



BLUE PENCIL

Ramendra Kumar

The canine^{♥♥} chronicles

love and laughter in the times of corona



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in the Times of Corona*

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Ramendra Kumar

Ramendra Kumar (Ramen) is an award-winning writer, a storyteller and an inspirational speaker with 38 books. His writings have been translated into 29 languages – both Indian and foreign. He has won 34 awards in the competition for writers of children's literature organised by Children's Book Trust, over the years. This tally is one of the highest won by any writer.

Ramen's stories have also found a place in anthologies and textbooks within the country and beyond. His stories have been showcased on several prestigious online platforms like www.Kahaanifestival.com, Radio Mirchi, Google & Apple Podcasts, Spotify etc.

Ramen has been invited to literary conferences & festivals held in Denmark, Greece, Sharjah, Sri Lanka etc as well Indian events including the prestigious Jaipur Literature Festival, Bookaroo, etc. He has been conducting Workshops for children and parents across the country and also taking sessions for institutions and corporates.

To know more about Ramen you can visit his website: www.ramendra.in & his page on Wikipedia.

CHAPTER 1

My name is Aryan. I am a Guppy. I can see raised eyebrows. My papa loves canines and he hates the word 'dog'. He feels it has been reduced to an abuse by the Bollywood star Dharmendra and his ilk – *Kutte, kamine tera khoon peejaunga, tujhe kutte ki maut maroonga*. In Queen's English too the word bitch has a connotation which I rather not discuss here. That is why he has coined a new name for me and my community – Grown up puppy or Guppy. Cool, isn't it!

I am six years, four months and two days old and I stay with my mumma and papa in Rourkela. Both of them are working as General Managers in Rourkela Steel Plant.

My narrative begins on 12th March, the day my parents left for Bhubaneswar to see my maternal grandma who was ailing.



A week later, Sharada aunty, our housekeeper told me that my parents were coming back the same evening.

I didn't believe her. She has this habit of fibbing. Just the other day she made me run after a non-existent cat all the way from the living room, where I was enjoying my post-breakfast-pre-lunch nap, beyond the veranda and across the garden to the front gate. All this because she had to sweep the floor and wanted me out of the way.

And last night when I was slinking away with her shawl she screamed, "See *bhaiyya*, Aryan has taken my shawl." In panic I left the stole and started running only to realise that papa was miles away.

I stopped in my tracks and gave aunty a reproachful look which was completely lost on her.

No, I don't believe Sharada aunty.

But in the evening I was in for a mumma of all surprises. At around 5 pm, I heard a car honk. I knew it was our car. I can recognise its sound among a thousand ones.

The vehicle stopped and I rushed out. I saw a tall,

slim youngster step out. OMD! (Oh My Dog) – that was my bro Ani. I rushed and jumped on him. He lost his balance and I was soon on top of him licking away to glory. However, in between my 47th and 48th lick my attention was distracted.

I looked up. Who was this young lady...she looked and smelled familiar. Even as I disentangled myself from Ani she squealed, “Nanna-lamlla, pulli-ku! My, how much you have grown,” and flung herself on me. I could hardly believe it. It was my elder sis Anki whom I was seeing after more than two years.

I simply went berserk hugging, licking everyone in sight, barking like there was no tomorrow, running around in circles and generally behaving as if it was the beginning of the world.

After around ten minutes I finally settled down with my head on Anki’s lap my tail in Ani’s grip, my eyes sparkling with joy and my tongue hanging out for the treat which I knew was coming. And soon enough Anki was feeding me my fav mango-banana-cherry custard...



I was told that my family would be staying at home under lock down for 21 days because of something called *Karona*. Now I was quite familiar with the term *Karo-na*. I had been hearing it all my life: ‘Aryan *susu karo-na*; potty *karo-na*, *yeh mat karo-na.... voh mat karo-na*.’

But I soon realised while watching the news with my fam that this was not *Karo-na* but Corona which was a kind of a dreadful disease sweeping the world. Though my parents and siblings looked quite worried I really was cool about it. I knew my fam can and will take care of me.

The next three weeks were the best period of my life. I had my entire family together for the first time ever for such a long period – and I was lovvvvving each moment.

Let me tell you a bit more about my family. I share a distinctly different relationship with each of them.

Let us start with mumma – she is the cuddliest. I really like to snuggle up to her wherever she is and whatever she may be doing. Everyone, especially papa, says she has spoilt me silly. And I kind of agree.



Anki is the prettiest in the family. She is fair and fragile and she reminds me of Poopsie, the Pomeranian who lives opposite our house. She invents new words of endearment to address me. And believe me some of them are quite revolting. But I tolerate because it is Anki who is using them. If anyone else had addressed me as ‘lulla-lippi, pulli-ku or galli-gappu’, he/she would have had it. Besides, we also have another awesome connect – ‘she loves to feed me and I love to be fed’.

Ani is fun but sometimes a pain in my tail – literally. His idea of bliss is pulling my tail, screeching into my ear when I am in snooze-land, treating me like his pet pony and even attempting a *dangal* with me. ‘Fight with someone your age, kiddo, I feel like telling him.’

Now the only person left is papa. What do I tell you about him? He is such an odd ball. Trying to predict his behaviour is like making a guess about the performance of the Indian cricket team in overseas matches.

Actually no one in the house takes him seriously anymore. However, he still has the hangover of the days when Ani and Anki were in pre-teens and would meekly listen to him. Mumma never bothered about him and she still doesn’t. How do I know? I heard papa and his best friend Ramu uncle exchanging cribs. They

call it the seven-year itch! But why seven years? I am just six and I have been itching for the last three years. And because of this I am bathed in some weird powder which smells like puke and tastes like yuck, every seven days.

Anyways papa's idea of showing who is the boss of the house is by disciplining me.

“Aryan why are you sitting on the sofa, why haven't you eaten your Pedigree, go and see who is at the gate...”

His favourite line is looking at me with a stern expression and asking, “What have you done?”

This is one question which always flummoxes me. Now I usually carry a burden of sins on me. How the hell would I know which peccadillo he is referring to: ‘My chewing up his pen drive, me leaving a half-eaten bone on the key board of his laptop, me doing susu on the front right wheel of our car...’

So instead of taxing my brain I simply go into the ‘little child caught with his hand in the cookies jar’ mould. My ears go all back, my eyes turn into pools of innocence, I bend low and sidle up to him – all apology and remorse. And whenever I indulge in this little performance, I make sure my mumma is around.

“Hey Ramen, look at him how guilty he is feeling. Come on, stop glaring at him. I don’t know what pleasure you get in torturing my baby...give him a biscuit.”

“Guilty my foot, can’t you see it is all a big drama!” Papa would say and I would direct an expression of such hurt and pain at him that even he would start laughing. He would pull me towards him and give a friendly slap, a hug and not one but two biscuits.

I would happily wag my tail and unleash some ‘conditional love’ on him.

Now you must be wondering why a brave, bold and brazen stud like me should be so scared of papa?

Well there is a background to it.

I must have been barely two. One evening papa had returned from office and after parking our car was walking down the pathway. I was inside somewhere and I missed the sound of the horn. I rushed out to greet him. He was holding, what looked to me like an umbrella in his hand. I have this fetish for umbrellas. I jumped on him and caught by surprise he fell down landing straight on a few flower pots. At that moment he simply lost it. He has a short fuse but usually



manages to hold his temper. But that day it was too much. I realised I was in for a hiding and went looking for a place to hide. But before I could get under the sofa, my favourite sanctuary, he caught me by my tail and whacked me one and started hollering at me like the dickens. It was not his hand but his voice that did me in. I started shivering and before I realised there was a pool of water under me – I had actually peed right there on the living room floor in front of my mumma and Sharada aunty.

I did not where to hide. But my act of shame seemed to work in my favour. Mumma looked daggers at papa and shouted. “See what you made the little darling do! Is this the way to treat the poor baa lamb? You should be ashamed.”

I looked at papa from the corner of my eyes. I could see a range of emotions fighting for space on his face. Finally, guilt overpowered everything else. He lifted me in his arms put me in the car and took me on a really long ride. On the way back he bought me a Vanilla ice-cream and fed me himself!

Papa is fun in other ways too. He gets me soft toys – cute squeazy ones which make a musical sound which I love. He gives them names which only he thinks are

cool – ‘chhota po’, ‘ducky po’, ‘pinky po’...

Whenever there are guests in the house papa gets into his ringmaster mode.

“Aryan, go get your latest toy – Kitty-kat and show it to Chadda aunty,” he declares.

I obediently trot off and return with a grey cat. She reminds me of Bhoo-devi, the neighbourhood cat whom I hate. I keep squeezing its gullet happily imagining that it’s Bhoo-devi who is squealing for mercy.

“Such a smart lab,” Chadda aunty would gush adding, “Can he distinguish between different toys?”

“Of course,” papa would say and ask me to get half a dozen toys, announcing their names at random.

I would promptly get them in the order in which their names were called and place them at papa’s feet.

Papa would look at me with unconcealed pride and gently pat my head three times. This meant that I would get three one-inch bones, but only later.



CHAPTER 2

To give you another perspective let me share a few pages of my *papa's diary* with you. Don't tell him I did or else I have had it.

21st March:

I cannot tell you how elated I was on seeing the all too familiar gate. And when our third child ran out to greet us – all tail, all black and all muscle and fat and tongue it was sheer bliss. He was meeting his siblings after quite some time and was naturally ecstatic. He ran all over the place unleashing clumsy, wet and woof driven dollops of unconditional affection. I am sure at that moment he was one of the few denizens of Planet Earth who was not quite unhappy with China for unleashing its latest scourge on unsuspecting humanity.

I talked to the doctor and both Madhavi and I were advised 21 days of home quarantine.

We hadn't been together as a family since Anki left home to study in Bengaluru twelve years ago. The kids would come, usually separately, and disappear after a few days. Getting them together was a huge bonus.

So much had happened in the last 12 years. Anki and Ani had completed their studies and found vocations in tune with their Ikigai. Madhavi and I had grown younger, fonder, crazier and were planning to cut the umbilical cord of our jobs and spend our life's savings in exploring our inner selves (writing, storytelling & Facebooking for me; singing, gardening and Whatsapping for her) and the outer world.

Our typical day now followed a distinctive pattern. All five would get up rather late. Madhavi would be the first one to face the world. She would let the maidservant who lived in the outhouse in and then either go back to tiddlywinks or begin her daily course on WhatsApp university.

By the time we got up she would be ready with the jokes/precautions/admonitions/Covid cures/Corona statistics let loose by fellow students of the Covid Varsity.



At breakfast we would be served a delectable dish conjured up by her along with the not so scrumptious garnishing of Corona.

Three of us would retire to our respective computers while mumma mia would practise her music lessons and share the latest updates on the affliction and more with family and friends.

Lunch would be a gourmet's delight with Madhavi and her hapless prodigy, Sharada, rustling up something new every day.

For the kids meal time was a truly special time. They were getting mumma-cooked food after ages and loving every morsel. It was also the time to discuss, argue and fight over news, views and reviews on Covid. The kids would often gang up against me since mumma mia, with the over abundant supply of the milk of human kindness sloshing inside her would give in and I, PAPA-prude, proud and pestilential, wouldn't.

Lunch would be followed by Ani and Anki going back to work and me to my writing and Wodehouse. Madhavi would go for a post-lunch virtual enzyme comprising a brief look at the headlines and then some channel surfing. She would stumble upon a super hit

movie that she would have seen barely 10 or 11 times and get down to watching it.

Evening tea, a more modest affair, would be followed by a walk in the garden. This was the best time to get a peek into the lives of the kids in the last decade or so and also discuss the future plans.

All this while I would try to make the best use of their skills. The first day I told them I would like to record a story which would then be posted on YouTube and shared. Both of them were enthusiastic.

The next day I had to persuade them to do a recording of three of my parenting talks. The enthusiasm was less palpable. A few days later when I asked Anki and Ani to record my dance both of them quite suddenly discovered that they had super urgent assignments to complete. However, when I sat in a corner sulking they came to Papa the Pain's rescue.

CHAPTER 3

It was 22nd March and I was sleeping, as always dead to the world. I was enjoying a particularly delicious dream. I was surrounded by my family with each member taking turns at offering me something delectably delicious. Mumma was armed with *roti* dunked in warm, melting butter, Anki had dipped her slender fingers into thick gooey *aam-ras*, which I was happily licking. Ani was feeding me fruit salad floating in honey. Even Papa the Hun was in a benevolent mood and was sharing his favourite mixed-fruit ice-cream with me.

Just then there was an infernal noise and I jumped up a foot in the air – a personal milestone. The last time I had achieved this feat was when I was a frisky teenager and mumma had stepped on my tail.

Anyways, moving to the here and now, I thought the washing machine had fallen on my head. As I landed on

mother earth and checked, I found that the appliance and my head were both intact.

The cacophony had now shot up by several decibels and its location was the front veranda. I rushed out and stopped in my tracks. I have had a fairly uneventful life but even a guppy who has had a roller coaster of an existence would have been shocked by this scene.

Three members of my precious family were out there with steel vessels in their hands creating a cacophony which would put an Indie pop band to shame. Mumma was holding a *thaali* and beating the hell out of it with the same ladle which she used to serve me *kheer* on my birthdays. Anki was creating a symphony on a large bowl with a small spoon. Ani was jumping up and down banging two huge *bhagonas* like they were cymbals. And Papa...Oh My Dog...he was interacting with a *tabla* with such single minded devotion and intensity, I was surprised its entrails had not fallen out.

I knew that my family was bananas, but this performance proved that they were an entire fruit basket. I rushed out. I knew this called for emergency measures. They needed to see a shrink and immediately, before they went completely loony.

As I reached the gate I was in for an even greater shock. The neighbours on the left and right and those opposite were all indulging in almost exactly the same activity. Some were even dancing and singing.

I must admit I was scared. I consider myself a fairly intrepid guppy. Nothing much scares me except papa, when he is in one of his ‘disciplining moods’, or Bhoo-devi who has this disgusting habit of screeching into my ear at the most inopportune moments and then racing off in a jiffy.

But this was getting too much. I couldn’t take it. I had to reach out. I howled for my soul mate, my mentor, my ‘partner’ Priyamvada or Pri.

Pri stayed two houses away. The hedge surrounding her house was quite low and every time I called her she leapt to my rescue. (Actually our hedge is also equally low but high enough to make it difficult for a 98 pounder to negotiate.) My partner is a fawn coloured lab, with soulful eyes, a slim figure and a long and lovely tail which has a vocabulary of its own.

“Whatsupp Aaalu-Paalu?” she woofed. I loved it when she called me by this name – it was so lovey, dovey.

I told her.

“Ha! Ha! You really get worked up over little things, da’ling. In fact if you watched TV or listened to some of the conversations around you, you would know more and fret less.”

“What do you mean?” Pri has this habit of frequently pulling my tail, which is a bit irritating.

“It is the Covid 19 thing. Modi *daadu* asked everyone to stand in their balconies or in front of their houses at 5 sharp and create ‘steely music.’”

I had seen Modi *daadu* on TV. He often came at eight and spoke seriously about some issue. And invariably he left papa and mumma super excited.

“Why? The Corona Virus will get scared and vanish?”

“No my pet, it is just to create a spirit of unity and solidarity.”

“It would have been far better to organise an India Pakistan cricket match,” I quipped.

“That’s a good one,” Pri said and gave me a lick.



END OF SAMPLE

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