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Rukmanibai's Nose Ring

Jayaditya Vittal

Rukamanibai came awake, opened her eyes, and took stock of the room. Then she turned to her brother-in-law, who was asleep beside her; she ran a hand over his cheeks, and a finger each over his fine, aquiline nose and his moustache. Finally she shook him gently.

“Shivoba,” she said. “Wake up.”

He opened his eyes.

“Go on.” she said, with a touch of urgency. “It’s almost noon. Your brother will be here soon. Put on your clothes and go.”

Shiva looked at his wristwatch, which he had not taken off. “Does he come home for lunch?”

“Yes, ever since they moved the office closer to our house.”

“Why doesn’t he take his tiffin there anyway?”

“He says it doesn’t satisfy him.”

“Do you think the old idiot suspects?”

“No.” she said. “And don’t speak of your brother like that.”

Shiva buttoned up his pants, slipped on his sandals, and walked out. From her window, Rukmani watched him: down the back stairs, across the garden, over the compound wall, and finally down the street. The rest of the town was asleep in the hot, muggy afternoon, so it was unlikely that anyone would suspect anything. When he was out of sight, Rukmani turned back and began to dress. First the blouse, then the sari; she pulled her hair into a chaste bun and slipped on her *mangalsutra*, the sacred necklace indicating that she was married, over her neck. Then the thin gold bangles of a good wife: two on each wrist. Then she reached down for her nose ring, the elaborate gold ornament of a caste Hindu Marathi woman. It wasn’t there. She bent down, crinkling her stiff sari, and looked below the bed, the pillow, under the dressing table - it failed to make an appearance. In the day, a woman like her could only take off her nose ring for two things: to answer the calls of nature, and to go to bed. Where could she have dropped it? She considered going out to look for it, from the back door all the way to the bedroom, but she paused with her hand at the doorknob. She felt somehow naked without her nosering; and, in any case, the servants would see, and they of course would suspect. Rukmanibai heard a soft shuffle just outside the door and drew a sharp breath. What was she to say if her husband were home,

and had arrived at the room to see what was the matter? The shuffling did not stop, but there was no preemptory, authoritative knock at the door. Rukmanibai took a deep breath, and cracked open the door. At first she saw nothing. Then she cast her eyes downwards, and saw, at the level of her knees, a crumple of cloth and white hair, ostensibly sweeping outside her room.

“Koki” she hissed. “Up here.”

Koki looked up and seemed surprised. “Hu, Mistress,” she said, in her aged, high-pitched voice.

“Koki, I am searching for something.”

Koki looked up, and said nothing.

“Go look for it, Koki.”

Koki obediently got to her feet and began to go down the stairs. Halfway down, she stopped and looked back.

“Go on!” snapped Rukmani, opening the door slightly.

“Mistress!”

“What?”

“What do I search for?”

“What?” snapped Rukmanibai, losing her temper. “For my nose ring, idiot. It must be near the back door. Go!”

Koki, who was old and had a troublesome hip, shuffled down the stairs. Rukmani waited with a thumping heart. She strained her ears, but did not dare step out. Suddenly she heard the crunch of gravel under a heavy foot, and the unmistakable creak of the front door swinging violently open. Her husband was home. Rukmani broke into a cold sweat. There was a commotion downstairs, and suddenly Koki’s voice, incomprehensible but rising in volume, querulous - and then Naropant’s bull-roar up the staircase:

“Rukmani!” he boomed. “Rukmani! Come down here!”

This can’t be happening, she thought, as she went down the stairs. Not to me, not now. This didn’t happen to her, to Rukmanibai Naropant Shinde, eldest daughter of Ramoji Shinde, wife of the sub-magistrate of the whole of Gadchiroli...

At the bottom of the stairs she paused. To her left Koki cringed against the wall, her sari off her shoulder, her thinning white hair undone and dishevelled. She looked as if she were going to break out weeping. To Rukmani’s right stood her husband, Naropant. In one hand he held his

Burma-teak walking stick aloft; in the other, clutched tightly, glinting through his fingers, was Rukmani's nose ring.

"Rukmani" he spat, through his moustache.

"I..."

"How many times have I told you?"

"What? I don't..."

"You can't trust these wretches. Look at her, sneaking off with your nose ring."

Rukmani opened her mouth, and then slowly closed it. Koki hobbled over and plucked at Rukmani's hem. "Mistress," she said, her voice breaking. "Mistress, please..."

Rukmanibai looked down, into the rheumy, tear-filled eyes of Koki. Beside her, she was aware of her husband: his heavy breathing, his rustling clothes, his *smell*, undisguised by the musk of cheap perfume. Rukmanibai Shinde tugged her sari out of Koki's hands.

"You must be mad," she said, coldly. "You are better off dead."

Koki wailed.

Naropant Shinde advanced across the floor, raised his walking stick, and brought it down on Koki's hip.

"Out!" he roared. "Wretch! Bitch!"

He watched as the wailing Koki hobbled away, out of the gate, down the street. Then he brusquely handed the nose ring to Rukmanibai, and stalked off into the house. Rukmanibai paused a moment longer, staring out of the door. She worried a little, then pulled her sari over her head, and followed her husband. Justice had to be served.

Biographical Details of the Author:

Jayaditya Vittal is a third year undergraduate student of English (Honours) at Christ, Bangalore. He is based in Bangalore, where he has grown up, but has drawn considerably on his Marathi and Telugu roots to colour his writing. He has been previously published in campus magazines and writes a creative non-fiction blog.