

QUICK BITES

for spare
moments



Musings by R. K. Murthi

Extracted from
The Hindustan Times,
The Tribune,
The Times of India,
The Indian Express,
& The Statesman.



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Quick Bites for Spare Moments

Musings by **R K Murthi**

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Once upon a time, the middle had a pride of place in almost every major newspaper. It was right at the centre of the edit page. Other sombre or thought-provoking or scholarly articles acted, in a way, as maids in waiting to the middle. The middle was looked upon as the midriff, the backbone of the edit page.



I started writing middles in that golden age when the middle was duly accorded the place consistent with its title.

Good times, it is said, never lasts. The middle enjoys hardly any privileged slot now. Many newspapers have cut down on the frequency of the middle from six days a week to two or three. Even when it appears, it has been demoted to the bottom right corner or the bottom left corner. Thus has the middle been cornered, pushed to the edge. Now, it won't need much of a strong push to throw the middle out. So I, for one, won't be surprised if the middle joins the dodo in the none-too distant future. I draw solace from the philosophy, *Life is transient, so why should a genre of creative writing like the middle not find itself put away as not suited to the new age?*

Not that this augurs well for the future. Man doesn't live by bread alone. He needs butter and honey and biscuits and choice drinks too. The middle, along with the short story and the poems, provides just the diversion the reader needed. Having mopped up the terrible tales of tragedies and disheartening reports of the ugly deals of politicians and the mess, the world leaders have made of our earth,

he virtually seeks a pill to dispel the pain within. Literary genre of writing, now slowly fading out, play the role of the pill.

I hope this truth dawns on the readers, sooner or later. The middle, I still, believe will survive. For the middle has neither a beginning nor an end. It may take new incarnations, assume new formats, but it will be around, hopefully, till Armageddon.

I started writing middles around 1960. The middles in this collection, (the fourth such collections), have been extracted from leading English language publications including *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Tribune*, *The Indian Express*, *The Deccan Herald*, *The Evening News*, *The Statesman*, *The Pioneer*, *The Patriot*, *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*. In these middles, I have spared none. I have been as much the target of my witty digs as others.

It is my fervent hope that this collection will be as well received as the previous ones.




Better Half
and
Bitter Half

My wife is stirring the mashed ingredients, submerged in water and held in a pot that gets the heat from the bottom, with a spoon. I get a whiff of the exotic smell and ask her, "What's the pot boiler of

the day?" There goes the writer in you, says my better half. "I am not going anywhere till I know what is cooking?" I dig in my heels. "Go and produce a potboiler, try to hit the jackpot. Take a potshot at potluck. This is the best of time for Indian writers. Heard of Manil Suri or Jumpa Lahiri or ...! They hit the jackpot with their potboilers," the lady fires at me a virtual who-is-who of terms that are rooted in the word POT. "So my skill at playing with words has rubbed on to you", I mildly reprove her for trying to steal my thunder. "Words are not your monopoly," she gives an extra churning to the mix of tomatoes and green chilly and tamarind pulp and salt and the intoxicating smell of *rasam* hits my olfactory organ. "So I can't even file a case against you before the Monopoly Commission," I joke. "You are barking at the wrong pot," my wife parodies an idiom that talks about barking at the wrong tree. "Go and fire your creativity. Set its bottom, wherever it be, on fire". "Why do you want the bottom to be set on fire?" I ask.


"Elementary, my dear! The pot boils only when its bottom is set on fire. The rocket takes to flight only when its bottom is on fire. Your imagination will fly high only when it is forced to drag its seat away from the scalding heat," my wife shares her understanding of where the heat needs to be selectively applied. "It is not as easy as



What's in
the pot?

all that, dear. The path of creativity is often littered with potholes," I find the right POT word. "Is not a POT a hole? A hole with no hole at the bottom, so it becomes a one-way street to whatever one wants to boil in the pot?" she jokes. "My God! Potholes are what litter a bad road," I clarify. "As if I don't know!" she ticks me off before continuing, "Have you heard of pot wrestlers?" "Do wrestlers fight for pots?" I make light of her statement. "They do. One who wins the pot gets the dish the pot contains, when it is fresh and hot and truly delicious. He has his first fill. Others wait for their turns. Strange that he is usually the one who doesn't have a potbelly. Others display varying patterns of bulging tummies and resultant slowness when it comes to wrestling it out for the pot." "Are there a few more pot shots in your armoury? "I have half a mind to use a term that shows the target's intelligence in poor light," she laughs, leaving it to me to guess the word, CRACKPOT. Suddenly, it dawns on me. I have enough material for a skit. So I hurry out, ready to churn out a potboiler with words.





Ugly husband, wife's delight

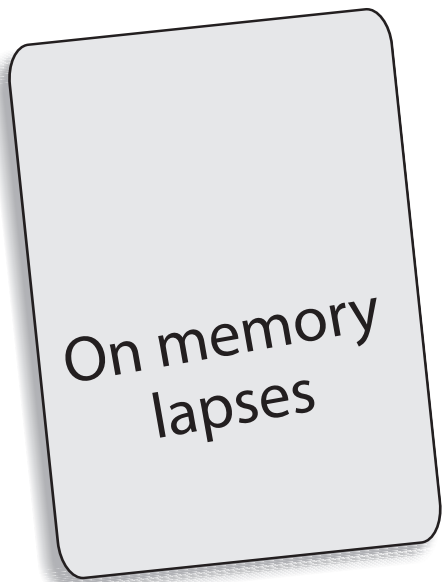
The signal the receding hairline sends out to my wife is clear. She realises that my top is trying to shape itself into an egghead. I know that every egghead is not an intellectual.

I have no pretensions on that count. So when I end up displaying a head that reminds everyone of a billiard ball, I shall still remember that I fall short of the highest standards of intellectual rating by quite a few notches. "Oh! How smart you looked, with those curly hair, glossy, wavy, when we got married! I almost thought you were cupid!" my wife groans. "Don't be stupid," I find a rhyming word, before continuing, "Be happy that I am heading towards a hairless top. Soon if I gain enough wisdom, people may call me a modern day Socrates? And if I become a nuisance, they may force me to keep a date with hemlock," I banter. "Can you be serious for once? Why don't you seek pomades and lotions, try hair transplant, if necessary, to arrest the hair fall," she looks at me wistfully. "And end up a pauper? Have you any idea how much it costs to buy these cures about whose efficacy I have reservations?" I point out. "Oh, if only I can put the clock back!" my wife sighs.

"Don't chase impossible dreams. Instead find the positive notes that my impending state of baldness strikes, the safety and security that come with it," I take a breather. "Positive notes? Where do you find them?" my wife is sceptical. "I will help you find them," I hold out hopes. "Out with your offbeat ideas, then," my wife reluctantly lets me have my say. "Bald men are rarely ever considered super smart.

Once I am bald, no wily young woman, looking for suitable husband material, shall consider me smart enough to throw a bait in my direction," I tell her. "My God!" "If I grow fat and stout and develop a big spread round the waist, you can feel safer. When I sport wrinkles on the face and the crow's feet etch dark shadows below the eyes, you can feel absolutely certain that our marriage will never be rocked by illicit relationship," I joke. "Is it your contention that a wife is secure only if her man is..." "Taller, older, heavier, uglier and hoarser, says EW Howe," I chuckle, draw my wife closer and whisper in her ears, "Love me now for what I am today. On every passing day, you will find in me a man, with a new face, with lesser hair on top, who loves you and expects you to love him. Variety is the spice of life, dear. With me changing the look of my head everyday, you will never face paucity of spice," I close on finding my wife laughing her head off.





I admit I suffer from occasional memory lapses. More often than not, they occur when I will them to be so. That may sound odd, but there is a logic behind my claim. Usually, I keep memory lapses under

check, collared and pinioned and trussed up, held out of harm's way, behind bars, in the locked cells of my mind. There they stay, pickled, restless, perhaps, livid with rage at being denied the opportunity to be free and unfettered. Slavery, I confess, has never reached the abysmal depths to which I have pushed mental lapses. But then I have my interests; and they have to be protected. Memory lapses protect my interests. That is why I keep them, hold them in chains, have them at my beck and call.

Give them an inch and they gain the power of banana peels. One false step and the memory lapses make me slip and fall in a trice. So I hardly ever give anyone of them more than a millimetre. That too under severely controlled conditions! When do I give the memory lapses minimal freedom? The answer is plain and simple. I give them freedom when it is to my advantage. That is when I need the right excuse for my alleged failures. Then I put the blame on memory lapses, make them play the role of sacrificial goats.

Take, for instance, my failure to fetch a gift for my wife on her birthday. I return home, walk in and the first thing I sight is the cake sitting on the dining table. My wife is wearing a fine *Kanjeevaram* saree.

Both my son and daughter, dressed in their very best, hover around the table, licking their lips just waiting for the cake to be cut and distributed.

“Ah, dear,” I gently press my wife’s palm.

“That is just a verbal gift,” my wife scowls.

“I am a man of words,” I spar.

“Words can’t clothe or feed or satisfy me, now,” my wife scowls.

“Sorry, dear. I forgot that today is your birthday,” I give the millimetre of space for my memory lapses to come out of their prisons and take the blame on their shoulders.

“Some day, you may even forget me,” she is ready to sob.

“Oh, no, this Sunday, we shall go to the market. You may buy whatever you want,” I tell her.

The smile returns to her face while I lash out at my failing memory, accuse it of letting me down through its lapses. My memory cells shout and scream, make futile bids to tell my wife that I am feigning memory lapse because I don’t have the funds to fetch her a gift, right away, but the language they speak is Greek and Latin to my wife and my children too. They have served their purpose. So quickly I chain them and lead them to their cells and keep them under lock and key, to be aired again when I need them to be the sacrificial goats.





Surprise gift

It is a very pleasant November evening. I suggest to my wife that we drive down to Connaught Place. She looks up, unsure of whether she had heard me right. She feels there is a catch somewhere.

She does not know what it is. But she knows for certain that it is uncharacteristic of me. Rarely, ever do I come up with such suggestions. That is why she feels a little unsure whether she heard me right.

“You heard me right, dear. Let us drive down to Connaught Place. Let us go window shopping. There is no greater pleasure than that. You don’t have to spend a paisa. Yet, you can savour the good things of life. You can stand and stare at attractive models, colourfully draped, stacked away behind glass panes, looking life-like even though they are just made out of mud and paint. You can browse around, pick up books from the shelves, feel the gloss and glamour of good books. You can try shoes or *chappals*, just for the heck of it, and then walk away, saying that the price is too high or the quality is just not good enough for you or you will return after trying at a few more places. Yes, let us go. But, remember, it is the end of the month. So there simply is no cash to buy anything. The only luxury we can afford is some snacks and ice creams at any place you choose. I hope you understand” I drop off, looking up to my wife to see the reaction.

She is elated. She nods her head. She hurries to the dressing table, starts uncoiling her hair to set it again. I watch her trimming herself up. I admire her reflection in

the mirror. She notes what I am doing and quips, "Hey be careful. Don't fall in love with my mirror image." I chide, "When I have the original, all to myself, why should I fall for the image which is transient, has no existence of its own, projects itself only so long as you stand before the mirror".

My wife laughs. Then she applies pomades, talcum, cream and a lot of other things, runs the comb through her hair, sticks them with pins and needles, wraps a sari with ease, dons a matching blouse and turns to me. She looks really charming. "I now know that make-up can make even an ordinary lass look exotic." My wife curls her lips in displeasure. She is not pleased. I know that. I tell her, "Just in fun, darling. Don't take it seriously. You are a lovely girl. I am glad I own you."

"Own me. I am not a thing to be owned. I am a living, pulsating human being with a mind of my own."

"I mean you are mine, as much as I am yours," I mollify her before starting off towards the scooter. My wife locks the door and joins me. She sits on the pillion seat and we move off. Soon we are at the shopping arcade of Connaught Place. I park the scooter. Then we head towards the inner circle of the shopping arcade.

As we walk, hand in hand, we get a whiff of *agarbati*, and notice a pavement vendor displaying his wares. I refuse to buy from him. I am sceptical. I know one thing about these pavement sellers. They have a way of taking a customer for a ride easily. Or there is some miracle which makes the *agarbati* smell exotic when the vendor lights it, yet it turns odourless, once I take it home. It is the same with the violin which has just three strings, and manages to produce the latest filmi song when handled by the vendor, but produces only catty squeals when I try to play on it.

These thoughts fill my mind when I realise that my wife is not by my side. I turn. I notice her, standing before a glass pane, almost tall enough to accommodate a six-footer. Behind the glass pane is a model, draped in a lovely sari. My wife has eyes only for the sari. She is lost in it. I get close to her, ask her, "Like it, dear."

"Like it. That is an understatement. It is the most lovely sari I have seen in recent months. I wish I could buy it," my wife says.

"Oh, no. We came window shopping. That is all what we will do. But, no harm going in and asking the price. We may also check up whether the shop has saris of the same texture with different colour combinations. Let us have some fun, dear. Just fun. No purchases. I don't have cash. Right!" I tell her while leading her in.

My wife is not exactly pleased. But she has no alternative. For she had agreed to the terms set out at the start. I had told her we would just go around, enjoy looking at things. That is all. Nothing more.

The salesman greets us with a big, broad smile. A ready-made smile, which all salesmen have. They can switch it on or off at will, I think. That is what makes them salesmen. Blue-blooded ones at that.

The salesman waits while I tell him about the sari displayed at the shop window. "You must have other colour combinations of the sari. I would like to see all the variations. Then I would like to decide," I hold out a vague hint that I might make a purchase.

That sets the salesman into motion. He leads me and my wife to the corner where a dozen saris, which belong to the variety which had caught our eyes, are stacked in a shelf. He pulls them out, one by one, opens them, holds out the *pallav*, lets us take a look at the exotic prints, rolls

along merrily, focussing attention on the plus points of each sari. My wife waits till her eyes land on a light blue sari. It has a dark border. The *pallav* looks immaculate. I notice the glint in her eyes. I know for certain that she has fallen for it.

The salesman too is quick to notice that my wife has lost her heart to the sari. He smiles and says, "Good one, Madam. I admire your taste. Only the other day, Mrs X, (He drops the name of a well-known dancer) bought three of them. Then there was the diplomat's wife who took two, one for herself and one for her friend. The diplomat was from Singapore. A naturalised Singapore Indian"

My wife does not even look at me. Instead, she feels the texture while enquiring from the salesman what the price of the sari is. He turns the sari around, spots the price tag and reads out, "Rs 1475/-", "Taxes", he says, are extra.

"Too high," I mumble.

The salesman peers at me, half in contempt, says, "Sir, good stuff is always costly. This is a collector's item, mind you".

I sternly tell my wife, "Ah, darling... Come. The price is too high."

The salesman looks beaten. My wife looks crest-fallen. But there is precious little that she can do. She reluctantly trails behind me. I wave to the salesman and say, "Maybe, I will be back soon." He does not take me seriously. He realises he has wasted his energies. He thinks my wife and I have just walked in to look at things.

My wife is glum for about ten minutes. Then she says, "Wish I could have that sari. Did you see how well the blue body fits in with the black border and the printed *pallav*. I wish I could own it. But, then, I know... I know this is the end of the month and we can't buy it"

I lead her to a restaurant. We sit down to eat *masala dosa* and ice cream.

We loaf around and window shop before returning home late.

A few days later comes my wife's birthday.

I return home early, carrying with me a lovely present for her. It is packed, neatly. I give it to her. Then I give her a hug and wish her many happy returns of the day. She starts opening the parcel. I tell her, "Wait, darling, guess, what is in it."

"How can I guess, when there are so many things you can get as a gift. It could be a cardigan. Or a shawl. Or a bedspread. No, darling. I can't guess," she says.

"I will give you a tip. It is a gift which would please you most. For you had set your heart on it sometime back. I think that should give you a clue as to what is in the parcel," I state enigmatically.

"What could it be "My wife scratches her head. She finds it difficult to get at the answer. She pouts her lips and says, "Can't make any progress in this guessing game. Tell me, dear. Tell me, what is in it?"

"Something that will hug you, adjust to your figure, bring out your personality in bold relief. Something that will add to your charm. Something that you will be proud to have," I still gloss over the exact identification of the gift.

"You are rousing my curiosity," she grumbles.

"Curiosity won't kill you, darling. You are not a cat," I snipe in good humour.

"I can't wait a minute," says my wife. She tears the brown paper and pulls out the plastic bag within which lies the prized object. She finally gets hold of the gift. It is the sari on which she had set her heart when I took

her to Connaught Place, a few days back. Her eyes bulge out in surprise. She is thrilled. She whirls around, holding the sari, before coming close to me to peck gently on my cheek. I pat her and say, "Do you know dear that I took you out, that day, to Connaught Place, only to find out what gift you would love. I noticed how much you fell for the sari. So the day after our outing, I went to the shop and bought it. And I decided to give it to you as a gift on your birthday."

"Thank you, darling. That is a surprise gift. The best gift you could have given me on this occasion. Oh, how sad I felt that day because I could not get it. And all the time, you were planning to get it for me. You say it is difficult to understand a woman. I say a man is more complex and has many surprises up his sleeves. At least, my man is full of surprises."

"Pleasant ones, darling," I quip and ask my wife when she would give me a piece of cake and a cup of coffee.

