



TO CATCH A GRASSHOPPER

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Grasshopper)

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Padmarajan Award
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(Padmarajan was
famous writer and
film director in
Kerala)

To Catch A Grasshopper

The bride's guests gathered under the decorated canopy and around the podium adorned with *nirapara* and coconut flower and jasmine garlands that hung from the makeshift *pandal*, waiting impatiently for the groom's party to arrive. At one end of the tent the *nadaswaram* musicians waited for the arrival of the bridegroom to start the music. One of the girls sitting in the front row got restless. The five-year-old, who was the bride's little sister told her friends.

"Come, let's go catch grasshopper."

They have never heard of grasshoppers. "What's is it that you said 'grasshopper'?"

"Come, I'll show you."

They got up and went out of the *pandal*.

"Where art thou, the four damsels going?" One of the guests asked.

"We're gonna catch grasshopper." Shalini said.

"Grasshopper" He asked with disdain.

"Yes," she said seriously. Catching grasshopper is not a matter to be scoffed off that easily.

The destination was next compound. Through a gap made by the broken brick wall they entered the vast compound. Two mango trees standing as sentinel to the vast growth of shrubs and thicket are the only vegetation available in the compound. In the middle lay the remains of an old house, just the stone foundation only. For a moment the children forgot about their mission and absorbed in the beauty of the backwaters that lay on two sides of the compound. The sounds of chatting and confused hubbub from the marriage *pandal* receded. Shalini could see beyond the compound wall the top of the canopy. Looking from this far, the already small house looked smaller still. She was wondering why the boy who is going to marry her elder sister is not coming yet.

"Where do you get grasshoppers?" Asked Mini. Shalini suddenly remembered the purpose of her mission to the compound.

"It'll be somewhere here only." She said looking around. She started her search. "I come here with my sister for playing."

It was her sister who bathed her and dressed her up with new clothes that morning. Her sister did even fix the *bindi* on the forehead. Shalini felt for the spot and reassured herself that it is still there. While giving bath her sister had said.

"From tomorrow onwards, you should take bath and dress up all by yourself."

"Why?"

"Because I will be leaving with the big brother who marries me."

"Why can't *that* big brother stay with us, sister?"

She had not grown up to foresee the emptiness her sister's departure would create in her life. Had she known that she would have been very sad. The mother, who is constantly bedridden, is only a shadow in emptiness. It was her sister who looked after her needs.

The sister did not say anything. She was braiding her hair. Shalini repeated her question and the answer was a heave of sigh and Shalini looked up to see her sister's eyes becoming soggy.

"He wouldn't like our tiny house." Bindu said.

She wanted to say 'our tiny house and the eternal curse of poverty that encompass it'. She was never moved by poverty either, but when along with it come loathing and detestation? Knowing it was selfish she wanted to somehow escape from that house. She was hoping to escape not from poverty, but from animosity. Looking at the cute face of her younger sister, she felt sad. She said.

"When you grow up a handsome big brother will come and marry you and take you away. Thus you can also escape from here."

"When will that big brother come?"

"When you grow up."

Shalini stood in a trance with the knowledge that was giving immense solace and hope to her.

The grasshoppers are hiding. Even on the day of her sister's engagement there were countless grasshoppers as she walked along that compound. Where on earth have they all vanished today? Meenu, Mini and Saji are searching for something they themselves do not know what. They just searched as if something will just pop up in front of them. Saji asked.

"How big is this grasshopper?"

"Look, this big." Shalini pointed her tiny index finger. "It's green, but it will jump when caught."

In the heat of sun the girls started a renewed search for something that is as big as their index finger and jumps when caught."

Mini asked. "Why do you want to catch a grasshopper?"

"That is," Shalini added, "to have lots of money. There will be plenty of money if you catch a grasshopper and bring it home. My sister told me."

Sister could have imparted this valuable knowledge a bit earlier. Last time when she came here she had counted a lot of them. Shalini now realized that her friends are impressed. It is worth a try if you can have a lot of money. There is the vulgar presence of abject poverty and drunken fathers in their houses too."

The unrewarding search for a long time must have bored the other three girls. They said.

"Let's go back."

"Please, some more time. We'll search for some more time." She said. "I'm sure we'll get it."

Shalini wanted to hold back her friends somehow. She needs help to catch the grasshopper, and she doesn't want to go back without catching one.

Inside the wedding house, Bindu, Shalini's sister was in the process of paying obeisance to the elders. That is a ritual before marriage. Putting a coin and a betel nut inside a betel leaf, she will place it on the hands of each one of them who are standing in a row, and fall on their feet as if to beg absolution for whatever she had done in the past. It's a ritual she had to undergo, and the elders waited for their turn to bless her. When she was stooping at the feet of each one of them, memories about each person overwhelmed her. First was her father's elder brother. She remembered how, on the pretext of looking after their aged parents he claimed nearly 90 percent of the family wealth, leaving this small stretch of land, that nobody wanted to own, to her father, that too as if offering undeserving alms to a beggar. In this small piece of land, where digging with a coconut shell will bring out brackish water, Bindu grew up like a cactus plant.

Second in the row was uncle, Mother's younger brother. He wore new pants and shirt, and stood in front of her without even removing his shoes. Usually

people remove their footwear before entering a house, leave alone standing in front of a bride to receive her obeisance. The aunty who stood next to uncle also wore new *kancheepuram* sari costing four thousand Rupees. She had told Bindu. "Your uncle wanted me to buy another sari costing six thousand, but then I liked this sari. Okay, he said you buy a pair of ear-drops with the remaining two thousand. I didn't want any eardrop. I don't get time to wear the eight pairs I already have. I said we will add some more gold and buy a pair of bangles for Rajani....."

Bindu listened to all this haughty talk. Why are they coming to spoil my peace of mind? Her wedding sari is costing below one thousand Rupees. She liked a sari costing two thousand five hundred, the one with crimson color and a glittering fringe and an end piece with exotic designs. She had sat in the sari shop holding that sari for a long time, even after knowing that she cannot afford to buy it.

She remembered the day of engagement. There was a drinking party hosted by her father. Father's elder brother and this uncle and four other friends sat drinking till late night. Uncle, between his drinking, stood up to air a declaration. I will conduct the marriage of my niece all by myself. He repeated it with a slithery tongue beating his chest with his right hand to give credibility to his statement. Father was very happy, and poured his brother-in-law another drink. Father's elder brother was also in good form. His declaration was that the entire wedding feast would be on him. Don't anybody inquire about it. I'll do it.

By three in the morning almost everybody was asleep. She had spread a mat on the floor and took her younger sister, who fell asleep, somewhere on the floor, with her. Her bed had been occupied already by the aunty. Bindu did not sleep. Today is my engagement day. My day. Till 2 O'clock in the night she was washing the dishes left by others in the sink, and frying fish for the partying people, and cleaning the vomit of somebody who was over drunk. She was tired. In between she had to arrange for mat and bed for guests to sleep. The hollow promises and brags became gradually silent. She remembered the young man who wore a ring on her finger; a small ray of hope. She wanted to cry aloud.

There was a stir in the *pandal*, and then the sound of *nadaswaram* music.

"I think the wedding has begun." Mini said.

"Then we have to go?" Saji said. She was a bit nervous. "Mom will be lookin' for me."

"I am going." Meenu said.

Shalini helplessly, sadly watched her three friends walking towards the house. She doesn't want to go without catching a grasshopper. It happened a week ago. As they were singing the ritualistic prayers in front of the oil lamp at the dusk, it came, an insect green in color with long legs. She tried to drive it away, 'cause last time it came it got into her frock and created real problem for her. She took a long stick and tried to make it jump. It was then that sister told her.

"Shalini, you don't drive a grasshopper away."

"Why so?"

"Cause when a grasshopper comes home that house will have a lotta money."

That was close. Had her sister delayed a bit she would've driven it away. It was the same with a greater coucal also. Sister said it would bring luck to us if we see one along. But you shouldn't tell anybody about seeing that bird; then the luck will go away.

That grasshopper, for some unknown reason, jumped out and gone without

bringing any money. Sister Bindu was fighting with father for a mango necklace, one with tiny golden mangoes in a row.

"I'm not asking for anything else, just a mango necklace only. Can't you buy me that much at least, father?"

There were sobs and complaints.

"How can I sit in front of all the guests? Just because the bridegroom's people didn't ask for anything, you don't have to buy?"

"I still have one more daughter to marry off. You've got to remember that."

"You're talking about something which will take place after 15 years. It's not that, I know you don't love me at all."

Mother would stand there quietly without uttering a word. Shalini would wish that mother would say something to support her elder sister, at least to pacify her. Nothing will happen, and she will watch her sister sitting there like a withered flowering plant.

The great promises and declarations made at the engagement party thinned to nothingness as intoxication tapered. Father waited for his brother-in-law to bring bag full of money to conduct the marriage, and his elder brother to organize the wedding feast. No one turned up, and realizing that the waiting is useless he started running around for money.

Sister wouldn't ask mother to recommend her, knowing very well its futility. Shalini knows about it. So she also suffered with closed eyes the iniquity from father. She hid herself not able to face father when late in the night he staggered home with red eyes and faltering steps. Mother, because of her wheezing, goes to bed early, and her sister would serve father dinner, listening as usual to the brawl. Sister is so used to it like the croaking sound of frogs you hear incessantly in the rainy season.

Father was going out in the morning when Bindu said.

"Please buy me that mango necklace today, at any rate."

He did not answer. Only one week left for the marriage and she naturally expected that money will come from some quarter and that the necklace will be bought. Her expectations, that have been fading as the night advanced, have had a natural death as father came in heavily drunk. Bindu expected some words from the man, but to no avail. She asked.

"Father, you didn't buy the mango necklace, isn't it?"

"I'll buy a coconut chain, not mango necklace. Don't let me lose my temper."

"You have money to drink and make others drunk, but no money for buying anything for me only."

"What did you say you wretch?" He asked incensed.

"Am I not correct? If we had the money you had squandered on my engagement day, I could've bought a better sari than the one bought now. Now where are those big brother and brother-in-law of yours? You had made them drink to the heart's content at your expense, and now they have left you high and dry, when you actually needed their help."

She only knew that father has risen from his chair and that a heavy hand was falling on her. At the next moment she remembered hitting her head on something, and when regained consciousness again, she found herself lying on the floor. There was dampness of blood when she touched the forehead where it pained much. She remained there without bothering to wash her hands even. Nobody inquired about the cut on her forehead in the morning. It was at the bathing time that Shalini noticed the cut on her sister's forehead. She inquired.

"There is a wound on your forehead?"

“Oh, that one? It’s a wedding gift from father.”

Shalini felt sorry. Her lips quivered, and she was on the brink of a whimper. Bindu hugged her sister and kissed her on her face.

“Does it hurt?”

Shalini realised that the grasshoppers are playing truant. How else they disappear all of a sudden? She continued her search, between the grasses, on the branch of shrubs, with her sharp eyes. She has gone farther from home, and that pained her. She wanted to be present at the time of sister’s wedding, but then how can she go without catching a grasshopper. Finally she located one, on the leaf of a *thumba* plant. Even though small, Shalini hoped it would serve the purpose. Now I have to catch it. She felt pooped in the absence of her friends. It would have been easy with their help. She approached the grasshopper with furtive steps, touched the tail of the insect. At the next moment it was she, who jumped making a loud noise, because the insect, on feeling the touch of Shalini’s finger jumped to her face. It lurked there for a moment and jumped off to the ground.

It was a dangerous business to catch a grasshopper, and Shalini realized she had not come fully prepared for that. You need a net or something similar, and then a cover to put it safely once caught. In the absence of all these equipment, it is a difficult task. During the ensuing exercise the grasshopper made that girl move around like a spinning top. The hunt that lasted for about fifteen minutes left Shalini tired. At the end of a jumping spree, she has realized that the grasshopper has disappeared. Tired, she went under a mango tree and sat there soothing by the cold breeze from the lake.

In the wedding dais Bindu was looking around for her younger sister. She could locate her friends only, but not Shalini. She must be playing around somewhere Bindu consoled herself. The wedding ceremony started and rings and garlands were exchanged, all mechanical, since her mind was away somewhere. In between the bridegroom asked her something, and she didn’t hear it. He asked her smilingly. “Where are you now?”

“Did you tell me something?”

“I asked; where were you?”

“I was looking around for my younger sister. She had told me that she would sit just in front to see her sister getting married. Now I can’t find her.”

“Both of you get up..... Now let the bridegroom hold the bride’s hand and circle the dais. Yeah, like that.... Now the girls.... You take your oil lamps and walk in front....”

Marriage over, they were sitting around the dining table and Bindu again remembered about Shalini. She was wondering whom to ask about Shalini when she saw Mini and Meenu.

“Where is Shalini?” She asked them.

“Naw, we don’t know.”

“But then I saw all four of you going out?” It was the man who had witnessed the saunter of the four damsels.

“Haa.” Mini remembered. She said. “Shalini had gone to catch a grasshopper.”

“Grasshopper?”

“Yeah, she is in the next compound.”

It was difficult for Bindu to control a sudden sob. While her sister is getting married, Shalini had gone to catch a grasshopper. The knowledge why she is catching the grasshopper pained her. She got up and the groom also went along. They saw her under one of the two mango trees next compound.

She was curled up and in good sleep. Her hair danced in the cool breeze coming from the lake. She was dreaming about grasshoppers, plenty of them, she could collect handfuls; so many grasshoppers on the ground.

Bindu watched her younger sister for a while. And then she saw a tiny grasshopper on a blade of grass as if watching Shalini. She took Shalini in her arms. Shalini opened her eyes.

“What were you doing here?”

“Me, I was.....” She looked around bewildered. “I came here to catch a grasshopper. Is your wedding over?” She asked in a rueful tone.

“Just look, someone is waiting for you to wake up.” Bindu pointed at the grasshopper and said. Shalini smiled. It was looking at her as if asking, ‘after making me run around you had a nice nap, isn’t it?’ It was then that Shalini saw her brother-in-law. She liked him.

“I like this big brother very well.”

The bridegroom stretched his hand to take her, and Shalini without so much as giving a second thought jumped to his arms.

“Listen Bindu”, he said, “we’ll take her along and she can stay with us. How’s that? There are a lot of grasshoppers there, and none to catch them.

“Are you coming with us?” He asked Shalini.

She was ever ready for that.

Bindu’s eyes brightened. Both ways, she wished his promises hold good for her, that is to take Shalini along and make her stay with them and that there are a lot of grasshoppers in his house.

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