



**A**mma was lying on the cot and I was curled up on the floor right next to it. Amma and I were free to get up as late as we pleased. We had made it our habit over the years. We had to put up a battle of sorts to win it. Ours is a family that takes pride in the fact that we safeguard the dharma of the early riser – for generations now, we’ve all bathed before sunrise. But then, Amma and I were invalids. Amma had asthma and I suffered from joint pains. Both could create problems early in the morning.

Outside, there were sounds of the horse shaking its mane, of its bells jangling. The horse buggy was ready. This meant that Appa had picked up the bunch of keys for his shop. It also meant that the clock was inching towards eight thirty. He would now put on his slippers. Kweech. Kweech. Then, once downstairs, the abrupt impatient sound of the umbrella opening, closing. The daily umbrella-health-test, that.

The door opened slightly. A thin streak of sunlight pranced into the room, a shifting glass pipe of light, dust swirling inside it. Appa! I see him in profile – one eye, spectacles, half a forehead streaked with vibhuti and a dot of chandanam paste, golden yellow, topped by a vivid spot of red kumkumam.

“Boy! Ambi! Get up!” Appa said.

I closed my eyes. I did not move a limb. As if I were held captive by deep sleep.

“Ai! Get up. You good-for-nothing,” Amma said. “Appa’s calling.”

On the sly I looked at Appa. He looked affectionate, even gentle. As if I were being roused from heavy slumber, I opened my eyes with pretended difficulty.

“Get ready, Ambi. Eat and then go to Aanaipalam,” said Appa. “Go and bring Rowther to the shop straightaway. I’ll send the buggy back for you.”

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Sundara Ramaswamy won the Katha Award for Creative Fiction in 1991, for this story. *India Today* (Tamil) received the Journal Award for first publishing this story in Tamil. The Katha Translation Award went to S Krishnan.

This story first appeared in English translation in *Katha Prize Stories 1*, 1991.

We thank S Krishnan, our nominating editor, for choosing this story for us.

I looked at Appa, then at Amma. I had told her about the squabble between Appa and Rowther in the shop the previous day.

“Can you or can you not manage without him?” asked Amma. “This farce has gone on far too long,” she said. “Making up one day and parting the next!”

Appa’s face reddened. It seemed as if, if it grew any redder, blood might start dribbling from the tip of his nose.

“Onam is round the corner. *You* can come to the shop and make the bills,” he screamed. Anger twisted his lips, slurred and flattened out the words.

“Is Rowther the only person in this whole world who knows how to make bills?” asked Amma.

“Shut your mouth!” yelled Appa. Abruptly he turned to me. “Get up, you!” he ordered.

I sprang up from my bed and stood taut as a strung bow.

“Go. Do what I told you,” he growled.

As if someone unseen had tugged at the wheels attached to my feet, I moved swiftly out of the room.

I heard the horse buggy leave the house.

I got ready in double quick time. What briskness! I wore – as I usually didn’t – a veshti over my halfpants, and a full sleeved shirt, all in the hope that it would make me speak up with some confidence. I didn’t feel my usual anger with Appa. I didn’t feel sad either. It seemed as if even some little fondness seeped through. Poor thing! He had got himself into a fix. On an impulse, he’d spoken harshly to Rowther. He could have been more calm. Now, if a person is merely short tempered, one can talk of calmness. But if he is *anger personified*?

Excited by this paradox, I went and stood before Amma. I looked her straight in the face and said, “If he is anger personified where is the question of calmness?” Amma laughed. Almost at once, she made her face stern and, “Smart, aren’t you?” she asked. “Now, if you are a clever boy, you’ll go take Rowther to the shop.” Placing her right hand over her heart she said, “Tell him whatever *he* may have said, I apologize for it.”

I went and climbed into the buggy.

I too thought that we could not manage the Onam festival sales without Rowther. Who could do sums like him? He was lightning quick in mental arithmetic. Five people sitting in a row, with paper and pencils, would not be equal to one Rowther and his brain. Remarkable. Even regular buyers who flocked round him to have their bills tallied were amazed. "Is this a mere human brain?" many wondered aloud. "If the man can be this fast just by listening to the figures, what would he not do if he'd been granted sight?" And to think that Rowther has only studied up to the third class. That's two grades less than Gomathi who works in the shop, fetching and cleaning.

The dispute between Appa and Rowther had started mildly enough the previous evening. "Look here, Rowther, what are you going to do if you let your debts keep mounting like this?" Appa asked. Rowther had chosen all the clothes he wanted, piled them up by his side, before thinking of asking Appa for credit. It was quite clear that Appa did not like this.

"What can I do, ayya? My house is full of women. My sons are useless. My sons-in-law are useless. Four sons, four daughters-in-law, eight granddaughters, eight grandsons. How many is that? Just one piece of cloth each, and the cost goes up."

Appa was staring at Rowther, as if thinking, The man is getting out of hand. I must cut him to size. Right away.

"Kolappa, wrap up the clothes and give me the bill," said Rowther.

How dare he take the things before permission had been granted? Appa's face reddened. "It is not possible for me to give you credit this time," he said.

"So, you're saying you don't want our relationship to continue, no, ayya? All right. Girl, take me home."

Rowther stood up. Gomathi took his right arm and placed it on her left shoulder. They went down the steps. When the shop closed in the evening, he would usually look in the direction of my father and take permission to leave. That particular evening he did not take permission. That is, he had taken leave.

I thought I would first pick up Gomathi and take her with me to Rowther's house. That would perhaps lessen his hurt. But Gomathi was not at home. "Rowther had sent word that he was not coming. She's just left for the shop," her mother said.

I took a shortcut through the grove, and reached Rowther's house through a narrow lane. A tiled house, the roof low. In the front yard, there was a well on the right hand side, its parapet wall stark, unpainted, broken. Velvet moss sprang around it in bright patches. Stone steps led to the house. A strip of gunny bag hung from the main door.

"It's me, Ambi!" I announced my arrival loudly.

A little girl came out followed by another who was obviously her twin.

"Who is it, child?" came Rowther's voice from inside the house.

"It's me. Ambi," I said.

"Come! Come," said Rowther. His voice bubbled with happiness.

I pushed aside the sack curtain and went inside. The floor had been swabbed smooth with cowdung. Rowther was sitting cross-legged, like a lord. His arms reached out for me. "Come, come," his mouth kept saying.

I went and knelt in front of him. He put his arms around me. His eyes stared and stared, as if trying to recapture the vision they had lost long ago. He pressed me down by my shoulders, dragged me towards him and sat me down beside him. His emotions seemed to overwhelm him.

"Ah! You seem to be wearing a veshti today!" he said.

"Just felt like it."

"What's the border like?"

"Five striped."

"Just like Ayya, uhn? The boys in the shop tell me that you look just like your father, too. It is my misfortune that I can't see you."

He ran his fingers over my face, my nose, my mouth, my neck, my eyes, my ears, my forehead. "Everything in place, thank the Lord." He laughed.

I thought that this was the right moment to tell him why I had

come. But the words stuck in my throat, as if held there by an unseen hand.

“Amma ...” I started to say, making a tentative start.

Rowther interrupted me. “How is amma’s health now?”

“As usual.”

“I have Thuthuvalai, Khandankattri leghiyam. No better medicine for asthma. Only, Ayya likes to see English labels on his medicine bottles. I don’t have English here. Only medicine,” he said, enjoying his own joke hugely.

This was the right moment to tackle him.

“Amma wants me to take you to the shop. She wants me to tell you that *she* is very sorry if Appa has said anything to hurt you. You are not to misunderstand him. She says please don’t turn down her request.”

Rowther’s face visibly brightened. He raised his hands in salute. “Amma, you are a great woman,” he called out. “Get up, let’s go to the shop at once,” he said.

That year the sales during Onam were very good. Rowther was in his element. With great elan he supervised the shop boys who constantly jostled around him. He looked like Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata fighting a whole battalion, single handedly. He would state the price as soon as the cost and quantity of the material were mentioned to him. Only the good Lord knew what spark it was in his brain, what genius that did not need even a minute to calculate? A brain that could multiply and total up the cost of sixteen different items in a trice to announce, “Items sixteen. Grand total – one thousand four hundred fourteen rupees twenty five paise,” How could that be called an average brain? Even if the whole thing were written down on the blackboard, I would have easily taken half an hour to work it out. But for him, answers slipped forth like lightning. He had never till now made a single mistake. Amma has told me that in the early years of their association, Appa used to sit up half the night, checking Rowther’s calculations. It seems he’d say, “That man is getting beside himself. I must find at least an error or two.” But he never could. He just lost a good night’s sleep.

One day, a cart drawn by a single bullock, heavily curtained on both sides, stopped in front of the shop. From inside came the wailing of women and children.

“Sounds like the females from my household,” Rowther said.

Rowther’s house had come up for public auction! Apparently the amina was taking all the household things and flinging them on to the street.

Rowther started crying like a child and called on God to help him out. Even as he was emoting, Kolappan came with a bill saying, “Forty five metres and seventy centimetres at thirteen rupees and forty five paise.” Rowther stopped his keening for a moment and said to him, “Write this down, six hundred fourteen rupees and sixty six paise.” He turned to my father who was at the cash counter and sobbed.” Ayya, I have to pay the court the loan and the interest on it, more than five thousand rupees. Where will I go for the money?”

Appa took Rowther in the horse buggy to see a lawyer.

Rowther did not show up for work the next day. The shop assistant Kolappan said, he had with his own eyes seen Rowther, reciting the bills in Chettiar’s cloth shop.

“What injustice! I have just come back after paying the court the entire amount for his debts. He’s let me down, the ungrateful wretch!” Appa shouted.

Kolappan also whipped himself into a fury. “He knows how to calculate, but he’s a senseless idiot. Wait, I’ll go this minute and drag him here by his hair,” he said as he jumped onto his bicycle.

Appa sat down on the floor, devastated. He started to mumble. “This is a wicked world,” he said. “These days you can’t even trust your own mother.”

In a little while, Kolappan returned. Rowther was sitting behind him, on the carrier. He marched a stone-like Rowther to the cash counter.

“I lost my head, ayya,” said Rowther as he stood before Appa, his hands folded in supplication.

“A time will come when you will be cut down to size,” said Appa.

“Please don’t say such things ayya,” pleaded Rowther. “Come work for me and I’ll pay your debts, the Chettiar said. And I lost my head.”

Appa only repeated, “The time will come when you will be cut down to size.”

And, surprise of surprises, things soon happened that made it look as if Appa was going to be right after all. When Appa returned from Bombay that year after seeing his wholesalers, he brought back a small machine and showed it to Amma. “This can do calculations,” he said.

“A machine?”

“It can.”

Amma made up sum. Appa pressed a few keys. The machine gave the answer.

I quickly worked it out on a piece of paper. “The answer is correct, Amma!” I shouted.

“Have they transformed Rowther’s brain into a machine?” Amma asked.

That whole day I kept trying out the calculator. That night, I kept it by my side when I slept. I gave it the most difficult sums I could think of. Its every answer was right. I remembered something Gomathi had once told me. “Thatha! How can you do sums in a nimit?” she had asked Rowther, mixing up as she always did, the Tamil and the common English word. It seems Rowther had said, “Child, I have three extra nerves in my brain.” Now, how did those extra nerves get inside this machine? I couldn’t control my excitement.

I showed the calculator to Gomathi. She also worked out many many sums.

“Even I am getting it all right,” she said, “This machine is more cunning than Thatha!”

One evening Rowther was totalling up for the day. Gomathi was sitting there, the calculator balanced on her lap, checking out his calculations. At one point, very impulsively she said, “You are correct, Thatha.”

“Are you telling me I am right?” asked Rowther.



"I have worked it out," said Gomathi.

"Hmm," said Rowther. "I'll give you a sum. Answer."

Rowther gave her a sum. Gomathi gave the right answer. He tried sum after sum on her. She had the correct answer each time. Rowther turned pale. "Dear God. I am so dumb I cannot understand anything," he muttered.

"I'm not doing the sums, Thatha," said Gomathi. "It's the machine."

She stuffed the calculator into his hands.

Rowther's hands shook as he took the calculator. His fingers trembled. He touched the whole front portion of the calculator, the whole back.

"Is *this* doing the sums?" he asked again.

"Yes," said Gomathi.

"You keep it yourself," he said as he thrust it back at her.

After this, Rowther was a very quiet man indeed. Words failed him. He remained in a state of stupor, leaning against the wall. That day, Gomathi and I took care of all the billing. After a long time, Gomathi dug her finger into his thigh and asked, "Thatha, why don't you say something, Thatha?" But he said nothing even to that.

He kept coming to the shop regularly but he looked and acted like a walking corpse. It seemed as if all the laughter, happiness, backchat, teasing, sarcasm, had dropped off him. His voice was slow, hesitant. Even his body looked thinner.

Appa had stopped asking him to do the bills.

One afternoon, it was a busy time in the shop. Murugan had a pile of cut pieces with him. I was working out the cost. Suddenly, Rowther interrupted him, "What did you say was the price of poplin?"

Murugan stopped calling out and looked at Rowther's face, "Fifteen rupees and ten paise per metre."

"Wrong. Get the material out and look – it is sixteen rupees and ten paise per metre."

Appa got up. He came and stood next to Rowther.

Murugan's face fell as he checked the price. "You are right," he mumbled.

"You have sold ten metres. You could have lost ten rupees. Are you here to give away ayya's money to everyone who comes in from the street?"

"So, you know the price?" Appa asked Rowther.

"Only a memory, ayya."

"Do you remember all the prices?"

"It is God's will," said Rowther.

"What is the price of the smallest towel then?" asked Appa.

"Four rupees and ten paise."

"And the biggest one?"

"Thirty six rupees and forty paise."

Appa kept on asking. The answers kept coming.

Appa looked amazed. He could not believe his ears. He took a deep breath. He could not help doing so.

"If that's so, you do one thing. When bills are being made, please check the prices."

"I will do my best, ayya," said Rowther. Then he looked up and said, "Oh, by the way, have you paid your electricity bill, ayya? Today is the last date for payment."

"Oh, no!" said Appa, calling out to Kolappan.

Rowther said, "He hasn't come today, ayya."

"How do you know?" asked Appa.

"Everybody has a voice, a smell. Today I missed Kolappan's voice, his smell," said Rowther, and then he called out to Murugan.

"Yesterday he told a customer that we had no double veshtis. Please reprimand him," Rowther said.

"I don't understand," said Appa.

"Ayya, you put out ten double veshtis for sale. Weren't only seven sold? There should be three remaining, shouldn't there?"

Appa asked for the veshtis to be brought.

Sure enough there were three unsold.

Rowther let a sardonic smile play on his face. He said to Murugan, "Oh Lord Muruga, you merrily send customers away by telling them

we don't have what we do actually have. Are we here for business or for charity?"

That evening Rowther moved away from the bill-making section and went and sat close to Appa.

"If I am by your side I will be more helpful, ayya," he said and without missing a beat, "And if you increase the speed of the fan a little, yours truly will also get some breeze."

Appa gave the appropriate order.

"It is time to pay advance income tax, ayya. Shouldn't you see your auditor?" asked Rowther.

"Yes, I must go see him," said Appa.

It was time to close the shop.

"Ayya, you had wanted to get some medicine for amma. Have you bought it, yet?"

"I'll buy it."

Appa was tugging at the locks to check if they had been locked properly.

"Ayya, you were saying that your mother's tithi was due soon. Why not ask Murugan to notify the priest on his way home?"

"Good idea," said Appa.

The employees left one by one.

Gomathi took Rowther's hand, placed it on her shoulder and started moving.

"Won't you be doing the bills any more, Thatha?"

"Ibrahim Hassan Rowther is no longer a mere adding machine. He is now the manager. It is God's will," Rowther replied.