

## Blasphemy

As he passed a glass window, the *velichappadu*\* saw his own reflection and froze. It was nearly midnight, but the tall lamps that patrolled either side of the street mocked the night's inability to shroud the world in darkness. The *velichappadu* looked at himself and realized that he was a time traveler trapped in an unfamiliar world. The landscape was a haphazard mix of concrete, metal and neon lights, the sky a hue of red and silver, with the stars outshone by their more functional rivals on the ground. The soundtrack to the scene was the sound of vehicles occasionally whizzing past and the odd drunkard's swear words, challenging the entire world to a duel that no one was brave enough to accept. Shops, though closed, still peddled clothes and shoes to no one in particular. In the middle of all this, he stood, his hair a ragged mess of gray and white, a saffron *mundu* around his waist and a carelessly packed paper packet tucked between his arms. The *velichappadu* realized that he needed to get back to his own world and walked on.

Anybody would have lost their way, but not him, for he had been walking the same road for the last forty years. Everything might have changed, from the surface of the path he walked on to the houses flanking it, but the route was imprinted on his mind. As he had grown accustomed to doing for the last decade or so, the *velichappadu* closed his eyes for the last fifteen minutes of his journey. When he opened it, he had been magically transported to his own world. Before him, there were a few trees and a narrow gravel-filled road that, like him, had been discarded because they served no purpose in the modern world. As he carefully negotiated it, squinting to not step on snakes that had died out a long time ago, an old broken-down temple came into view.

The front door was locked, but the *velichappadu* knew how to get inside, for he had been doing that every night. As he walked along the granite path that had once been thronged with devotees, he saw her sitting on the side of the temple building and gazing into nothingness. She was dark, and her hair was as untidy as his, her robes robbed of their color and luster by time. Once upon a time, he had been intimidated by her appearance. But she had mellowed down so much with age that he no longer found her scary or intimidating. As she sensed his presence, Kali\*\* turned around and flashed a smile, revealing teeth that were as dirty as the granite she was sitting on.

"Did you get it?" she asked, making no attempt to hide her impatience.

The *velichappadu* quietly took the packet from under his armpit, unwrapped it and pulled out a bottle. As he placed it in front of her and attempted to open it, she reached into a crevice in the wall and pulled out two glasses.

"Nothing to have on the side?" she asked. He pulled out a small plastic packet seemingly from nowhere and took off the rubber band covering its mouth. "I got your favorite mango pickle." As she smiled a sense of satisfaction, he felt a warm glow inside him.

After they had both downed a couple of glasses, he gathered up enough strength to ask her the question that he had been waiting to ask all night. "Your decision. You haven't changed it, right?"

Kali looked at him and smiled the saddest of smiles. "No," she said. "I have to go. There is simply no reason to be here anymore."

He did not say a word, but she knew what he wanted to ask — she was a goddess after all. Wasn't he reason enough? Hadn't he come here his entire adult life and did what she asked him to, taking care of her and observing all the rituals that were a link to the time when gods still roamed amidst men? "Even you need a release," she told him. "Who are you doing this for?"

He did not have an answer to her question — he rarely had. He quietly downed another glass and dipped his finger in the pickle and sucked on it. The spicy sensation traveled straight from his tongue to his brain, where it awakened him like she used to when she possessed him in his younger days. He closed his eyes and tried to remember that scene — him jumping around, his gold-plated sword in hand, a long row of people not even daring to look straight at the fearsome sight that he was. The sword, he had pawned a few years ago, the fearsomeness even longer ago.

As usual, she knew what he was thinking. "I always wanted to ask you," she started, while taking small sips from her glass. "Why did you make it look like you were having a seizure? I was always a gentle voice in your head, whispering things like 'tell him to stay away from under the coconut trees for a couple of weeks, his time is not the best'. Yet you would shout 'I see a terrible death, blood pouring from a head split open!'. I think a bunch of people like you are the reason why they took to depicting me in all sorts of hideous shapes."

He chuckled at what she had said. "People like me are the reason why they fear you," he said.

She shook her head and looked away. "I never needed them to fear me."

As he downed another glass, it suddenly dawned on him that this was the last time he would see her or talk to her. For years, she had stayed on at the discarded temple, waiting for someone to show up and pray. A couple of days ago, she had finally accepted the fact that no one was coming. It was time to go.

He dipped his fingers in the pickle again and licked it clean. "But what does it mean? When you go. What happens? Where do you go?"

"I honestly don't know," she said. "I think I'd just stop existing. A god without people to worship is the most pointless of entities, you know?"

"What do you mean, stop existing? Are you saying you will die?"

"I suppose that is how you would explain it to a human. For you, a lack of existence is death, right?"

The *velichappadu* froze and tossed his glass to one side. As all the alcohol he had taken in began to take effect, her form slowly started becoming more and more blurry. He had never considered this. Death? That was not something you would associate with gods. He had always assumed she was going back to the world of gods, or maybe to another temple where people still came. But she was essentially committing suicide here. As the world started swirling around him, he found just enough strength for two more words, muttering it inaudibly as he crashed to his side.

"Don't go!"

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The *velichappadu* was shaken awake by an angry stream of light penetrating his clenched eyelids. At first, he covered his eyes with his arms and tried to go back to sleep. But then, as events from the night before slowly started to come back to him, he sprang awake and looked around him. The alcohol bottle was empty, as was the packet of pickle, and the two glasses had rolled quite some distance away in the wind.

He jumped to his feet and rushed to the small shrine at the center of the temple. The front door to that was locked, but he knew which windows were weak enough to pry open with his hands. He peered inside and was greeted by emptiness. The idol was missing. She was gone.

He wanted to cry, but he couldn't. He wanted to take the empty alcohol bottle, smash it at the bottom and plunge it into his stomach, but he couldn't. He wanted to bang his head against the beautifully crafted sculptures adorning the walls of the shrine, till it burst open and released whatever life was left in him, but he couldn't. All he could do was walk, mechanically retrace his steps from the night before and meander unsteadily back to a world where he did not belong.

As he walked, the *velichappadu* stopped the same glass window where he had caught a sight of himself, the night before, but he could not bring himself to look up at himself. But when he finally did, he saw a small kid standing in front of him, looking on curiously at his strange appearance. The *velichappadu* looked sorrowfully at the kid. He wanted to tell him all that he had lost but knew fully well that the kid would not understand. But then something came over him and his demeanor changed. His limbs froze for a minute and then unfroze, as his lips widened into a smile. He knelt before the kid and stroked his hair, his smile now a full-faced grin.

"Don't stand around under coconut trees for a couple of weeks," the *velichappadu* said, as he walked away.

\***Velichappadu** in Malayalam translates as Revealer of Light, is the oracle or mediator between a God and devotees at Hindu temples in the Indian state of Kerala. Dressed in red, he wills the deity to enter his body and dances around in a trance until he is no longer possessed

\*\***Kali** is a Hindu goddess