little screwdriver is growing older now. So I’ll make him a shovel or something.”

I flipped through the pages, wondering how my daughter could come up with this idea. Where did she learn how to add such realistic facial expressions and features to these imagined characters? How is she able to make you fall in love with common household objects and teach you to accept them with their fine needle points and sharp jagged edges, as though they grew inside your womb? Who would ever think to covet a chainsaw?

“Wait a minute. How come Uncle Unni’s page is empty? What is he going to be?”

Rani did not say anything.

“Let me think, maybe....” I said.

Rani covered her ears and screamed. She stood up to leave.

“I know what you’re thinking. Don’t want me to bias you,” I said.

“I’ll be under the rain tree, playing,” Rani said, running away.

I looked at Rani’s picture book again. Unni’s children. Seven of them. How I feel like we have known them all my life, like we had seen them every day and as though they grew older right alongside Rani.



My husband has to leave shortly for the memorial service. I go inside my daughter’s room to see if she has changed her attitude. Rani is lying underneath the bed. A blanket lies stretched across the floor and she is covering her face with the other end.

“Okay, you ghost person. That’s enough. Show me your face.” I try to unwrap the blanket and expose her face. I hear her whimpering as

though her sobs are trying to run away from her and she needed to tie them down.

“Rani, what happened today? You are upset,” I say. “We all are. Unni was family, more than family; your father would give up his life for him.”

The sobbing gets louder.

“Okay, why don’t I do this? I will read from one of Unni’s books? Which one? ‘The Animal Symphony? Grandma’s Elephant Brigade?’ You pick one, baby. I will read your favorite book. This way we’ll feel like he is talking to us.”

“I hate him,” she said.

“Whom?”

“My father.”

“What did he do to you?” My hands start to tug at the tassels on her blanket. “Look how you make me upset. What did appa do except share his friend with you?”

“I hate the friend too.”

“Unni? Why?” I am thinking it is natural for kids to hate someone when they die. It makes the loss so much more bearable. I wish I could hate Unni too. I wish I could cry out. But I have to keep up the facade for my husband. It wouldn’t do any good to light a match next to dynamite.

“Why make that ugly, ugly face at your appa? You know he hurts easy. Don’t you?”

Rani starts to disentangle the sheet wrapping her head.

“What would you say if this is what I look like to you suddenly?” she says. The sheet is completely off her face and her eyes look accusingly at me.

I look at that precious face in utter horror. Rani has black *kajal* tarnishing her dreamy eyes. Several tarry lines crisscross her face randomly, from chin to forehead. A gory blackened head floats in front

of me against the backdrop of a smoky sky outside. From the middle of that canvas, a pair of scarlet eye stares out at me.

“What you do that for?” I pull her face towards me and start to rub off the *kajal* with the *palu* of my saree. “Crazy girl.”

“See what I mean? See?” Rani says. “No one likes it if you wear a different face every day. See you hate it, don’t you? Now you know how I feel.”

“What you saying?” Why is my daughter talking in riddles like her dad?

“You understand nothing, amma,” she says, and dives inside her blanket again.

“I’m stupid. So, you tell me.” I don’t know what else to say to get her to talk.

Rani starts to sob in earnest again. There is no hope.

I walk to the window and look outside. Black clouds are starting to descend towards the earth. The sky fractures unevenly and a distant thunder claps its hands.

I see Rani’s green picture book lying on the ground. I pick it up and flick through the pages. I catch a new drawing on Unni’s page.

“Oh,” I say, “You draw Unni now, I see.”

I can tell from the lumbering footsteps on the wooden stairs that my husband is coming up.

I look at the picture of Unni my daughter has drawn.

“What is it?” I ask. “Tell your amma, baby. A cucumber? A thimble?”

I stare at the picture except I don’t know how exactly to hold the book.

“If you ask me, baby,” I say. A chuckle escapes me inadvertently. “It actually could be a boy’s *soosoo*.”

Rani looks up and what her eyes say sears into every bone in my body. A lizard chirps from behind the tube light and that sound punctures my eardrums.

“No,” I scream, cupping my ears with both hands. Rani’s book slips out of my hands, glides down my saree and rests on my toes. I kick it away as though it were a rotting rodent.

I grab Rani’s shoulders and shake her body vigorously. “Tell me you’re making this up. Tell me nothing happened with Unni.” I keep on shaking her. Rani’s head bobs back and forth like a *Tanjore* doll. “I’ll kill you, kill you.” I shriek. The pitch of my voice is so high that it sounds like a bird caught in a trap.

I hear my husband’s wheezing breath. I let go of her body.

The ground underneath me shakes from the reverberation of the traffic outside, but my legs don’t stop shivering until long after the lorry is gone.

“Rani, baby,” I whisper.

How can I ask my baby to tell me more than I care to understand already? How can she confirm something that I cannot ever bear to face? “Rani, my sweet child,” I say, just under my breath.

My husband knocks on the door. “What for this commotion now? Is Rani ready or not?”



I stand by the window staring out at the rain, but I am not sure for how long. I see Rani’s father walk down the street by himself to the bus station. He is on his way to the memorial service.

Rani is still on the floor. I lock my daughter inside the house and run out the door into the pouring rain. I have memories of the side streets and alleyways that would lead me to the memorial hall. When I walk into the hall, it feels like enemy territory. I have never been in the midst of so many men before. Some look puzzled to see me and some look away quickly, as if they had stared at the blazing sun for too long.

Most don’t dare look up at all.

My husband is standing on the podium next to a garlanded photograph of Unni. There is a steadily burning lamp next to it. My husband is lost in his speech. Endearing words spread out like fragrance.

I can sense the impact it has on the audience. An occasional outburst or a sob cuts through the rapt attention. If my husband sees me standing in the far corner, he doesn’t show it. As I had suspected, my husband is

giving his friend a send-off befitting royalty. When he steps down, the audience bursts out in loud sobs.

I find myself walking to the podium.

By the time I turn around to face the crowd, the crying stops and a deafening silence befalls the auditorium. But I look up at what seems to me like the intense stare of about hundred cobra eyes poised at me for the final strike. An occasional cough from the audience reminds me that I am out of line. But I start to speak without knowing what I will say next. I have never addressed a crowd. Someone adjusts the microphone, and my voice echoes back to me. For my daughter's sake, I want to hear what that voice has to say.

*I only have a few words*, I say. My voice shakes uncontrollably and emotions seem to clog my throat. I tell myself it doesn't matter what I say now, all I need to do is draw one brush stroke of a doubt, create one dissonant note.

I clear my throat, I speak softly, and I say that *I am not a poet*. I say *when some people die, they live on because of a legacy they leave, by how they chose to live their lives. But when some people die, they die once and for all, for the same reason*. I stop talking. It feels done. I step away from the podium and leave a sea of vacant faces in front of me.

When I leave, the Memorial Hall is still wrapped in silence.

And I run home thinking that the rain is clapping on the rooftop for my Rani.

