I had a childhood friend named Lalu. About half a century ago – in fact, it is so long ago that you cannot ascertain it properly – we studied in the same class in a small Bangla school. We were about ten or eleven years old then. There was no limit to the number of tricks Lalu had in his head by which he would either scare people or overpower them. Once he had troubled his mother with a rubber snake in such a manner that the lady had to limp along with a sprained ankle for about seven or eight days. She was so annoyed that she ordered a tutor to be arranged for him. Every evening the tutor would keep him occupied and so he would not have the time to pester people any more.

Lalu’s father disagreed and said ‘No’. He himself had never studied under any tutor. It was through sheer perseverance in his studies and after enduring a lot of hardship that he had become a successful lawyer today. He wished his son would also study in the same manner. Of course, there was one condition. A tutor would be appointed for Lalu only when he would not be able to stand first in class. Though he was relieved on this occasion, Lalu was secretly very cross with his mother. The reason was that she had tried to force a tutor upon him and calling a tutor at home was similar to calling the police.

Lalu’s father was a rich householder. A few years ago he had renovated his old house into a huge three-storied building. Since then, Lalu’s mother kept wishing that the family gurudev would come to their house and bless them. All this time the old man was reluctant to travel so far from Faridpur, but now the opportunity presented itself. Smritiratna had come to Kashi for the solar eclipse and had sent a letter from there stating that he would come to bless Nandarani on his return journey. Joy and excitement were boundless for Lalu’s mother. She started the preparations in full swing. After all, gurudev’s visit to the house would make it holy.

All the furniture from the big room on the ground floor was removed. A new taped bed with new furnishings arrived for the gurudev to sleep in. Because he would find it difficult to climb up to the puja room on the top floor, a corner of the same room was specified for his puja and rituals.

A few days later, gurudev arrived. But what a bad weather! The sky was overcast with dark clouds followed by storm and incessant rain. In the meantime, Lalu’s mother was so busy preparing sweets and arranging for fruits and flowers that she hardly found any time to breathe. Even within that she managed to clean up the bed and fix up the mosquito net for the gurudev. After a lot of discussion, the tired guru finished his dinner and went to bed. The servants also retired. Lying down in that neat and comfortable bed, the guru could not help blessing Nandarani once again.
But suddenly in the middle of the night he woke up. Drops of water were falling over his tummy from the ceiling and through the mosquito net. Oh! How cold that water was! Hurriedly he came out of the bed and wiped his stomach. The he said to himself, “Though Nandarani has build a new house, the roof has already developed cracks under the strong western sunrays.”

The taped bed was not heavy, so the guru dragged it to the other side of the room along with the mosquito net and again lay down to sleep. Just as he had closed his eyes, within half a minute a few drops of cold water fell upon his stomach once again. Smritiratna got up again and dragging the cot to another end of the room once again exclaimed, “I see, the cracks on the terrace seem to have spread from one end to another.”

Again he lay down and once again water started dropping upon his stomach. Dragging the cot to another corner did not help matters in any way. Water started dripping again. Then he realized that the bed was so wet that he could no longer sleep in it. Smritiratna was in trouble. He was an old man and though staying in the room was risky, at the same time he was scared to go out of the door in this unknown place. What would happen in the cracked roof collapsed upon his head? Scared to death, he opened the door and came to the verandah. Though a lantern was lit there, it was pitch dark outside and no one was in sight.

The storm was raging in full swing accompanied by incessant rain. It was difficult to stand still. He did not know in which room the servants slept. He shouted for them, but there was no answer. There was a wooden bench in one corner of the verandah on which the poor clients of Lalu’s father sat prior to their consultation. Gurudev sat down there. Though he felt that it was beyond his dignity to do so, there were no other means left. The cold north wind sprayed some rain water upon him and made him shiver with cold. Lifting his feet upon the bench, he pulled one end of his dhoti over his body and tried to make himself as comfortable as he could. Tired after the whole day, his body feeling numb, bitter at heart, with sleepy eyelids, and with the indigestion that had been caused by the rich food and sleepless night, the gurudev was really perturbed. All of a sudden there was a new botheration. Huge mosquitoes started singing in his ears. Worried about the number of mosquitoes that were attacking him, at first he could not shut his eyes. But within two minutes he realized that they were innumerable. There was no brave man in the world who could counter such an army. The biting became unbearable, as was the scratching.

Smritiratna quickly left the place, but the mosquitoes accompanied him. The water in the room and the mosquitoes outside it really disturbed him. He started flapping his hands and feet, and even tried to hit them with his gamcha, but to no avail. Running around from one end of the room to another, he perspired a lot even in this cold night. He felt like shouting at the top of his voice but restrained from doing such a childish act. He imagined that Nandarani was fast asleep in her comfortable bed within a mosquito net and that everyone else in the house too were also sleeping peacefully. Only he had no end to his running about. Somewhere a clock struck four
and resigning himself to his fate he said, “Go on biting as much as you can – I can’t stand it anymore.”

Going to one corner of the verandah he squatted on the floor, saving himself with his back as much as possible.

“If I survive till morning, I’m not going to stay in this horrible land anymore. I will take the first train available for home,” he promised himself.

Now he realized why he did not want to visit this place. But soon deep sleep erased all the sorrows of the night and he was nearly senseless in deep slumber.

Nandarani in the meantime woke up at dawn as she had to look after her gurudev. Though he had a heavy meal at night, she felt that the food was not sufficient. She even resolved to compensate it with different items throughout the day. Coming down, she found his door open. She felt ashamed that gurudev had woken up before her. Peeping into the room, she found that he was not inside. But what was wrong?

The cot on the southern side was now placed north, gurudev’s canvas bag which was near the window was now in the middle of the room, and all the utensils used for his pujas were scattered around the room. She could not comprehend what had happened. Coming outside, she called the servants but none of them had woken up.

Where did gurudev go alone? Suddenly she saw something – what was it? In one corner of the dark verandah, wasn’t it something like a man sitting there? Gathering courage she moved closer and bent down to find her gurudev. In an unexplained fear she shouted, “Thakurmoshai! Thakurmoshai!”

Smritiratna woke up, opened his eyes and sat up straight very slowly. Distressed with fear, worry and shame, Nandarani started crying. She asked him, “Thakurmoshai, why are you here?”

Smritiratna stood up and said, “There was no end to my misery for the whole night, Ma.”

“Why, Baba?”

“You have built a new house no doubt, but the roof is damaged everywhere. All the rain throughout the night did not fall outside but upon my body. Wherever I pulled the bed, water kept falling. I came outside in case the whole roof collapsed upon my head. But here too the huge armies of mosquitoes kept on biting me for the whole night. I ran from here to there, again from there to here. I think half the blood of my body is no longer there, Ma.”

Seeing the pitiable condition of the old gurudev whom she could bring home only after a lot of effort, coaxing and cajoling, Nandarani was moved to tears.

“But Baba,” she said, “the house is three-storied. There are two more rooms above yours and how could rain water pierce through three floors?”

But suddenly she realized that there might be some handiwork of her wicked Lalu behind it. She rushed to the bed and found that the sheet was totally wet at the center, and drops of water were still falling from the mosquito net. Quickly taking it down, she found a slab of ice wrapped up in a piece of cloth – part of it had not melted and a little piece of it was still left.
Running out wildly she shouted at the servants whom she found, “Where is that wicked Lelo? Leave all your work, go look for him, and wherever you find that devil, beat him, and bring him back.”
Lalu’s father was just coming downstairs. Perplexed at his wife’s condition, he asked, “What are you doing? What has happened?”
Bursting into tears Nandarani said, “Either you throw out your Lelo from the house or else I shall go and drown myself in the Ganga today to redeem this sinner.”
“What has he done?”
“Go and see for yourself what he has done to gurudev for no reason.”
They all went into the room. Nandarani narrated everything, showed him everything.
Then she said to her husband, “Tell me, how can I run this house with such a wicked boy?”

Gurudev understood everything. Realizing his own stupidity, he burst out in laughter.
Lalu’s father turned his face the other way.
The servants came and reported, “Lalu is nowhere in the house.”
Another one informed that Lalu was having food at his mashi’s house. Mashi did not let him come home. Mashi meant Nandarani’s younger sister. Her husband was a lawyer too and they lived in another locality. After this, Lalu did not dare to come near this house for about fifteen days.

---------------------

Glossary

Gurudev = spiritual leader
Thakurmoshai = respected priest
Mashi = maternal aunt
His pet name was Lalu. He had a formal, official name but I don’t remember it. Perhaps you know that the word “lal” in Hindi means favourite. I don’t know who had given him such a name but such a consistency between a person and his name is hardly found. He was everyone’s favourite.

After leaving school we got admitted to college. Lalu said that he would do business. He borrowed ten rupees from his mother and started business as a contractor. “Lalu, your capital resource is only ten rupees,” we told him. He smiled and replied, “How much more do I need? This is enough.”

Everyone loved Lalu. So he always got the contracts easily. After that, on my way to college, I would often see Lalu standing with an umbrella over his head supervising a few labourers undertaking road repair. Making fun of us he would say, “Go, run – your percentage will be cancelled now.”

Much earlier, when we were younger and studied in a Bangla school, he was everyone’s mechanic. He always had several instruments in his schoolbag – the handle of a mortar and pestle, a nail cutter, a broken knife, a carpenter’s drill to make holes with, and a horseshoe. I do not know from where he had accumulated these things, but there was no work that he could not do with them. He would do many things for his schoolmates. This included repairing broken umbrellas, fixing the wooden frames of slates, stitching clothes torn while playing games, etc. Moreover, Lalu never disagreed to do any work. And he would do it efficiently. Once on the Chaat festival day, he bought a few paise worth of coloured paper and Indian cork and made some toys with them. Then he went and sold them near the bank of the river for two and a half rupees and with that money fed us a lot of chickpeas.

As the years went by, we all grew up. There was no one in the gymnastics club to compete with Lalu. Both his physical strength and courage were endless. He would turn up whenever anyone called him or whenever anyone was in trouble perhaps because he did not know what fear meant. He had only one serious vice and that was whenever he found an opportunity of frightening or terrifying people, he could not control himself. This he did to all men irrespective of their age. How he could invent such plans for frightening people within seconds was beyond our imagination. Let me narrate one or two such incidents.

Kalipuja was being celebrated in our locality at Manohar Chatterjee’s house. At midnight, the auspicious time for animal sacrifice was waning away but the man to do it was still absent. People who went to fetch him found him unconscious with stomach ache. When they came back and broke the news, everyone was upset and worried at the same time. How could they arrange for another person to do the sacrifice in the middle of the night? The puja for the goddess would be ruined. Someone said, “Lalu can slaughter lambs. He has done this job many times before.”
People ran for Lalu. He woke up from his sleep and just said "No."
“How can you say no? It would be dangerous if there were impediments in the puja.”
“Let it be interrupted,” replied Lalu. “I did all that in childhood but I will not do it now.”

Those who had come to call him started scratching their heads. There was hardly ten to fifteen minutes left for the auspicious moment to be over and after that no one would escape from the wrath of the goddess. Lalu’s father came and ordered him to go.
“Since they have come to you in desperation, it would not be good to refuse. You better go” he said.
Lalu had no power to disobey his father’s command.

Mr. Chatterjee was relieved after seeing Lalu. Time was running short. The sacrificial lamb was hurriedly decorated with sindoor and a red garland of hibiscus and led to the stocks. The loud shouts in unison of “Ma, Ma” by all the members present there subdued the last cries of the helpless animal. The large falchion in Lalu’s hand was raised and came down instantly. The spurt of blood from the beheaded beast painted the dark ground in red. For some time Lalu stood with his eyes closed. Gradually the loud noise of drums and cymbals subsided. Again sindoor was smeared on the second lamb’s forehead, a red garland hung on his neck, again the stocks and the shouting of “Ma, Ma” in unison. Lalu lifted the blood-smeared falchion once again and brought it down instantly. The severed body of the animal shook for some time before it became still and the animal’s blood stained the ground even further.

The drummer kept on beating the drum in full swing, the people stood crowded upon the front verandah, Manohar Chatterjee sat on a carpet seat and praying with his eyes closed, when suddenly Lalu delivered a menacing shout. In an instant all the noise subsided and everyone was astonished at his behaviour. Opening his eyes as widely as possible, his eyeballs roving, Lalu shouted, “Where are more lambs?”
Someone from the house replied in a scared tone, “There are no more lambs. We just offer only two per year.”
Swinging the blood-stained falchion twice above his head, Lalu roared in a rough voice, “No more lambs? That will not do. I want to kill. Either give me lambs or I will get hold of anyone and slaughter him – Ma! Ma! Jai Kali!”
Uttering these words he gave a huge jump over the stocks with the falchion still spinning above his head.

What followed next defies description. Everyone started rushing towards the front door before Lalu could catch them. The rush to escape resulted in a stampede. Some rolled down, some crawled between the legs of other people, some people whose necks were caught under the arms of others were nearly suffocating to death, some even tried to climb above other people’s shoulders and fell flat upon the floor. All these lasted for a moment and soon it was empty everywhere.
“Where is Manohar Chatterjee? Where is the purohit?” roared Lalu.
The _purohit_ was a lean man and right at the beginning he had hid himself behind the idol. The _gurudev_ who was sitting on the floor and reciting from the holy scriptures quickly got up and hid behind a huge pillar near the puja pavilion. But it was very difficult for Manohar to run away with his huge body. Lalu came up, caught his arm with his left hand and said, “Come and rest your neck in the stocks.”

The firm grip of his arm and the sight the falchion scared Chatterjee to death. In a soft and entreating manner he begged, “Lalu! Dear! Look patiently – I am not a lamb, but a human being. I am your uncle, so to say, dear. Your father is like my younger brother.”

“I don’t know about that. I want to slaughter. So come and I will sacrifice you. It is the order of the goddess.”

“No, dear, it cannot be the dictates of the goddess.” Chatterjee sobbed loudly. “It cannot be so – she is the Mother of the world.”

“Mother of the world? Do you have that much knowledge? Will you sacrifice lambs again? Will you send for me again to do the slaughter? Answer me.”

Chatterjee replied in tears, “No, never again. I am promising before the goddess that from this day onwards there shall not be any more sacrifices in my house.”

“Right?”

“Yes, right. Not again. Now dear, let off my hand. I want to go to the toilet.”

Letting his hand off Lalu said, “OK, go, I am letting you off for today. But where did the _purohit_ escape? Where is the _gurudev_?”

With a menacing shout he rushed towards the goddess. Suddenly cries in two different voices came out from behind the pillar. The combined cries of a thin and a hoarse voice resulted in such a strange and funny situation that Lalu could not control himself anymore. He burst out laughing – Ha, ha, ha! and dropping the falchion upon the floor, scampered away from that house.

It was only then that everyone regained their senses and realized that Lalu was just playing tricks with them. Killing human beings was just a part of his deliberate plan to fool everyone. Everyone who had run away assembled back within five minutes. The puja was still incomplete and things had already been delayed for quite some time. Amidst all that hustle and bustle Mr. Chatterjee kept on promising to himself, “If I cannot make that boy’s father give him at least fifty blows with a sandal by tomorrow morning, I shall no longer be called Manohar Chatterjee.”

But Lalu did not have to undergo that ordeal. He escaped somewhere early in the morning so quietly that no one could find him for about seven or eight days. About a week later he quietly sneaked into Manohar Chatterjee’s house one evening and begged forgiveness by touching his feet. So for that instance at least, he was saved from his father’s wrath. But whatever it might be, because he had sworn before the goddess, the practice of sacrificing lambs during _Kalipuja_ was forever stopped in the Chatterjee household.
With the onset of winter in our city, cholera broke out. The very mention of cholera in those days would make people perplexed with fear. If anyone heard that cholera had broken out in one area, they would not stay there anymore. If anyone died, it would be difficult to find people to cremate him. But even in such difficult times, there was one person in our locality who never objected to it. His name was Gopal Khuro and his aim in life was cremating the dead. If anyone was seriously ill, he would go to the doctor everyday and find out about his condition. As soon as he heard that there was no hope left, he would arrive there at least two hours ahead, barefooted and with a gamcha on his shoulders. A few of us were his disciples. He would tell us with a serious face, “Be a bit careful tonight. You should respond instantly if I call you. Do you remember the scriptures? “Rajadware smashane cha.....”

Yes, we do remember it. We will come with our gamchas as soon as you call us."

“OK, OK, This is what we want. There is no more virtuous deed in the world than this.

Lalu was also part of our group. Except when he was going out on his contractor’s job, he never refused. That evening, a morose looking khuro came and told us, “I think Bistu Pundit’s will not be saved this time.”

All of us were shocked. In our childhood days we had all studied under this very poor schoolmaster. He was congenially sick and too much dependent on his wife forever. He had no one else in the world to call his own and I have never seen any more timid and helpless person other than him.

It was around eight at night when the pundit’s wife was carried in a rope cot from the bedroom into the courtyard. The pundit stared at us vacantly and nothing in the world can be compared to such a look. One can never forget it for a whole life. While we were lifting up the dead body, the pundit asked us very slowly, “If I do not go with you, who will singe the mouth of the dead at cremation?”

Before anyone could reply, Lalu said, “I will do that job, Punditmoshai. You are our guru and in that sense, she is our mother. We all knew that it was impossible for the pundit to walk all the way to the cremation ground. Our Bangla school was hardly a five-minutes walk but he would take more than half an hour’s time to come panting all the way.

After remaining quiet for some time Panditmoshai said, “Won’t you put some sindoor upon her head before taking her, Lalu?”

“Of course I’ll do, Punditmoshai.” Saying this he gave a big leap into the room, brought out the container full of sindoor and emptied it on the corpse’s head. Chanting religious intonations we left the house with its mistress’s dead body departing forever while the punditmoshai stood quietly with his hands resting on the panel of the open door.

The cremating ground was situated about six miles away on the banks of the Ganges. When we reached there and placed the cot with the dead body on the floor,
it was two o’clock at night. Lalu held on to the cot and squatted on the floor with his feet spread out. In order to ward off their tiredness, some of the others just lied down here and there. It was a bright lunar fortnight and the empty stretches of the sandy cremation ground spread out endlessly in the moonlight. A cold north wind across the Ganges gave rise to big waves, some of which were breaking almost near Lalu’s feet. There was still no sign of the burning logs which usually came from the city by bullock carts. We had already informed the domes on our way here. They lived about a mile away and no one knew how long they would take to arrive.

All of a sudden thick grey clouds rose from the horizon across the river and strong northerly winds started blowing towards this side of the riverbank. Warily Gopal Khuro said, “The signs are not good – it might rain. We shall be in trouble if we are drenched in this winter night.” There were no shelters nearby, not even a big tree. In the mango orchard at some distance there were a few gardener’s huts but it was not an easy job to run so far out there.

Dark clouds gradually covered the whole sky, the moonlight disappeared in the darkness, and the hissing sound of fast-falling rain approached us. Like sharp arrows, a few drops first pierced us and by the time we could make up our minds as to what should be done, heavy downpour began. To save themselves, everyone ran helter-skelter leaving the dead body behind.

When the rain stopped about an hour later, we all came back one by one. The sky had cleared, the moonlight reappeared as clear as day. The cartload of firewood and other ingredients had arrived in the meantime and they were preparing to leave. But the domes were nowhere in sight.

“These people are always like that,” said Gopal Khuro. “They do not like to come out of their houses in winter.”

Moni said, “But why didn’t Lalu return till now? He said he would light the pyre. Has he run away home in fear?”

Annoyed with Lalu, Khuro replied, “He is like that. If he was so frightened, why was he sitting down holding the dead body? Even if thunder and lightening had struck me, I would not have left the dead body.”

“What happens when one leaves the dead body, Khuro?”

“What happens? A lot of things happen. After all this is the cremation ground.”

“Would you not feel scared to wait alone in the cremation ground?”

“Scared? Myself? Do you know that I have cremated at least a thousand dead bodies?”

Moni could not say anything else after this. Really, Khuro had reasons to be proud. Picking up a shovel that was lying on the floor, Khuro said, “I am digging the pit. You all give a hand in bringing down the wood.”

Khuro was busy digging the pit, we were carrying the wood, when suddenly Noru said, “Hasn’t the dead body swollen up to double its size?”

“Without looking anywhere Khuro replied, “Won’t it swell? All the blankets and quilts have been drenched in the rain.”

“But cotton is supposed to squeeze smaller when wet, not swell up.”
“You have too much of intelligence. Do what you are doing”, replied Khuro in anger.

Carrying the wood was nearly over. Noru had kept a constant watch over the cot of the dead body. He stopped suddenly and said, “Khuro, the dead body seems to be moving.”

Khuro had finished his work. Throwing the spade away he said, “I have never seen such a coward like you, Noru. Why do you volunteer for such work? Go and fetch the remaining wood. Let me arrange the pyre. You donkey!”

A couple of minutes elapsed. Now Moni suddenly jumped a few steps back and warily said, “No, Khuro. Things don’t seem to be all right. The dead body really seemed to move.”

Giving out a loud laugh Khuro smiled and said, “You youngsters, do you want to scare me? Someone who has cremated over a thousand dead bodies?”

“See it’s moving again,” said Noru.

“Yes, moving. It has become a ghost to eat you up—” But even before he could finish his sentence, the wrapped up dead body sat up kneeling on the cot and shouted in a shrill, fearful voice, “No, no. Not Naru. I will eat Gopal.”

Scared to death, we started running as fast as we could. There was a huge pile of wood in front of Gopal Khuro. Unable to run behind us, he went and jumped into the Ganges. Standing abreast in that cold water, he kept on shouting, “Oh my God, I’m going to die. The ghost is going to eat me up. Ram—Ram—Ram.”

The ghost on the other hand uncovered his face and kept on shouting, “Hey Nirmal, hey Moni, hey Noru, don’t run away. I am Lalu. Come back, come back—” Lalu’s voice reached us. Shy at our stupidity, all of us came back. Shivering in the cold, Gopal Khuro also came up to the embankment.

Lalu paid obeisance to him and added in a shy tone, “Everyone left in fear of the rain. But I could not leave the dead body and go, so I had gone under the quilt.”

“Very good, dear. You’ve done a wise job. Now go, smear yourself with the holy mud and take a dip in the Ganges. I’ve never seen such a wicked boy in my life.”

But actually he had forgiven him wholeheartedly. He realized that displaying such fearlessness was impossible for him. Actually, staying alone at night with a dead body inflicted by cholera, amidst all the infected bedding was no mean feat.

While lighting the pyre, Khuro objected, “No, this cannot be done. If she comes to know about it, his mother will never see me again.”

The cremation was over. After a dip in the Ganges, the sun was just rising when we headed home.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Glossary:
Khuro= uncle
“Rajadware smashane cha…”= The Sanskrit shloka states that a person should always be present in at least these five places – at ceremonies, during famine, in political unrest, during the summons of the king, and during cremation of the dead.
Domes = A Hindu untouchable caste whose duty was to burn the dead and look after the crematorium.
These three stories by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee from his Lalu series in Parabaas (Online Journal) www.parabaas.com Also published in Indian Literature Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. (Special 50 Years Commemorative volume) 2007.