

THE DINOSAUR'S
BABY
AND
OTHER STORIES

BY
E. HARIKUMAR





The Dinosaur's Baby

(collection of short stories translated from Malayalam)

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E. HARIKUMAR

(profile)

Short story writer and novelist in Malayalam, the language of Kerala in South West India. Born on 13th July 1943 in Ponani a coastal town between Calicut and Kochi. Parents: Edasseri Govindan Nair, well-known poet and playwright and E. Janaki Amma, who in her early years had written poems and stories and translated Tagore's Fruit Gathering into Malayalam. Married Lalitha. Son Ajay, married. Wife: Subha.

Harikumar was a member of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, the foremost literary institution under the Cultural Department of Government of Kerala, for two terms from 1998 till 2006.

Awards:

- Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1988 for anthology of short stories titled Dinosarinte Kutty (The Dinosaur's Baby),
- Padmarajan Award in 1997 for the best story of the year 'Pachhapayyine Pidikkan' (To Catch A Grasshopper)
- Nalappadan Award for the book 'Sookshichu Vacha Mayilpeeli' (Peacock Feather Treasured) in 1998 and
- Kathapedam Award for the book 'Anithayude Veedu' (Anitha's House) in 2006
- Kerala State Chalachithra Academi Award for best story for the TV film 'Sreeparvathyude Paadam' (Holy Foot of Goddess Sreeparvathi) in 2012

Books by E. Harikumar:

Novels:

- 1) Urangunna Sarpangal
(The Serpents Dormant)
- 2) Asaktiyude Agninalangal
(The Flames of Passion)
- 3) Oru Kudumbapuranam (A Family Saga)
- 4) Engine Drivere Snehicha Penkutti
(The Girl Who Loved An Engine Driver)
- 5) Ayanangal (The Solstices)
- 6) Thadakatheerathu (On the banks of the Lakes)
- 7) Pranayathinnoru Software
(A software for Love)
- 8) Kochambratti (Young Mistress)
- 9) Ariyathalangalilekku
(Journey to the Unknown)

Memoir:

- 1) Nee Evidayanenkilum (Wherever You're)
- 2) Ee Oramakal Marikkathirikkatte (Let Not Die These Memories)

Stories:

- 1) Koorakal (The Cockroaches)
- 2) Vrishabhathinte Kannu (The eye of the Taurus)
- 3) Kumkumam Vithariya Vazhikal
(Alleys Sprinkled With Vermilion)
- 4) Dinosarinte Kutti (The Dinosaur's Baby)
- 5) Canadayilninnoru Rajakumari (A Princess from Canada)
- 6) Sreeparvathiyude Paadam
(The Holy Foot of Goddess Sri Parvathi)
- 7) Sookshichu Vacha Mayilpeeli
(The Peacock Feather Treasured)
- 8) Pachappayine Pidikkan (To Catch a Grasshopper)
- 9) Doore Oru Nagarathil (In a City Far Away)
- 10) Karutha Thambatti (The Black Mistress)
- 11) Anithayude Veedu (Anitha's House)
- 12) Nagaravasiyaya Oru Kutti (Boy Who Lives in the City)
- 13) Ilaveyilinte Santhwanam (Solace of the Mellow Sunshine)
- 14) Vellithirayilennapole (As If In A Silver Screen)
- 15) Ente Streekal (My Women)

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THE DINOSAUR'S BABY

AND OTHER STORIES

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The Dinosaur's Baby

"The dinosaur baby came once again last night", Rajeev said.

"It was watching me through the window grille for a long time."

Breakfast time and it is Rajeev's story time. As the sunlight creeping through the window spreads on the table top, creating patterns, he recollects his dreams in abundant detail. Slowly the stories unfurl one by one. Mohan is bound to be attentive, being the lone listener. Shailaja, his Mom is busy fixing breakfast in the kitchen.

"I was sleeping." He said. "The dinosaur baby watched me for a long time, and I think it has taken a liking for me. And you know, finally it just took out its tongue and licked me. It has such a soft tongue, and has a very cute face too, like a puppy."

This is the second episode. First day, that is day before yesterday; it came and looked at Rajeev, who was sleeping in his first floor bedroom. It was standing on its hind legs, so he said, and was pressing its short front legs on to the wall. It was roughly twenty feet high, but was a baby dinosaur. Rajeev wanted to kiss its cute face, but didn't venture to do it, not knowing whether the animal would like it.

This is the beginning of a new series, a series that abound in animal characters. The animals that loved him or tormented him in his dreams were numerous, the animals as small as a pussy cat and big as an elephant. But an animal of this magnitude appears for the first time. A twenty feet dinosaur and it is just a baby dinosaur only! As the size of the animal characters increases, the stories also tend to be bigger and last for days together.

"Haven't you had your *dosa* yet?" Shouts Shailaja when she came with a hot *dosa*. He wouldn't listen. He was busy recollecting his dream and giving an elaborate account of it to his Dad.

"It's hind legs are pretty fat. The front legs are short and thin. It was standing there with the front legs hanging in front of it, his lovely tongue jutting out. Poor thing, it must be very hungry. Daddy, what do dinosaurs eat?"

What do dinosaurs' eat? He doesn't know either. Is it grass?

Was there grass a hundred million years ago? Really he did not know.

"Why don't you eat your *dosa*?" He asked. "The auto rickshaw will be here in a moment, and you will have to hurry."

As Rajeev started gobbling *dosa* Mohan thought. 'I have ruined his dreams.'

"Mummy, have you seen my blue socks? Yesterday Paul Master said he would punish me for wearing black socks. Gimme my lunch box."

"Where's the lunch box? I told you to hand me the lunch box the moment you come in the evening, for washing. Give it to me, quick. Now, there are two *iddlies* left in it. Why didn't you eat 'em all?"

Now there is a virtual turmoil. By the time the auto comes at half past eight, Rajeev makes Shailaja spin like a dancer. When the auto leaves she just sinks into a chair tired.

"Come to think of it," she says, "this is the turmoil with just one. Guess if we had four of his kind?"

"Keep quiet," Mohan says, "I've got more important things to think about, for example the dietary habits of dinosaurs. By the time he comes from school I have to be ready with the answer. He has to feed a dinosaur at night. Then I have my own problems, unimportant though, to solve. I have to dispose of battery eliminators worth fifty thousand Rupees immediately."

It was the Delhi salesman, who ditched Mohan by his sales

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talk. He had shown him the orders he got just from two districts alone. They are worth over forty thousand. Mohan fell in that trap, and got into a sole selling arrangement with that company. The terms are very attractive. The first consignment will be worth Rupees fifty thousand and then they will be sending consignment worth ten thousand every month. They say the item is in great demand.

Now, Mohan thought, I go begging at the doorsteps of shops carrying the fifty thousand worth of stock. 'Battery Eliminators? Sorry, we have a lot of stock,' they say. 'This will move slowly, one or two at a time. Do you have transformers? There is a lot of demand for that item.'

Either I have turned out to be a bad salesman. Mohan thought. Or the item I am selling is in least demand. At any rate creditors, including banks have started pestering him. The due date is well over long ago. Next in the list of problems is his residence. He has after long search found out a small house in town for rent and has to pay a deposit of five thousand rupees. The rent is same, but he can cut on his travel. That's a good point, and he has given notice to the present landlord. He can give deposit in the new place only after getting deposit back from the present landlord.

"Let me have my breakfast." Shailaja said.

While sipping tea from the glass she said. "If you have a multitude of problems, do you know what to do? My grandpa used to say. First arrange the problems in order of importance, and then start doing the most important thing, and then the next one. It's so easy. Do me a favor? Can you bring me a *dosa*, it is on the pan. And you have also to make another one for me."

He went to the kitchen and brought the *dosa*.

"I am a man capable of doing miracles! But here I am wasting my precious time making *dosa* for my wife. Your grandpa probably did not have any of these problems."

"No. My grandpa has *kanji* for breakfast, and two unmarried sisters of my grandma were staying with them. They compete each other to make the best *chatni* for him. All right, tell me what is most important of your problems?"

"What's the diet of a dinosaur?"

"The diet of what?"

"A dinosaur. A baby dino. This is the latest in Rajeev's dream series. When each of his dream series is over, I will get a doctorate in that subject. This is the most difficult thesis yet. I don't know where to go for research."

"You could try the zoo. Find out what they feed them on."

Mohan did not say anything. Either she made a mistake. She must have taken dinosaur for rhinoceros. Probably she hasn't heard about dinosaurs. She is lucky that Rajeev is not here. He would have laughed his head off. It looks like Rajeev is growing up to be a male chauvinist. It happened last week. Mohan was passing urine in the bathroom. Upstairs they are sharing the bathroom with Rajeev. There is door from both the rooms. Shailaja made bed for Rajeev and opened the door to the bathroom only to find Mohan pissing. She went out in a hurry and closed the door. Rajeev saw it. He knew that Dad was in the bathroom peeing, and he was watching Mummy's movements. When he saw her getting into the bathroom and coming out in a jiffy, he started laughing. He was somersaulting in the bed and laughing.

Before going to bed when Mohan went to the bath again, Rajeev came along and asked him in a whisper.

"Did Mummy see it?"

He whispered back seriously. "No."

"Lucky for us, isn't it? It would have been bad had she seen it. It's alright if boys see each other. But girls!"

On saying this he opened the fly and took out his little thing and fitted it between his tiny fingers.

“Yeah.” Mohan said seriously.

When he was sure that Rajeev was asleep, Mohan repeated this bit of interesting dialogue to Shailaja, and she started laughing till her stomach ached.

In the Library reference section a book on prehistoric animals was kept open before him. Mohan was pondering. Something is wrong somewhere. Everything is topsy-turvy and nothing seems to work. When he realized that the Marwadi was exploiting him, he fought back and left the job. A good job was in peril. It was then that he started as a self styled businessman. Till now he got three visiting cards printed in succession, and sold anything from nails to radio parts. Everything ended in loss, in the same pattern. By the time he brings a much sought after item for sale, the demand nosedives and there is no taker for that.

‘Oh, this item? It’s lying in our warehouse, bundles of them.’ Or, ‘eighteen rupees? We can supply you the same for twelve rupees? There is plenty of stock.’

The shopkeepers yawn at his sales talk, and suggest the name of their adversaries. Why don’t you go there and try. They might take it.’

His salesmanship, which made orders for machines worth millions for the Marwadi, has gone to dogs. Something is wrong somewhere.

In front of him the dinosaurs which lived in different ages grinned. When these ferocious animals walked, the earth trembled. Then, when the ice age set in, these monsters died one by one. He saw the last dinosaur raising its head helplessly, for a bit of warmth, for a bit of food.

Now, after sixty million years of solitary hibernation, it has woken up to be the pet of a six-year old boy, with a cute face and soft tongue to lay watch outside his window. A long sleep that lasted eons.

I have got to see an astrologer. He thought. In fact he was thinking about seeing one for some days and had kept his horoscope in his bag. Something is happening beyond his rational thinking, and he has to find it out. He went out carrying the bag containing samples. He had once gone to an astrologer for a horoscope matching. The astrologer Swamy is still in the same pose, squatting on a tiger-skin wearing a white *dothy* and a *shawl* on the shoulder. He had a sandal paste marking on the forehead and a gold-rimmed spectacle on the nose. In front of him sat an old man and a young man, probably his son. They have come to check whether two horoscopes match for a marriage.

“No”, the astrologer said emphatically, “these horoscopes will not match.”

“Swamy, can you not somehow match them?”

“I get what you say.” Swamy said. “But eight months from now, these horoscopes will create a lot of problems. The girl is twentysix, okay. But these horoscopes will never match. Moreover there is *dasasanthi* too.”

They paid the Swami his *dakshina* and went away. A girl past twentysix. Everything matched, but not the horoscope. Search, the unending search.

“What do you want?” Swamy asked.

Mohan came out of his reverie. Opening his briefcase he took out a horoscope and handed it over to the astrologer. Swamy fitted his specs on his nose and opened the horoscope. As he read he started frowning and wrinkles appeared on his forehead.

“Whose horoscope? Is it yours?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve lost your job exactly three years four months ago. You must have fought your way out. Right now you are jobless.”

Mohan did not say anything. The designation of a self-styled businessman is not a job.

Swamy was pondering. He continued. “It was *Ketu dasa* for the last four years and seven months. You still have two and half years left in that *dasa*. There cannot be any prosperity during this period. Right now you are troubled by the evil look of Saturn also. It is very bad time; you have got to be careful. You will have loss of money, loss of prestige.

There will be obstacles in your way. You will start with something hopefully, but will end up in heavy loss. Invest you will five, but will lose ten. That's the way it is."

Is Swamy reading my mind?

"After *Sani dasa*, the remainder of *Ketu* is not bad. But real prosperity will come only after *Ketu dasa*. *Sani* will last for another nine months. You've got to be careful."

While Swamy was talking Mohan went to a recluse. So, that is it. All these were already written. What will become of a child born at a particular year, at a particular day, hour, minute and second. In the heap of scrolls kept somewhere in a mysterious hidden corner of the cosmos. Perhaps the creator had made up his mind about the composition and future of the universe billions of years before the dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals walked on earth.

"Can you go to the past as you prophesy the future?"

"Of course, yes. But you couldn't possibly be interested in knowing the past, since you already know it, like you know you have lost your job. People will be interested to know their future, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean the immediate past. I mean sixty million years ago, when the dinosaurs grazed the earth."

Swamy looked at him with a suspicious eye. He put on the specs he had removed earlier, and laced through the horoscope. Again calculations. After a while he kept aside his specs and looked at him.

"No, I don't see anything that cast a shadow on your mental health. Look, right at the moment it is bad time for you. That's all. Be patient and wait for some time. Next on your horoscope is *Shukra dasa* and that will bring a lot of prosperity. Till then lie low, visit the *Devi* temple twice a day....."

He paid the *dakshina* and went out. Swamy thinks that I have lost my head. Mohan thought. What I wanted to know was whether Swamy could go eon back, into the ice age and beyond where the huge reptiles roamed. One of the dinosaurs that grazed the land has, after ages, taken birth again to become the pet of a six year old boy, to stand watch on the sleeping boy outside his window, with a cute face and soft tongue, to lick the boys cheeks.

Swamy will never understand it.

Now he has to meet a shop keeper. He had promised to tell Mohan whether he could lift the stock. If this shopkeeper also backs out, he could very well throw the stock of fifty thousand rupees to the attic.

Luckily for him the shop keeper was in the shop, but he wouldn't look at him, as if he has not seen him. Mohan reminded him about his talk yesterday for half an hour when he reduced the price by 20 percent. Reducing the price by 20 percent means he would be losing ten percent. At least part of the money invested will be salvaged.

"You had promised to let me know today whether you could lift the stock."

"Oh, yes, the battery eliminator." He said. "There is no demand for it. If you want you can keep two dozen here. I will pay you after it is sold."

Where is two dozen, and a stock of fifty thousand?

He came back. He had nothing to hope.

Way back home Shailaja told him.

"Two people came to see the house, couple of hours back. I told them to come when you're back."

They knocked at the door in two minutes.

"Heard you're vacating this place? When are you vacating?"

"On the first."

"Mind if we come in and have a look?"

"Not at all. Come in."

"See this is the sitting room. The fan is provided by the landlord. This is the common

room, very spacious. From the common room you enter the kitchen. The kitchen is very convenient. The racks..., a platform for keeping the gas stove, down there is the sink. This door leads to the bedroom. I'm using it as my office. There are two bedrooms upstairs, and a common attached bathroom. Come, I'll show you. Water? Yes, you get 24 hours running water. There is a sump and a motor."

He was tired. He rushed home in a hurry to have a cup of tea. When the people have left Shailaja asked.

"Why do you have to take so much trouble? Why do you have to show so much enthusiasm to get a tenant for the Lonappan Mappila?"

She's right. Mohan thought. During the last ten days at least eight parties have come and seen the house. They came in groups of two to twelve persons. In all this eight occasions, he had eulogized the house. The ability of Lonappan Mappila to control me from a distance of five kilometers is tremendous. Unless someone takes the house and pay the deposit, I will not get back my deposit. Unless I pay the deposit at the new place, I will lose that house. So, whenever a party comes to see the house I take out the robe of a broker and explain, 'this is the sitting room....'

As usual Rajeev came from school with a little suspense.

"Mummy, do you know what I drew in the class? Daddy, don't tell."

The question is meant for Mom. He is not happy that Daddy guesses all his secrets. So all questions and riddles are directed at his Mom with a warning to Daddy. 'Daddy, don't tell.'

Mohan has already guessed.

When he was sure that Mom has failed in her guesses he took out a paper before Mohan could say anything. It was a baby dinosaur. A cute face of a puppy, shining eyes, a long neck, fat hind-legs, pretty big tummy, short front legs and a endlessly trailing tail. The picture was not altogether bad. It was a conglomeration of a kangaroo, a giraffe and a Pomeranian. Suddenly he remembered that he had become an authority on paleontology and that he could boldly face Rajeev with any question relating to dinosaurs. He was waiting for Rajeev to ask him questions, to impress upon him.

It was then that Shailaja brought two letters. One was from the bank asking him to remit ten thousand Rupees immediately. The other was from a creditor saying that it is not proper to delay payment. Send at least ten thousand with interest immediately.

He thought there would be some respite. *Sani* and *Kethu* from opposite sides strangulate him.

Rajeev came carrying paints and brushes.

"Daddy, I'm going to paint a big dinosaur. Gimme some paper."

"Don't disturb me now." Says Mohan: "I have a bad headache."

"Just give me some paper. Then I won't disturb you any more."

A little bit help. A few good words. Where will I get these. He has never felt so helpless before. He felt angry at himself.

Rajeev was still waiting for the paper. Mohan suddenly burst out.

"Didn't I say get the hell out of here. You and your dinosaur. Your pet! What a dirty animal is it? Don't you know what a monstrous face it has?"

Rajeev fell silent and listened to Mohan letting out steam. When the outburst was over, he walked away slowly to the kitchen.

Mohan could hear him crying. He was complaining to Mom.

"My dinosaur is very cute. Why is Daddy telling that is not cute?"

Look what I have drawn. It is coming during night and licking me. He does it because he likes me."

He is spending sleepless nights nowadays. Rajeev's dinosaur is tormenting him. Closing the eyes he sees a boy walking away on a lonely path, holding a long rope tied to the collar of a twenty feet tall dinosaur. The earth vibrates at every step the dinosaur takes. The

nature of the path is unchanging as they move through the endless path. In between, the loss of fifty thousand, or the fact that he does not have a place to live in after the first of next month, does not worry him.

Rajeev is a bit anxious about the new place. Since it is a single story building, there is no upstairs. Naturally his bedroom is on the ground floor. This, he says, will create problems for the dinosaur baby. It will sprain its neck stooping down to look through the window. Mohan suggested a remedy. He said there is a big ground across his window and the dino can lie down on its tummy and watch through the window. This will spare him the sprain on the neck. He couldn't however tell Rajeev that just below his window is a dirty sewage bordering a busy narrow street.

"Aren't you scared of sleeping near the window on the ground floor?" Shailaja asks him.

"Why should I be scared?" Rajeev asks. "When such a big dinosaur keeps vigil throughout the night, the thieves won't dare."

Rajeev usually sleeps alone. But once in a while, he comes to the master bedroom with his pillow and blanket.

"Today I am going to sleep with Mummy."

"Chi.. Sleeping with Mummy? No?" Shailaja says.

Smelling that their plans are going awry, Mohan diplomatically says.

"Sonny, go and sleep in your room."

He is not relenting. He says. "Everyday I am sleeping alone. Today lemme sleep with you."

From the age of two onwards he was sleeping alone.

"What's so special about today?" Shailaja asks.

"I read Hardy Boys mystery book."

"Who told you to read such books at bedtime?"

"There was no other book. Mummy, please let me sleep with you, at least for a few minutes."

"No, no, big boys don't sleep with mothers. You are learning bad manners."

"Rajeev," Mohan tells sternly, "Go and sleep in your room."

He was frightened. He took his pillow and blanket and went back to his room. There were tears in his eyes. Shailaja felt sad and upset. She said. "I'm not in a mood for anything. We could have asked him to sleep with us. Please call him."

Mohan did not say anything. He was lying on his back eyes wide open. He remembered his visit to the astrologer, the shopkeeper, who after giving hope for a full day rebuffed him at the last moment, and the Delhi salesman, who cheated him showing false orders, and the derogatory threatening letters of creditors.

An hour must have elapsed Shailaja fell asleep. Mohan got up and went to Rajeev's room and put on the light. He was sleeping hugging a pillow. There were four other pillows on four sides. He says it is a fortress and that sleeping inside makes him secure and fearless. He wouldn't say what the pillow that he is hugging is meant?

That's his secret.

By the side of the pillow lay the picture of the dinosaur he had drawn. He has tried to make its face look prettier by coloring it. He stooped and kissed Rajeev's cute face, and then softly licked his cheeks.

He felt immensely jealous of the dinosaur who watches Rajeev through the window and licks his cheeks in moments of liking. He wishes painfully if he could become a dinosaur that keep vigil at his bed throughout night.

Included in the anthology of stories titled 'Dinosarinte Kutty' (The Dinosaur's Baby), which won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best collection of short stories in 1988. Translated from Malayalam by the author.


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Anitha's House

Mother as usual is in front of the television. The growing darkness outside the house, or even the fact that her daughter is getting late to return home do not bother her. She's in the magic world of soap operas. Stealing time from the shows at ads she rushes to the kitchen to finish some urgent work. Nalini is contented that mother is doing at least that much to lessen her burden. Otherwise she would have to start from cutting vegetables on reaching home at half past eight to quarter to nine.

"There's tea in the flask" Mother said her eyes still glued to the screen.

Nalini kept her bag on the kitchen table, took out her lunch box and dropped it in the sink. She opened the lid of the vessel kept on the table. An *ilayada*. Though she was so hungry and could gulp it down in a moment, she went to the bathroom and opened the tap to fill the bucket. Men! They create such a racket while getting down from the train and in between some hands outstretch longer than necessary, their fingers..... She was disgusted. She removed her dress with disgust. By the time the train reaches Aluva station the remaining flickering overhead lamps in the junk of a compartment start closing their eyes one by one. Enjoying the anonymity provided by darkness, fellow passengers blurt out cheap talk that will bring forth a giggle or two. She changes from the deserted ladies compartment since that will be a haven for mischief-makers who are waiting for an opportunity. There will at least be some gentlemen in the general compartments.

She donned a nightdress after bath and came out and sat near her mother in the sofa eating the *ilayada* from a plate. Looking at the screen she said.

"But Mom..... this girl.... she died last week?"

"No, she didn't die actually." Mother said with evident irritation in her voice, "they only thought so." She was peevish apparently because a vital dialogue on the screen escaped her aging ears because of daughter's untimely interference.

As for Nalini each episode is littered with a few shots. Glimpses of shots she happens to see reaching home from office, or when after taking bath, eating the snacks prepared by her mother, or shots that she happens to see while moving about when ironing the dress that she would wear next day to office. Only a few shots and she feels that her life also consists of a few shots in a third rate soap. A few shots at home, a few with fellow female commuters in the train, still more shots when she tries to ward off the hands of

cheap Romeo when alighting from the train, more when working in the office with colleagues, and then the journey back to the railway station..... These shots complete an episode of her life as a serial show. Mother has a flimsy role in this rather drab humdrum show. Just a guest appearance only!

Warming up the food she had prepared in the morning she realized that mother is eating very little for lunch. At times nothing at all. She is getting old. 55 years is not an age to grumble. But in these long years she has suffered a lot. Her husband deserted her when her only daughter was 5 years old, and the reason given.....! Nalini knew her mother never looked at another man on his face in her life than her husband. Still her father left mother on that excuse. They survived on her grandfather's pension.

"Any letter today?"

ANITHA'S HOUSE

Short story by
E. Harikumar
translated
by the author.
Included in the book
titled 'Anithayude
Veedu'
(Anitha's House)
which won the
Kathapeedom Award
in 2006

“No.”

“I guess that too won’t work either.” Nalini said.

“What?”

“Nothing, mother.” She didn’t continue the conversation. Any talk on her marriage will hurt her mother deeply. Why should she dig at this poor soul for no fault of hers? It was a good proposal. They must have inquired the family background. Mother’s background looms large on her life. The man of a father! If he wanted to leave he could have done so without trampling on their life. Now what happened? Last time mother wept for a long time when told about the reason for fizzling out a good proposal. Why lament! One day a boy will come who won’t fall for these false stories, and marry her. She has a job, and if marriage doesn’t take place at all, she will take it in her stride.

“Mom, I have a lot of work in the office tomorrow, and if I miss the passenger train I might stay back with Anitha.”

“Why do they make you toil so hard?”

“No other go, Mom. Either work or quit. They will hire somebody else. Boss is already cross with me when I reach late for office. I stop my work exactly at 5 O’clock, so I won’t miss my train. He is not very happy about it. And things as they are, you know I can’t go without a job.”

Mother felt the change in her daughter’s voice.

“You are lucky that you have a friend there. Otherwise it would be difficult to stay overnight.” She said in a comforting tone.

Nalini didn’t say anything. She was thinking of the dress that she should carry tomorrow. Why should I think so much over it? I’ll carry any dress that comes handy. I have to take the night dress any way. Last time..... She didn’t like to wear somebody else’s dresses.

“Mom, let me get one more dress ironed. You please warm up the curries. I have to get up at 4.30 in the morning.”

The soaps are over in the telly. Mother won’t watch TV after nine. Not that she doesn’t want it, but because Nalini has to go to bed early.

While eating rice with *sambar* and vegetable curry made of raw plantain, Nalini remembered her fellow commuters cutting vegetables in the train compartment in order to save time at home.

“I would have to do likewise if you were not there” Nalini said.

“Do what?”

“Didn’t I say that Mother, some ladies in the train, they cut vegetables in the compartment. They’ll buy the vegetable on their way to the railway station, and in the heavy rush of the compartment they will cut the vegetable keeping them in their lap. They have to start from home so early at 5.30 in the morning to catch the Bokaro train. They have to fix the food before that, and then pack it for husband and children.” After a moment of silence, she continued. “Why do you live like that?”

“They won’t have any other go.”

“Why Mom, you are eating so little. Don’t bring it down so much.”

“I’ve grown pretty old, now this food is good enough.”

“Take care of your health. See that you don’t fall ill.”

That’s the only thing left for us. She said to herself sarcastically. Whenever mother spells out her age she remembers her own age also. Only a few months left for 30. Will anything come out before that.....? There is a lot of difference in being 29 and 30. No, I don’t see anything coming up before that.

When lying down to sleep, she would remember the day’s incidents like a fast scrolling set of frames. Right from the morning commuting, the incidents in the office journey back

home. There is absolutely no change from one day to another. A new day is only a replication of the previous day. But suddenly once in a day things change for better. May be nothing much to expect but the feeling waters the mind that has become barren. New hopes sprout to bring out tender leaves. That is all, and the remaining days she has to watch the leaves wither away and drop down.

Mother has fallen asleep.

In the morning while going to office with a bag packed with, apart from the lunch box, the dresses for next day and for the night, she reminded mother.

"Mom, most probably I'll be going to Anitha's house. If you don't see me until 8.30, have food and go to sleep. Don't sit in front of the TV."

Mother didn't say anything. She has started to worry about the night she'd have to spend alone. There isn't anybody around who could come over to stay with her. That is good in a way; the person who is coming to help her would be the one who unleashes an array of scandals.

As usual she was late in the office. 9.20. The moment she booted the PC, the message came scrolling on the monitor. "U R as usual late."

She replied. "Sir, it's not that I am late, but you've opened the office too early."

9.00 O'clock is not a time to start an office, and 5.30 to close it. It is true that she comes at 9.30 and leaves precisely at 5.00.

"Come fast to my chamber." She imagined her boss Vijayan picking up the alphabets with his index finger and making thrifty words. Words are truncated. Only the letters 'cm' for come, and 'fst' for fast.

Vijayan's chamber is getting cool slowly.

"Which train are you taking?"

"Bokaro"

"There is no train called Bokaro now."

"I know. They have changed to Dhanbad, but we passengers still call it by the good old pet name Bokaro."

"Couldn't you come by the earlier Push-pull train?"

"At 6 O'clock? You talk like a sadist."

Vijayan laughed.

"Take out that presentation you have to give today. Start on it immediately."

She came out. While the busy day lay in front of her the cell phone rang. She knew who it was. She took out the phone from the bag.

"Your *salwar kameez* dress is very cute."

"Agreed, but how did you come to know it?"

"That's my secret."

"You called me just to say this?"

"No, just to inquire whether you've brought dresses for tomorrow."

"If not?"

"No problem. We'll buy in the evening."

"Has Rajitha gone?"

"Yes, now I am free for five days."

"Five days? What about Mini's classes?"

"Mem Saheb says that's not very important. Says you need not be that strict in 2nd standard. But I have a feeling she'll tell the same thing even when Mini reaches 10th standard.

When meditating in front of the computer she thought. Is this life, waiting for another woman to leave, for a day or two? Those days she belongs to somebody else; a substitute,

only for those days. Other days you have to be satisfied with one or two calls coming from him. Join colleagues for office work, once in a while indulge in witty conversation. Talk about gif animation or creating graphic in Photoshop. Get scolded by the boss. When customers turn up, discuss their requirements and jot down notes. If possible give a demo right then and there. Then the journey back home. After a night of dreamless sleep, get up only to repeat the routine.

This might be my true life. What else am I expecting, until another life springs up for me?

She, as usual, got out of her office at 5 O'clock. She opened the bag that slung from her shoulder and felt for the duplicate key, just to make sure. That key is meant to open door of another house, a door of anxiety and nervous dithering. Her heart fluttered passing through that gate. She climbed the steps of the porch and feigning calmness opened the door. The tension that she has been suffering melts and disappears as she passes through the door. She is alone in the house. She secures the latch of the door and looks up every room. Nobody! Though expected, that gave her immense solace. She went to the bedroom and removed her sari. After carefully folding it, she took out the night dress and went to the bath.

She came out of the bath, a dreamer, who is trying to fool self.

'My husband will be here in a moment.' She thought in a trance. 'I should prepare something for him to eat. He must be hungry.'

She goes to the kitchen to see what she could prepare. She knows the likes and dislikes of Narendran, and so she makes up her mind quickly. Narendran leaves office at 5.30, and comes straight home, so he had told. It is so comfortable to have somebody to expect. She knows this thread is very delicate and flimsy, but still she weaves a shroud with that silk thread to cover reality.

The doorbell rang and she went and opened the door. Narendran came in with a smile.

"You didn't look through the peephole to see who is at the door before opening it."

"I knew it would be you. I heard the sound of your car."

He closed the door and embraced her.

Just the way I had expected, she thought. My husband comes from the office and hugs me, kisses me.

"Come, the tea is ready."

When eating the potato slices dipped in chickpea flour paste and fried, Narendran said.

"Look, I like this very much, and my wife knows about it. Still she wouldn't include *bhajiya* in the menu for the simple reason that she doesn't like it. She will do everything according to her whims and tastes only."

"This is so simple to make." Nalini said.

"I know. Now what is for dinner?"

"Tell me what you would prefer?"

"We will eat out, okay?"

"Okay." Now it was the turn of Nalini to hug him and kiss. Every time she stays with Narendran she used to feel that she is dreaming; a dream that continues even after you wake up. It doesn't matter even if she ends up in this dream. After nightfall they would take out the car. The deodorant used in the car is familiar to her. It is Nalini's choice which restaurant to go, and what to order.

"Today belongs to you, it's your day. It's your choice only."

He likes the dish she orders, or rather pretends to be so and praises the connoisseur in her. Nalini knew for sure that each moment she is being compared with Rajitha. Back

home in the bedroom he cares for her likes and dislikes only.

"Isn't it unfair to care for my liking only?" She asks.

"You become your real self only with me. Other times you are just a good actress, pretending to be what you are."

She is aware of that. Yes, with mother at home, in the train bogie travelling with five or six women packed in the place meant for four, when working in the office, yes she is just acting. Like acting reluctantly in a rather boring television serial that appears never to end, she finishes every episode.

And then once in a while a young man pops in to give her some hope of escape from the dreary rut. She remembered the man who came to see her last week. He came with his friend. A handsome boy and she liked him. He liked her too, a pretty girl with a good job and the house and surroundings are good. He said he wanted to talk to her. In between the talk he said.

"Look, I want to marry a virgin. Do you mind if I ask you....."

She pondered over it. She could pretend, but she hated to start a life by acting. She asked.

"Didn't you have any experience?"

He was obviously uneasy. Probably he also didn't want to start life by acting.

"How many times did you have....." She asked.

Finding him still hesitant and nervous, she said. "Please tell me."

"Many times..."

"Many times?"

"Yes, it was the maid in our house. She was elder to me."

"She still works there?"

"No, she's left two months back."

Nalini wanted to ask whether that is the reason why he decided to get married. Looking at his innocent looking face she couldn't ask him. Poor man! A man who bared his life so fast and so easily can't be bad. She consoled herself. He didn't go to a cheap woman. She liked him. He said he is 32, but he didn't look that old. Looking askance at his friend who is sitting farther away, he asked her in a low voice.

"What do you say about it?"

Instead of giving a reply, she hurled a question at him.

"Why should you insist on the girl you want to marry to be a virgin, when you have such experience and when you yourself aren't a virgin?"

"Aren't they both different?"

"What's the difference?"

He didn't have a reply. He went without taking a decision either way. Nalini had a feeling that he will come back again to talk to her, to convince her about his arguments, and probably to talk about him. She could not take a decision. Is it advisable to open critical pages of her life in front of a man who believes 'both are different'?

Narendran fell asleep, tired, only for an hour or so. He wakes up again to make her happy. A man who gives away more than what he receives. Nalini felt envious of Rajitha.

While opening the door to go to office in the morning, he asked.

"Do you really want to go today?"

She didn't say anything. She waited at the door till Narendran's car disappeared, and then closing the door she came in and sat in the sofa. It's only quarter to nine. She'll start for office at quarter past nine, sit in front of the PC to gather her wits to face another day; preparing presentations and show them when the customers call in and in the afternoon, hurry to the railway station and somehow push her way through the crowded ladies

compartment for a seat. At home, the waiting mother will ask about her friend Anitha, and with the skill of a script writer she narrates the imaginary character called Anitha..... It goes on, every episode, quite mechanically, of the dull play that's her life.....

*Included in the anthology of stories Anithayude Veedu (Anitha's House)
which won the Kathapeedom Award in 2006.*

Translated from Malayalam by the author.



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The Net of Darkness

They were peering through the window, stretching out on toes; two old women, sisters. How many days have passed in this waiting? The limbs are aching, and it looks like there is a film over the already weak eyes that refuse focusing. They were waiting there right from 2 o'clock to see her coming like a mix of colors, through the street that is laden with light and shade.

It was a daily sight pleasing to the eyes over the past few months. The figure that appears at the end of the street, like a spot mix of colors, turns out to be a sari clad girl. The elder sister asks her sister.

"Isn't that she only, Ammukutti?"

The younger one takes one more look through the window and replies.

"It looks like her only, Sister. My eyes are worse than yours."

"Yes, it is she only. Look at that style of walking, that defiant..... Yes my Ammu, It's she only!"

The elder one starts laughing. By that time the look of that girl coming towards them appears in the younger sister's mind, and she also burst out laughing. The two old women looking through the window out-stretching withdraws at the peak of pain in the stomach due to uncontrollable laughing and falls on the sofa, only for a moment. They get up and run to the window impatiently to be present when the girl comes.

By the time the twenty two year-old young lady would have reached the window. There would be naughtiness on her face and mischief on her limbs. She will climb on the foothold of the wall just below the window and smirk at them. While they will be taken aback on this sudden grimace, she will get down and walk in through the door.

"I thought that's a pair of geese looking through the window."

Words enough to spark a peel of laughter from the old dames. They don't grudge her for the simile used to equate them to a pair of geese. They were dressing themselves as clowns to be accepted as raw material for humor. A grimace or a comic action with her hands will be enough for them to start an avalanche of uncontrollable laughter.

"It's the Lord himself who brought this girl to us, no doubt." The elder sister will say.

"Surely my sister." Ammukutti Amma will say. "Remember what our state was before...?"

It is true, the ladies, one gave birth to a son and the other still a spinster, have spent their life in the three roomed darkly house, with two or three thrifty words sparingly used in a day, for years. The maid, who comes to mop the courtyard, wash the utensils and sweep the floor, would let out sparingly, during her hectic work, a few bits of news around the locality, and that is the only narrow door to outside world. Then the tit bits exchanged during meetings with old friends when they visit the temple first of every month. That's all it is. Back to the darkly rooms, where unpleasant memories that offer little or no solace at all, the two old ladies spent their time. Every month the younger sister's son sends a draft for Rupees four thousand, and just four lines that may be called a letter. 'Sending a draft. Tell me whenever you want more money. Hope you are fine. Here Deepa and children are fine. Regards to Aunty.' Finished.

THE NET OF DARKNESS

Short story by

E. Harikumar

translated

by the author.

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titled 'Anithayude
Veedu'

(Anitha's House)

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“What sort of letter is this?” Remya says with smile. “The only interesting matter in this is about the draft. So much money and what you old dames are going to do with it?”

“Right she is, sister.” The younger sister would say. “Why do I need all this money? I just wanted to see him and children. How long was it.....?”

“Is it possible to just come running from America, Ammukutti?” The plane fare alone is good enough to build a house here.”

“Still.....”

“You say that, but even I am so much eager to see him, isn’t it. You just gave birth to him and walked away. It is I who brought him up.....”

“Okay, right.” Remya would interfere. “One gave birth, and the other brought up the child. Quits.”

The tension unwound itself. The two ladies started laughing. But things were different before the coming of Remya. Each tiny word uttered hung heavily in the atmosphere to create a downpour. Lightning, tornado, and at the end silence, which dwelt menacingly in the house as a permanent structure.

They remembered the day Remya came for the first time home. She walked through the door and like a familiar person smiled at them. Then disregarding the two old puzzled women she started eyeing the room. The wall was dim and cheerless, gossamer hung from the tiled ceiling. Looks like the floor was swept once in a blue moon only. Looking at the wall she asked.

“Who is living here, you or spiders?”

“Where do you come from?” Ammukutti Amma asked. She wouldn’t reply. From the sitting room she walks to the inner rooms studying the surroundings. As she walked she sent out her comments on the discolored towels hung on the clothesline, the sheets on the beds that are wrinkled and dirty.

“What a house is this?” She tells them. “It didn’t look so bad from outside.”

“Who is this girl, Ammukutti?” The elder sister asked.

“I don’t place her either, sister.” Ammukutti said in a whisper. But Remya was hearing all that is told.

“Which house do you belong to, child?” The elder sister asked.

“I belong to my house.” Remya said.

Suddenly the magic worked. The first to laugh was elder sister herself, which was closely followed by the younger one. Then there were explosions of laughter, at the end of which she said. “I give up to this child.”

The cob webs disappeared. The yellowed bed-sheets and stained towels cooked in washing soda regained its whiteness. The walls once again turned white. The sweeper was given a fair warning.

Remya came again. After a restless waiting of four days, she came at noon. While the sisters were playing guessing game as to her identity and whether would she be coming again, she walked in through the door. She noticed the agreeable change in the house. Walking along, she started commenting. “Hmm.... the walls look good, and your tenants have also left, eh?”

The two sisters looked at each other perplexed.

“Tenants? We don’t have any tenants, child.” Ammukutti Amma said. “Yeah, that’s four years back we had a young man living in our outer room for four to five months. Now we don’t have any one as tenant.”

“Have the fisher folk gone?”

“Fisher folk?” This girl is out of her mind. The sisters looked at each other with a sympathetic expression. She is very pretty, but then she has this illness.

"Yes only fishermen weave net, isn't that so?"

"But then who is weaving net here?"

"They've all left. When I came week back, they were there." Pointing her finger at the ceiling she continued. "You've driven them all, isn't it?"

The first one to laugh was Ammukutti Amma. "Sis, this girl is talking about spiders."

Then there was a flood of laughter, and sweeping along the strong current were the dismal boredom, feeling of deprivation.....

"It is Lord Guruvayoorappan only who sent this girl to us." The elder sister said. "First of next month when we go to Guruvayoor I will offer a *neypayasam* to the Lord."

"What a miraculous coincidence, sister! Even I have promised to offer a *neypayasam*." The younger sister said in a surprised tone.

"Listen," the girl said, "If everyone offers ghee *payasam*, Krishna will get bored. One could have offered Him milk and sugar *payasam*."

"Isn't she right, sister? Can I then change it to *palpayasam*?"

"No!" The elder sister vehemently said. "Never! If you promised ghee *payasam*, you should give ghee *payasam* only....."

They entered into a dialogue on temple procedures, the unsavory results of breaking or changing an offer to the temple. While the lengthy, heated dialogue was taking place with great interest, both of them just happened to turn around only to see the girl, who spearheaded this conversation, laughing silently covering her face with both hands.

"Just see my Ammu, after making us fight over the offers she is just laughing her head off."

The clouds have been swept away, leaving a clear sky and in the middle stood sunshine of a girl. They looked at her with amazement and awe.

"Wonder if we had a girl instead of a boy! It would have been very nice." Said Ammukutti Amma.

"Exactly." The elder sister said immediately. There was agony of solitude in their words.

"There is danger lurking in that thought." Remya said. "If you get a girl who is as pretty and well natured like me, you are lucky. On the contrary, had you got a horrid monster as your daughter, then?"

"That's also true, sister." Ammukutti Amma said. "Just like our Bhargavi's daughter?"

"True, my Ammukutti."

The girl, who came from an unknown place controlled their life, influenced their thoughts, and formed their words. At 4'O clock she gets up.

"Now my darling husband would have boarded a bus. If he comes home and finds me not there, there is calamity. I will show you what'll happen."

She goes out, and immediately comes in holding an imaginary briefcase.

"Now a loud call, 'Remya.....' All things in that household will shudder, except one thing."

"What is that?" the elder one asked in right earnest.

"This Remya." Tapping her bosom lightly she said, "this brave girl of Remya."

She pretends to keep the briefcase on the floor and sits on the chair. "Bring tea."

"If there is delay of a moment, I am done with. Then what you see on the road will be my bones, hair and nail and all. If you look thoroughly among them you could see my dead courage also."

"Is that so?" The elder sister asked uneasily. But the younger sister had learnt the mischief in that girl. She asked. "What about flesh?"

"He will make a good curry adding spices and eat it. That's all. How many times did this happen, you know?"

Waves of laughter would be following the ears of the girl who was on her way home running.

The cleaning lady comes right at 8 in the morning and goes back exactly at 7.50 a.m, which means the duration of her work there is minus 10 minutes. This amazing phenomenon is achieved by moving like a spiral firecracker. The soiled vessels kept in the cement sink, may be just three or four, would be washed in a second and kept on the platform. She doesn't need two seconds to clean the bathroom, and in the time a bat takes to negotiate a room the floor will be swept. During this amazing phenomenon if by chance the sisters happened to talk to her, they have had it. The words won't be very sweet or reasonable. So, if possible they avoid talking to her while she is working. But they have to somehow ask about Remya.

"Remya? There is no such girl in this locality."

They have given a good picture of the girl who comes in the afternoon only to shed a few drops of sunshine on their lives, and sets by about 5 O'clock.

"The way you talk, the girl is a nice one. But no such girl lives in this locality. I am working in five houses in this area, and the young ones there are all monstrous ones."

When the cleaning lady went out like a tornado, the sisters looked at each other.

"Blame ourselves for asking a monster like this one."

Remya came again.

"Why can't you tell us where you're coming from?"

She smiled. "There are certain things you would better not know. We are from outside, and will go back the way we have come."

There was a veil of secrecy around Remya. That attracted and mystified them, but at the same time it was frightening too. They feared that she would, one day, stop coming and that their lives will be thrown back into eternal darkness. They made it a habit to be at the windows right from 2 O'clock.

Their fear was not unfounded. She has disappeared one day never to be seen any more. Days have turned into weeks and weeks into months. Those sisters continued their vigil. The various theories on her disappearance expounded did not comfort them.

"Her husband must have got transferred." The younger sister guessed.

"But then she could come down and tell us about it."

"We don't know. May be she was hesitant 'cos she was so close to us."

"Ammukutti, I am afraid if she is not well or something happened to her. We don't even know where she lives, to go and inquire."

"Lord, I pray to you to keep her safe and healthy. I will offer a milk *payasam* to Lord Guruvayoorappan."

Suddenly memories came rushing to fill their eyes. Both the sisters were wiping their eyes.

One day the elder sister looked up the ceiling only to see the spreading tentacles of gossamer. The tenants have returned.

"A lot of web....."

They became silent. The spiders are weaving the net silently. They could see only the big spiders with their weak eyes. There are hundreds of tiny ones between the big spiders doing work incessantly.

"Let me wipe these webs." The younger sister took out the long broom and started wiping the gossamer. Just for a minute only. She kept the broom on the floor and sat on the chair.

"I can't raise my hands sister..... I think we will ask Devaki to do it."

"It would be better if we do it ourselves, rather than telling that monster." The elder

sister got up.

“No, sister, you don’t do it. You could get a sprain.”

“Let me see....” She took the long broom and raised it.

Suddenly both the sisters listened to a sound. The younger one said.

“Isn’t that the voice of our Remya?”

She ran to the window, and dropping the broom the elder one also joined her. The street outside was desolate. They ran to open the door. No one was there outside; only the burning street steaming with heat of the noon sun. They looked at each other.

“I surely heard her voice.” Ammukkutti Amma said.

“Even I, my Ammu.”

They stepped into the street and after looking around for a while went back. They were tired. They sat on the chair dumbfounded.

The walls lost its freshness again, the yellowing bed-sheets waited, crumbled to receive the tired bodies of two old women. High above the clothes hanging on the clothesline, the spiders are weaving a net of darkness.

*Included in the anthology of stories titled ‘Anithayude Veedu’ (Anitha’s House)
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Translated from Malayalam by the author.



index

To Catch A Grasshopper

The bride's guests gathered under the decorated canopy and around the podium adorned with *nirapara* and coconut flower and jasmine garlands that hung from the makeshift *pandal*, waiting impatiently for the groom's party to arrive. At one end of the tent the *nadaswaram* musicians waited for the arrival of the bridegroom to start the music. One of the girls sitting in the front row got restless. The five-year-old, who was the bride's little sister told her friends.

"Come, let's go catch grasshopper."

They have never heard of grasshoppers. "What's is it that you said 'grasshopper'?"

"Come, I'll show you."

They got up and went out of the *pandal*.

"Where art thou, the four damsels going?" One of the guests asked.

"We're gonna catch grasshopper." Shalini said.

"Grasshopper" He asked with disdain.

"Yes," she said seriously. Catching grasshopper is not a matter to be scoffed off that easily.

The destination was next compound. Through a gap made by the broken brick wall they entered the vast compound. Two mango trees standing as sentinel to the vast growth of shrubs and thicket are the only vegetation available in the compound. In the middle lay the remains of an old house, just the stone foundation only. For a moment the children forgot about their mission and absorbed in the beauty of the backwaters that lay on two sides of the compound. The sounds of chatting and confused hubbub from the marriage *pandal* receded. Shalini could see beyond the compound wall the top of the canopy. Looking from this far, the already small house looked smaller still. She was wondering why the boy who is going to marry her elder sister is not coming yet.

"Where do you get grasshoppers?" Asked Mini. Shalini suddenly remembered the purpose of her mission to the compound.

"It'll be somewhere here only." She said looking around. She started her search. "I come here with my sister for playing."

It was her sister who bathed her and dressed her up with new clothes that morning.

TO CATCH A GRASSHOPPER

Short story by

E. Harikumar.

translated

by the author.

Included in the book

'Pachhappayyine

Pidikkan'

(To Catch a

Grasshopper)

This story won the

Padmarajan Award

in 1997

Her sister did even fix the *bindi* on the forehead. Shalini felt for the spot and reassured herself that it is still there. While giving bath her sister had said.

"From tomorrow onwards, you should take bath and dress up all by yourself."

"Why?"

"Because I will be leaving with the big brother who marries me."

"Why can't *that* big brother stay with us, sister?"

She had not grown up to foresee the emptiness her sister's departure would create in her life. Had she known that she would have been very sad. The mother, who is constantly bedridden, is only a shadow in emptiness. It was her sister who looked after her needs.

The sister did not say anything. She was braiding her hair.

Shalini repeated her question and the answer was a heave of sigh and Shalini looked up to see her sister's eyes becoming soggy.

"He wouldn't like our tiny house." Bindu said.

She wanted to say 'our tiny house and the eternal curse of poverty that encompass it'. She was never moved by poverty either, but when along with it come loathing and detestation? Knowing it was selfish she wanted to somehow escape from that house. She was hoping to escape not from poverty, but from animosity. Looking at the cute face of her younger sister, she felt sad. She said.

"When you grow up a handsome big brother will come and marry you and take you away. Thus you can also escape from here."

"When will that big brother come?"

"When you grow up."

Shalini stood in a trance with the knowledge that was giving immense solace and hope to her.

The grasshoppers are hiding. Even on the day of her sister's engagement there were countless grasshoppers as she walked along that compound. Where on earth have they all vanished today? Meenu, Mini and Saji are searching for something they themselves do not know what. They just searched as if something will just prop up in front of them. Saji asked.

"How big is this grasshopper?"

"Look, this big." Shalini pointed her tiny index finger. "It's green, but it will jump when caught."

In the heat of sun the girls started a renewed search for something that is as big as their index finger and jumps when caught."

Mini asked. "Why do you want to catch a grasshopper?"

"That is," Shalini added, "to have lots of money. There will be plenty of money if you catch a grasshopper and bring it home. My sister told me."

Sister could have imparted this valuable knowledge a bit earlier. Last time when she came here she had counted a lot of them. Shalini now realized that her friends are impressed. It is worth a try if you can have a lot of money. There is the vulgar presence of abject poverty and drunken fathers in their houses too."

The unrewarding search for a long time must have bored the other three girls. They said.

"Let's go back."

"Please, some more time. We'll search for some more time." She said. "I'm sure we'll get it."

Shalini wanted to hold back her friends somehow. She needs help to catch the grasshopper, and she doesn't want to go back without catching one.

Inside the wedding house, Bindu, Shalini's sister was in the process of paying obeisance to the elders. That is a ritual before marriage. Putting a coin and a betel nut inside a betel leaf, she will place it on the hands of each one of them who are standing in a row, and fall on their feet as if to beg absolution for whatever she had done in the past. It's a ritual she had to undergo, and the elders waited for their turn to bless her. When she was stooping at the feet of each one of them, memories about each person overwhelmed her. First was her father's elder brother. She remembered how, on the pretext of looking after their aged parents he claimed nearly 90 percent of the family wealth, leaving this small stretch of land, that nobody wanted to own, to her father, that too as if offering undeserving alms to a beggar. In this small piece of land, where digging with a coconut shell will bring out brackish water, Bindu grew up like a cactus plant.

Second in the row was uncle, Mother's younger brother. He wore new pants and shirt, and stood in front of her without even removing his shoes. Usually people remove their footwear before entering a house, leave alone standing in front of a bride to receive her obeisance. The aunty who stood next to uncle also wore new *kancheepuram* sari costing four thousand Rupees. She had told Bindu. "Your uncle wanted me to buy another sari costing six thousand, but then I liked this sari. Okay, he said you buy a pair of ear-drops with the remaining two thousand. I didn't want any eardrop. I don't get time to wear the eight pairs I already have. I said we will add some more gold and buy a pair of bangles for Rajani....."

Bindu listened to all this haughty talk. Why are they coming to spoil my peace of mind? Her wedding sari is costing below one thousand Rupees. She liked a sari costing two thousand five hundred, the one with crimson color and a glittering fringe and an end piece with exotic designs. She had sat in the sari shop holding that sari for a long time, even after knowing that she cannot afford to buy it.

She remembered the day of engagement. There was a drinking party hosted by her father. Father's elder brother and this uncle and four other friends sat drinking till late night. Uncle, between his drinking, stood up to air a declaration. I will conduct the marriage of my niece all by myself. He repeated it with a slithery tongue beating his chest with his right hand to give credibility to his statement. Father was very happy, and poured his brother-in-law another drink. Father's elder brother was also in good form. His declaration was that the entire wedding feast would be on him. Don't anybody inquire about it. I'll do it.

By three in the morning almost everybody was asleep. She had spread a mat on the floor and took her younger sister, who fell asleep, somewhere on the floor, with her. Her bed had been occupied already by the aunty. Bindu did not sleep. Today is my engagement day. My day. Till 2 O'clock in the night she was washing the dishes left by others in the sink, and frying fish for the partying people, and cleaning the vomit of somebody who was over drunk. She was tired. In between she had to arrange for mat and bed for guests to sleep. The hollow promises and brags became gradually silent. She remembered the young man who wore a ring on her finger; a small ray of hope. She wanted to cry aloud.

There was a stir in the *pandal*, and then the sound of *nadaswaram* music.

"I think the wedding has begun." Mini said.

"Then we have to go?" Saji said. She was a bit nervous. "Mom will be lookin' for me."

"I am going." Meenu said.

Shalini helplessly, sadly watched her three friends walking towards the house. She doesn't want to go without catching a grasshopper. It happened a week ago. As they were singing the ritualistic prayers in front of the oil lamp at the dusk, it came, an insect green in color with long legs. She tried to drive it away, 'cause last time it came it got into her frock and created real problem for her. She took a long stick and tried to make it jump. It was then that sister told her.

"Shalini, you don't drive a grasshopper away."

"Why so?"

"Cause when a grasshopper comes home that house will have a lotta money."

That was close. Had her sister delayed a bit she would've driven it away. It was the same with a greater coucal also. Sister said it would bring luck to us if we see one along. But you shouldn't tell anybody about seeing that bird; then the luck will go away.

That grasshopper, for some unknown reason, jumped out and gone without bringing any money. Sister Bindu was fighting with father for a mango necklace, one with tiny golden mangoes in a row.

"I'm not asking for anything else, just a mango necklace only. Can't you buy me that

much at least, father?"

There were sobs and complaints.

"How can I sit in front of all the guests? Just because the bridegroom's people didn't ask for anything, you don't have to buy?"

"I still have one more daughter to marry off. You've got to remember that."

"You're talking about something which will take place after 15 years. It's not that, I know you don't love me at all."

Mother would stand there quietly without uttering a word. Shalini would wish that mother would say something to support her elder sister, at least to pacify her. Nothing will happen, and she will watch her sister sitting there like a withered flowering plant.

The great promises and declarations made at the engagement party thinned to nothingness as intoxication tapered. Father waited for his brother-in-law to bring bag full of money to conduct the marriage, and his elder brother to organize the wedding feast. No one turned up, and realizing that the waiting is useless he started running around for money.

Sister wouldn't ask mother to recommend her, knowing very well its futility. Shalini knows about it. So she also suffered with closed eyes the iniquity from father. She hid herself not able to face father when late in the night he staggered home with red eyes and faltering steps. Mother, because of her wheezing, goes to bed early, and her sister would serve father dinner, listening as usual to the brawl. Sister is so used to it like the croaking sound of frogs you hear incessantly in the rainy season.

Father was going out in the morning when Bindu said.

"Please buy me that mango necklace today, at any rate."

He did not answer. Only one week left for the marriage and she naturally expected that money will come from some quarter and that the necklace will be bought. Her expectations, that have been fading as the night advanced, have had a natural death as father came in heavily drunk. Bindu expected some words from the man, but to no avail. She asked.

"Father, you didn't buy the mango necklace, isn't it?"

"I'll buy a coconut chain, not mango necklace. Don't let me lose my temper."

"You have money to drink and make others drunk, but no money for buying anything for me only."

"What did you say you wretch?" He asked incensed.

"Am I not correct? If we had the money you had squandered on my engagement day, I could've bought a better sari than the one bought now. Now where are those big brother and brother-in-law of yours? You had made them drink to the heart's content at your expense, and now they have left you high and dry, when you actually needed their help."

She only knew that father has risen from his chair and that a heavy hand was falling on her. At the next moment she remembered hitting her head on something, and when regained consciousness again, she found herself lying on the floor. There was dampness of blood when she touched the forehead where it pained much. She remained there without bothering to wash her hands even. Nobody inquired about the cut on her forehead in the morning. It was at the bathing time that Shalini noticed the cut on her sister's forehead. She inquired.

"There is a wound on your forehead?"

"Oh, that one? It's a wedding gift from father."

Shalini felt sorry. Her lips quivered, and she was on the brink of a whimper. Bindu hugged her sister and kissed her on her face.

"Does it hurt?"

Shalini realised that the grasshoppers are playing truant. How else they disappear all of a sudden? She continued her search, between the grasses, on the branch of shrubs,

with her sharp eyes. She has gone farther from home, and that pained her. She wanted to be present at the time of sister's wedding, but then how can she go without catching a grasshopper. Finally she located one, on the leaf of a *thumba* plant. Even though small, Shalini hoped it would serve the purpose. Now I have to catch it. She felt pained in the absence of her friends. It would have been easy with their help. She approached the grasshopper with furtive steps, touched the tail of the insect. At the next moment it was she, who jumped making a loud noise, because the insect, on feeling the touch of Shalini's finger jumped to her face. It lurked there for a moment and jumped off to the ground.

It was a dangerous business to catch a grasshopper, and Shalini realized she had not come fully prepared for that. You need a net or something similar, and then a cover to put it safely once caught. In the absence of all these equipment, it is a difficult task. During the ensuing exercise the grasshopper made that girl move around like a spinning top. The hunt that lasted for about fifteen minutes left Shalini tired. At the end of a jumping spree, she has realized that the grasshopper has disappeared. Tired, she went under a mango tree and sat there soothing by the cold breeze from the lake.

In the wedding dais Bindu was looking around for her younger sister. She could locate her friends only, but not Shalini. She must be playing around somewhere Bindu consoled herself. The wedding ceremony started and rings and garlands were exchanged, all mechanical, since her mind was away somewhere. In between the bridegroom asked her something, and she didn't hear it. He asked her smilingly. "Where are you now?"

"Did you tell me something?"

"I asked; where were you?"

"I was looking around for my younger sister. She had told me that she would sit just in front to see her sister getting married. Now I can't find her."

"Both of you get up..... Now let the bridegroom hold the bride's hand and circle the dais. Yeah, like that.... Now the girls.... You take your oil lamps and walk in front...."

Marriage over, they were sitting around the dining table and Bindu again remembered about Shalini. She was wondering whom to ask about Shalini when she saw Mini and Meenu.

"Where is Shalini?" She asked them.

"Naw, we don't know."

"But then I saw all four of you going out?" It was the man who had witnessed the saunter of the four damsels.

"Haa." Mini remembered. She said. "Shalini had gone to catch a grasshopper."

"Grasshopper?"

"Yeah, she is in the next compound."

It was difficult for Bindu to control a sudden sob. While her sister is getting married, Shalini had gone to catch a grasshopper. The knowledge why she is catching the grasshopper pained her. She got up and the groom also went along. They saw her under one of the two mango trees next compound.

She was curled up and in good sleep. Her hair danced in the cool breeze coming from the lake. She was dreaming about grasshoppers, plenty of them, she could collect handfuls; so many grasshoppers on the ground.

Bindu watched her younger sister for a while. And then she saw a tiny grasshopper on a blade of grass as if watching Shalini. She took Shalini in her arms. Shalini opened her eyes.

"What were you doing here?"

"Me, I was....." She looked around bewildered. "I came here to catch a grasshopper. Is your wedding over?" She asked in a rueful tone.

“Just look, someone is waiting for you to wake up.” Bindu pointed at the grasshopper and said. Shalini smiled. It was looking at her as if asking, ‘after making me run around you had a nice nap, isn’t it?’ It was then that Shalini saw her brother-in-law. She liked him.

“I like this big brother very well.”

The bridegroom stretched his hand to take her, and Shalini without so much as giving a second thought jumped to his arms.

“Listen Bindu”, he said, “we’ll take her along and she can stay with us. How’s that? There are a lot of grasshoppers there, and none to catch them.

“Are you coming with us?” He asked Shalini.

She was ever ready for that.

Bindu’s eyes brightened. Both ways, she wished his promises hold good for her, that is to take Shalini along and make her stay with them and that there are a lot of grasshoppers in his house.

Included in the anthology of stories ‘Pachhappayyine Pidikkan’ (To Catch A Grasshopper).

This story won the Padmarajan Award in the year 1997.

Translated from Malayalam by the author.



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The Cockroaches

Down in the kitchen she saw them, the cockroaches. They appeared at the corner of the table, on which she was preparing the morning coffee. They rattled and stared at her menacingly for a time and disappeared at the far edge of the table. She took the coffee to bedroom. Her husband was still in bed. She switched on the light and the soft, agreeable light began to flow. He smiled at her as he sat on the bed and stretched his right hand for the cup. He drank the coffee with a gloomy face and she watched him sipping the coffee. It was a stale routine, she thought, and every time she saw his dreary face and gray hairs, she felt pity. And it was this compassion that alone prevented her from being an aggressive wife. As she crossed the lobby with the empty cup, she thought she saw a black little creature crawling on the distempered wall. She wanted to see what it was, but an instinct kept her moving and she did not stop.

There were more cockroaches in the kitchen now, and they rattled and maneuvered around the table and on the wall. Some of them flew and landed on her head as she tried to enter the kitchen. She waved her hands aimlessly in a bid to drive the cockroaches away. But they were many in number and she had to withdraw eventually. She thought of telling her husband about this.

Back in the bedroom her husband was combating with something, which she understood not until he gaped to utter the word 'cockroach'. He was striking the insect with a folded newspaper. The cockroach dashed and dodged about him and he had to spin around to strike it.

'It's no use', she wanted to say. 'There are hundreds of them in the kitchen.' But she did not say anything, instead watched him taking the dead cockroach by the paper and throwing it out through the window.

'It is strange', he said gasping. 'Isn't it strange? There was no cockroach in this flat.'

True, it didn't occur to her that there had been no cockroach in their apartment. Her husband's surprise was not unfounded. He had a lot of friends in that locality and nobody ever had complained of cockroaches.

She withdrew. She has to fix the breakfast for her husband before 8 O'clock. He would have to get a tram latest by half past eight to reach his office in Dalhousie Square by 9 O'clock. I will tackle this problem myself. Only I have to get some cockroach poison when

THE COCKROACHES

Short story by
E. Harikumar
Included in
collection titled
'Koorakal'
(The Cockroaches)
This story is made
into a telefilm
by the national
television channel
Doordarsan.

I go out to the market. The market was only a few furlongs away, and as she walked through the Southern Avenue, the cockroaches no more worried her. She was preoccupied by more serious a matter; her appointment with the Doctor.

'It is simple', she remembered her husband saying hesitatingly, 'awfully simple. It is just an injection, and you won't even have the slightest pain, believe me, the slightest pain.'

At first she protested, violently in a gesture to defend her right to carry her own pleasant burden. Then he talked of the depressing economic conditions that forced him to take such a decision. Their two children were to be fed and clothed. They should be given proper education. The elder one was a girl. She should be given at least an academic education. But their son should be given higher technical education. 'The job market is

very tight', he said, 'and unless you give him good education he will be left out.' Besides, there were other expenses too, house rent, electricity and laundry charges. And the old maid servant should be paid. Life in a city like Calcutta is hard. And she knew she had to relent. But it was disgusting. She felt sorry for the life that was developing in her womb. But it was a question of existence - existence of the living, who happened to be born. This savage propensity for resisting the intruders was sickening. But you have to put up with it. She thought of her children, and was glad they were sent home during summer vacation. She was missing them very much, but it was better. She wouldn't like them to be here now. They would be happier with their uncle.

The market was less crowded and smelt of fresh vegetables; but she thought of her children and her appointment at the Doctor's in the evening. When she came out, the street was crowded and the atmosphere was filled with dust. There were a number of demonstrators in the street with broad red banners in their hands; the banners were all in Bengali and she could not read them. They were leading a procession and they shouted slogans in Bengali.

'Inquilab Zindabad,' and 'Our demands should be met.'

The procession was very long and she waited on the pavement to cross the road and watched the demonstrators filing past her. They shouted loudly and raised their fists in the air in utter excitement, and suddenly she remembered the cockroaches that besieged her kitchen.

'Gosh!,' she cried, 'I have almost forgotten it!'

The medical store was nearby and she asked the boy with the dump look at the counter if cockroach poison was available.'

'Kokrosh?' He asked.

'Yes' she replied 'Cockroach powder.'

'No', he said in Bengali, 'we don't have it.'

But it was apparent that the boy did not quite clearly understand her requirement. Then, finding the trace of surprise on her face, he said.

'Wait.'

She waited, and saw the boy going to the cash counter and conferring in a hushed voice with a tall and lean fellow. Presently the tall fellow came to the counter and asked her if she wanted cockroach powder. She nodded and he took out a red packed from one of the cupboards with glass panes, and gave it to her with elaborate instructions for use. She cut short of him by telling that she knew how to use it, but he wouldn't listen. He was on the verge of repeating the whole speech, when she said

'Thank you.'

Then he put a full stop by cautioning: 'It's poisonous, deadly poisonous.'

She remembered the words with uneasiness when the Doctor gave her injection in the evening. The Doctor was a plump woman and asked her about her children.

'You say both are going to school?'

'Yes' she said, and instantly she felt the needle plunging into her flesh.

'It's nothing', the Doctor said. 'Don't worry. It will go of its own.'

It has to go, she thought, and that is what worries me much. In the taxi, which took them to their flat, it was comfortable. But she was worried. She felt her abdomen with quivering hands, and instantly convulsive sobs filled her breast and choked her. She wanted to weep, lonely to her own heart's content. She wished if her husband started repenting. But there was no sign of remorse on his face. He was staring blankly through the windshield and she felt desolate.

In the bright light of the bedroom her face looked very pale and in low spirits, and her husband was alarmed.

'You look ghastly.'

'I am alright', she said, 'It's only a head ache. I will take an aspirin. Do you have one with you?'

She lay down on the bed, and her husband looked worried too.

It's the conscience that troubles me, she thought. I now have a guilty conscience. But it has got to be done. There is no other go. These days you have to live, and live happily, for which, at least, you have to pay a deaf ear to this beat of the wings. You will be happy tomorrow when memory of this nightmare ceases to haunt you.

We should bring our children back, she thought. I am missing them very much. Fifteen days seemed longer, and I can't stand this solitude any more. I should have them around me.

Dinner was prepared even before they went to the Doctor's, so that they only had to serve it. She felt better after eating, and she watched her husband taking the red powder in small lumps in cardboard pieces and putting them in the corners, and listened to the cockroaches rattling the lids of the tins and beating on the walls of the kitchen. They are aggressive, she thought.

Her husband was already in bed when she came to the bedroom.

He lay outstretched on the bed, and she switched off the light and found her place in the bed. The street light came stealing through the window and she could see that her husband was not asleep. He turned and hugged her.

'How do you feel now?'

'I am better,' she said, 'I am alright.'

He patted her on the back and kissed on her cheeks.

'You will be happy tomorrow,' he said.

And that was the sort of assurance she was waiting for from him, and she felt slightly relieved. Then she felt his embrace gradually slackening and his breath becoming regular and rhythmic and in a few moments he was fast asleep.

For a time she listened to the timepiece ticking and the humming of a motor vehicle dying away in the street outside.

And then she saw them coming. The cockroaches. They were myriad of them, and she laughed at the very idea of cockroaches leading a procession. You'll be dreaming, if it is true, she thought. But that was what they were doing. The procession swelled in the street and the cockroaches shouted and flew up and down in an aggressive manner. She was even more perplexed seeing the banners which some of them carried.

'We also have the right to exist.'

'Allow us to live.'

I will go crazy, she thought. But the procession was turning violent and out of control and some of them flew at her like a sortie of bombers and she suddenly woke up with a scream. Then she knew it was only a dream and she was assured. She nestled to her husband and felt sleep overcoming her.

She overslept, and when woke up sunray crept into the room. On the floor she found the dead cockroaches, hundreds of them lying on their back. She thought of the crumbled leaves which fall dry in the cold winter mornings from trees in her native home, and of her mother who passed away years back, and of her children, and of the tiny particle of life brewing in her womb, which was deprived of its right to exist, and she was sorry.

Included in the anthology of same name 'Koorakal' (The Cockroaches).

Translated from Malayalam by the author.



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The Greatest Show

He was watching them for the last one week, on the pavement across the bus stand, performing acrobatics. They would be performing, when he boarded the bus in the morning or got down from it in the afternoon way back from office, a boy and a girl. Brother and sister, probably. His face was dark with dirt and so was his sister's. She would wipe her running nose with the back of her cute little hands. She must be five or six years old and wore a short skirt only, torn and dirty. With a torn shirt and shorts her brother's dress was a little better.

It was six in the evening and they were still performing acrobatics. Probably the whole daylong they were there facing a crowd that changed like a kaleidoscope and showing the tricks that an eight-year old is capable of doing; his expectations of a kind soul amongst them fading into thinness. He used to watch the children from the waiting bus, showing tricks like somersaulting, passing through a small iron ring and so on. The scantiness of the mob did not discourage him, and hardly anybody paid anything to them. The people would be waiting there with an obscene curiosity to see what happens next, and when expectation of witnessing a big circus falls into boredom they would walk away pretending not to see the extending frail hand of an emaciated girl with a bowl. The show would go on.

I was in a hurry to reach home. It was a hectic day. In fact each day is a hectic day. In the struggle for holding your position you lose days, then months and even years, and finally yourself itself. The boy has stopped the performance and now is sitting in a corner and inspecting his toe. A wound and blood was oozing out of it. He must have got it while doing some acrobatics.

"What happened?" He asked.

The boy looked up at him and turned his face down. He was obviously averting him. He did not want anybody's sympathy. He moved on only to be confronted by the girl with a bowl. "Sir, please, ten paise."

He fumbled his pocket and took out a 25 paise coin and put it in the crumbled dented bowl. The girl's eye gleamed.

25 paise! He thought while walking home. She asked for ten paise and I have given two and a half times as much. What magnanimity!

The elevator was on the ground floor, and he could walk in and press the 8th button

THE GREATEST SHOW

Short story by
E. Harikumar
translated from
Malayalam by
E. Satish Narayanan.
Included in the
collection titled
Pachhappayine
Pidikkan
(To Catch A
Grasshopper)

that will take him to his flat on the eighth floor. He could sit in the sofa and remove his shoes and relax by selecting any of the 30 odd channels in the TV and sipping the cup of tea that Sarada has brought with Dosa or Banana fruit fry.

But he did not enter the elevator. He retraced his steps and went out of the gates. He fished out his purse from the pocket. Yes, there is a lot of money in it. He could give one Rupee, or why not two Rupees?

'What a chicken-heart you have', he asks himself. 'What is two Rupees worth these days. Is it worth a morsel of food?'

He took out a ten-Rupee note and kept aside.

The pavement was desolate. The children were not there. Today's show must have ended. Or maybe the boy could not continue because of the wound on his toe. He must have

bandaged the wound and tried to resume, but being unable to bear the pain.....

He walked back.

His daughter was eating ice cream. In fact it has become a regular scene. When he goes to the office, or when he returns, all the time she must be sitting there with an ice cream cup. And whenever they go out, she will be demanding ice cream.

"Chubby girls should not eat ice cream." He would say, but she wouldn't care and go at it with renewed ecstasy. He recalled a girl, frail and shriveled, with dirt sticking around her nose and dry unkempt hair, a girl who has still not lost the flicker in her eyes.

"The Secretary rang up." Sarada said, "He wanted to see you."

It is the Secretary of the Association of residents in the building. "Why?"

"It's about the terrace party in the evening."

"Oh, yes." The get-together, in the evening. He had forgotten all about it.

The Secretary had asked him to arrange for a sound system. The orchestra has been arranged already, and there are singers among the residents. He picked up the phone and started dialing.

"7 O'clock, sharp 7 O'clock." He said it rather rigidly. "The party should not get spoiled for want of a sound system."

At 1 O'clock midnight when they returned to their flat Sarada said.

"The party was grand."

Ragini endorsed her mother's views. God knows how many cups of ice-cream that girl had gobbled.

"The chicken *biryani* and fried fish were excellent." Sarada said.

"How was the vegetable fried rice? I wanted to taste the *Gobi Manjura* a little bit, but no room in the tummy. I had to spare some space for *Pista* Ice Cream; that's my weakness.

"The food was good." He also agreed. Since it was a buffet party you could take as much as you want. On the long table covered with white linen, steaming items were laid in steel vessels put on simmering gas stoves, and the bar with an array of bottles was on the other side.

"The orchestra was also good."

"Paying 6000 bucks they will beat you up if it is not worth it."

"Six thousand?"

"Yes."

"It's not worth that much."

"You don't blame the orchestra for the songs that slithers out of tune."

"And then I didn't like Rohini's dance at all. That dance you remember; whenever it's on, I used to switch off the TV itself, because I don't want our daughter to see it. It is not a dance fit for a sixteen year old to perform on the stage, you know, shaking it up here and shaking it up there."

He laughed. Probably this is the first time since he woke up in the morning he had a hearty laughter.

"Why laugh?"

"Do you know? Rohini's Mom has been teaching her daughter this very dance for the last one week. She in fact bought a videocassette of the movie in which this dance appears. Didn't you watch them videotaping her whole dance? For preserving it, for showing to their friends and relatives."

"This dance, shaking her hips and all?"

"Yes Ma'am. That very dance. That takes them to the upper strata of the society in a jiffy. What do you know of problems that the neo-rich face? If you don't want to be left out, teach your daughter the dance of those film actresses."

“Huh!”

Before going to bed he told Sarada.

“Now do you want to hear a kitchen secret?”

“What’s that?”

They had ordered 150 Chicken Biryani, and only about 90 guests turned out. Out of that some are vegetarian. They expected people from outside. Not all came. About 60 to 70 plates were left out.”

“Then?”

“They have packed the whole thing in a plastic bag and dumped it in the corporation bin - a perfect murder.”

“In the waste bin?”

“What else to do? They had prepared it at 4 O’clock. After 1 O’clock, what will be it’s shape?”

“How sad?”

“At twenty-five rupees per plate, imagine the money spent on it. Fish fry and vegetable fry rice also were left over.”

He paused for a while and told himself.

“...that too in a country where poverty and misery reigns....”

Sarada was asleep. For a while he could not sleep. The defiant face of an eight-year old boy, bent with his finger pressed on the bleeding wound on his toe and suppressing pain with clinched teeth has started to make him feel ashamed of himself.

He went to the Society office in the morning to write accounts. Twenty-five thousand Rupees spent. The money spent by twenty-five families for a night’s mirth! He remembered the 25 paise coin he had given to the circus girl yesterday evening.

The children were not there next day morning; must have gone looking for new pastures. That’s the way it is. They will camp in a place for a week. When they see the same acrobatics being repeated, the public turns away. This is the case even with a big circus, let alone a tiny two-member circus.

During one of his evening walks, he saw them again in front of a shop with its shutter down, in one of the many by-lanes of Mahatma Gandhi Road. They wore the same attire, filthy face, their dirty ransack lying nearby. The boy was sitting there, opening a small packet that lay in front of him. His sister was watching him open the packet, impatiently. The packet contained four *iddalis*.

When he went near, the boy raised his head to look at the intruder, as if to say ‘now what, when everything is over and I am having my food.’

He asked him.

‘Don’t you have father and mother?’ He somehow asked a question that came to his mind.

‘Don’t have mother, she died.’

‘Father?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where’s he?’

‘He’s in the jail.’

‘How come?’

‘He stole.’

He said it without any emotion. His sister started to eat the *iddalis*. He too was having his hand on the *iddali*, waiting for the stranger who is rudely intruding, to go.

‘What’ll you do if I give you ten Rupees?’

His face brightened. He smiled coyly. The grown up look on his face vanished, and he,

once again became an eight-year old.

'What'll you do?'

'We will go for a movie.'

He didn't have to look around for an answer.

He placed a ten Rupee note on his hand. The boy unfolded the note and looked at his sister unable to believe. Her face also brightened. She stopped eating and took the note from her brother's hand.

'What are your names?' He asked.

'Raju.' He said, 'and she is Sheela.'

'Okay Raju, I must be going.'

He turned to go.

'Sir....' The boy got up and called him.

He turned around. The boy told something to his sister and swiftly opened his ransack and took out two iron rings. Then like any other acrobat in the world he walked backwards four steps and clapped his hands and somersaulted four times. He somersaulted backwards and again forwards. He let his body through the iron ring with difficulty. Then he let the bodies of himself and his sister through the same ring. He let his sister stand on his shoulder and walked forwards and backwards balancing her on his shoulder. He kept a rod on his forehead and walked balancing a cup on top of it.

Leaving aside his food, he was showing the tricks only for the sake of the stranger.

With wide eyes and dismay on his face, he was watching it. It was the greatest show he had ever seen.

Included in the anthology of stories titled 'Pachhappayyine Pidikkan' (To Catch A Grasshopper).

Translated from Malayalam by E. Satish Narayanan.



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Music of the Mountains

The soothing softness of the jaded sunrays, the raindrops trickling from the stray clouds in the sky he saw while out hunting in the woods and the wind blowing the other way, all made him aware of the imminent monsoon. And he went up the mountain to collect firewood. As though by an intuition, he had already stored the flesh of the deer he marked with his arrow and the fish he caught from the stream - all dried when the sun was hot. Also he had collected in the chambers of his cave, the tubers and the fruits he found in the jungle; and the grains -ripe and dry- from the plants that came up on the valley below his cave, following the last rains.

And it was when he reached the mountaintop that he experienced the music of the mountains. It reached his ears, reverberating in echoes through the innumerable cave mouths on the mountain. A pleasing chill went up his body and he was excited. It was during one of his honey collecting errands on the mountain some time back that he experienced this music for the first time in his life. All day, he used to wander collecting honey in the gourd shells; during nights he used to sleep on tree tops, a camp fire below with dry leaves and wood protecting him from the beasts of prey. Even before sunrise he used to get up, grab the birds still in sleep in their nests, fry them in live coal and eat them. Thus, it was on the third day that he experienced the music of the mountains. He was captivated and he lost himself to the music. The heaviness of the gourd shells full to the brim with honey, he felt not. He had reached the topmost edifices of the mountain. From there he could see the stream down there in the valley and the herds of deer - tiny figures - their heads lifting after each gulp. All the while the music of the mountains flowed around him, leaving him in their tiny waves - splashing against the rocks around and breaking into fragments.

It was then that he noticed the girl on the rocks below - moving in a dance, the dainty steps. Her loin was covered from the waist with green leaves. Gracefully moving her full breasts and abundant thighs she was dancing. Suddenly he had the delusional awareness of his loneliness and his thoughts hovered around the insipid boredom of his cave.

Her dainty steps moved in tune with the music of the mountains. He attempted to attract her attention by clapping and shouting. She looked up at him raising her head but continued her dance. He tried to allure her, holding up to her the gourd shells full of honey. She would not give in. Nodding her head, she flowed in her dance. Realizing that she would be vanishing into the dense dark woods shortly, he desperately sprinted towards her. He darted through the trees and reached the rocks but she had already vanished into the dark vegetation. He was deeply perturbed - crestfallen. He had not seen a human being before; nevertheless by some strange insight he realized that she was of his species.

He could not pursue honey collection any further and he returned to his cave. He experienced a painful distress between his thighs. His back was all wet with honey, spilt from the gourd shells. For a long time after this experience, the thought of going to the mountain used to frighten him.

Now again, while listening to the music of the mountains, he

MUSIC OF THE MOUNTAINS

Short story by
E. Harikumar
translated from
Malayalam
by Dr. S.P. Ramesh
Included in the
collection
'Kumkumam
Vithariya Vazhikal'
(The Alleys Sprinkled
With Vermillion)

hopefully looked around. At last his eyes were rewarded by the sight of the dancing girl on a rocky edifice among the trees at a distance. He observed her - the one who always appeared in synchrony with the music of the mountains - with pleasant interest. He was gripped in a desire to get her as his mate. She would not be enticed, he knew from experience once. And so he decided to kill her and possess her. Having searched out an appropriate rock, he was well positioned to hurl it at her.

It was precisely then that something strange happened. The music of the mountains came to an abrupt halt. In the void that followed, he saw her - motionless - looking at him with imploring eyes. His hands moved not. The rock he was holding dropped involuntarily and crashing against the rocks below, scattered to pieces. On the tree top, a yellow bird with a long tail made some noise of reproach. The bamboo trees screamed in their creaking noise. He ran up to her. She stood, without moving, looking at him. The green leaves covering her waist swayed in the breeze exposing her abundant thighs. He saw her breasts slowly rising and falling in tune with the rhythm of her breath, the same full breasts he had seen quivering while she danced. As he drew near her, he noticed that her eyes were wet. He stopped short. Those eyes were sad with grief and grievance. Later, when he hugged her, possessed with lust, she yielded in submission. He tickled her, stroking his beard over her face. Her full breasts pressed firm against his chest, her eyes closed. He was conscious of the anguish between his thighs. She lay beside, close and merging one with him. He realized the ecstasy of orgasmic experience. They lay close, motionless.

As he woke up, there again was the music of the mountains. But when it did resume, he would not know. There was breeze. Atop the trees there was yellow luster. He picked up his mate who was still in a pleasant slumber. Throwing her over his shoulder, as he used to carry the deer after killing it, he carried her to his cave. The descent through the sharp rocky terrains did not tire him; nor did he feel the cruel caresses of the thorny bushes on either side of the track. He was aware only of the music of the mountains.

He felt the music of the mountains thinning down as he reached the valley, and it pained him.

When they reached the cave, she woke. She looked around, her eyes widening in surprise. On the walls were his paintings - his expressions over the past so many years. Pointing to the dim corner of the cave, he drew her attention. And there was she! He had painted her in his own blood - cutting his body with a sharp stone and painting with the blood from the fresh wound. He had done it on the day of his first sight of her.

Leaving her waiting in the cave, he set out with his bow and arrow. The stream was full of ponderous fish. Having struck the big ones, he returned to their cave. Striking two stones against each other and letting the sparks fall on cotton wool, he made fire. She roasted the fish in the fire and gave him. She watched him in contentment while he was biting at the fish and eating in mouthfuls. Then they heard noises of thunderbolts outside. She shuddered and moved close to him nestling. He went out of the cave. He saw formations of dense rain clouds. A drop from the clouds fell on his shoulder and spurted. He came back to the cave. He closed the mouth of the cave with a big rock and drew near her. As they were warming each other in an intimate embrace, the thought came to him that he had not stored enough firewood to see the monsoon through. He was perturbed.

Included in the anthology of stories titled 'Kumkumam Vithariya Vazhikal' (Alleys Sprinkled With Vermilion).

Translated from Malayalam by Dr. S.P. Ramesh



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The Shroedinger's Cat

The physics class was silent. Professor Hameed was speaking in front of attentive students, with body language and rhetoric full of imagery. Words turned into images and images are filled with bright colors to become imagination. It is a flight of fancy to see these imaginations acquiring wings and flying away to the horizon of one's mind. It happens only in the class of Professor Hameed. So students, even the most difficult ones, are silent in his class.

"C.E.M. Joad had once said that this universe is like the grin of the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. What's so special about the grin of the Cheshire cat? The grin of the cat remains lingering for some time even after the cat has disappeared. Similarly the grin appears on the branch of a tree even before the cat appears. Interesting, eh? Isn't this universe of ours like that only? Who can tell for sure that it exists today? The glittering universe we see through a telescope does not remain where we look. What is the relevance of C.E.M. Joad in quantum dynamics?"

"Let's talk about another cat. The Shroedinger's cat. Joad was a philosopher, but Schroedinger a physicist. Both are searching for truth, in their own ways. What is the essence of quantum theory? The universe exists only when we observe it. There is no universe without an observer. Now let's talk about the problems of observation.

"What did Shroedinger do? He put a cat together with a radioactive atom. If there is decay of the atom the emitting particle hits a vial of cyanide and it in turn kills the cat instantly....."

Suddenly the Professor became silent. He remembered the bomb blasts that took place in Mumbai. T.V. screens flashed the blood soaked dead bodies between ripped off vehicles and shattered buildings, parts of human bodies strewn around. The writhing bodies that are not blessed with death yet, stretchers, ambulances, search for the relatives, wailing.....

"Eleven people died in the explosion that took place in Mumbai this morning. The condition of twenty eight people is critical."

Professor sank into the chair, as if suddenly lost the power to stand. The humming of the class that is interrupted, like the incoming swarm of bees, became louder and sharper. He was still waiting for the phone call. He wishes the cell phone kept on the table would ring and that he could talk to his son. Ever since the news came out in the TV yesterday he has been trying to reach him.

THE SHROEDINGER'S CAT

Short story by
E. Harikumar

Translated by the
author

Included in the
collection

"Doore Oru
Nagarathil"

(In A City Far Away)

'....the number you are dialing is temporarily out of commission....' The message came in three languages continuously. 'The number you are dialing.....' in Malayalam and then in Hindi and English.

"What happened to you Sir?" Somebody asked. The professor woke up. Where did he stop? Yes he remembered, he was talking about Shroedinger. Catching a cat and putting it in a sealed container. The container has a vial of cyanide and above it a hammer. There is a photon detector, which will detect any photon decay. If there is photon decay it will activate the hammer and break the cyanide vial killing the cat. Now for us to find out whether the cat is alive or dead, we have to open the chamber. If you open the chamber the cat will be dead any way and we

wouldn't be knowing whether it is dead due to photon decay or not. Here is the dilemma of the quantum theory.

"Like Shakespeare said - to be or not to be....."

The words are broken down, stained with blood they scattered on the floor unable to join together again. The Professor stood there bewildered like a child in front of set of scattered building blocks.

Professor Ramachandran, as usual, waited outside with a thick book in hand. It was Nirad C. Choudhury's 'Continent Of Circe'. Professor Hameed had seen that book in the morning also. Now the book will remain in the hands of the History Professor until read fully. When it is over there'll be discussion on it with Professor Hameed. History will converse with Science. Hameed liked those discussions, since the culture that churns out of these discussions was magnificent.

"Any news?" Ramachandran asked. Hameed nodded in the negative.

They walked silently. When they reached the quarters Hameed asked. "Do you care to drop in?"

Ramachandran lived in the next block. Without replying he accompanied Hameed. It won't be a good idea to leave that man alone now. Both the teachers lived alone in their respective quarters, their families living in their native place. They take a train on Fridays to have their week-end family life.

Hameed put the teapot on the stove. The ineptitude in Hameed showed, may be due to his nervous state. Watching his frail hands at work, Ramachandran felt tenderness towards that man.

"Our children are also to certain extent irresponsible.' Ramachandran said. "Abdu could have just called you. Even my son is no different. Once the train he was travelling in met with an accident. It was a minor accident, but as you know the media, the news came in the TV and we were frightened. Nothing happened to him fortunately, but he could have just phoned us up and what a relief it would have brought to us!"

"Abdu is quite different." Hameed said. "He is very thoughtful. That's why I'm anxious, if he is safe he would've somehow phoned me up."

It could be anything. Hameed thought. He could be in the hospital with minor injuries, or he would be one of the 28 seriously injured, or.....?

"Hameed, don't let your imagination go astray. We'll try to get in touch with Abdu somehow."

How? Even Ramachandran didn't know. He drank tea with a blank mind.

"I'll wait for any news today also, and I will go to Mumbai morning tomorrow."

"Did Abdu's mother call?"

"Hmm." Hameed said, "I have tried to console her somehow. I said I'll phone her up the moment I get some news."

"We'll do one thing. Go to my quarters. While we try to get through to Mumbai, we will listen to some ghazals. I've got a new cassette of Mehdi Hassen."

The Pakistani ghazal singer Mehdi Hassan is a passion for Ramachandran. If he has seen one anywhere he will bring it home, 'buy, beg, steal or borrow.' Ghulam Ali is in the second place, and then Begam Akhtar. Ramachandran's ghazal world abruptly ends there. He considers there is nothing beyond these three ghazal singers. So when guests walk in, they are compelled to listen to these singers. Hameed liked ghazals, but wishes Ramachandran's collection includes a few Jagjith Singh, Pankaj Udas and Talat Aziz also.

The recorder was playing Mehdi Hassan's '*Ranjish Hi Sahi*.'

"But you have this in another cassette of yours." said Hameed.

"Yes." Ramachandran said with a grin, "but this is a live show. A stage program. I will have a small surprise for you."

He rewound the cassette and started playing it right from the beginning. Naushad Ali,

the all time music director of Hindi cinema, was introducing Mehdi Hassan. Then came the heavy voice of Mehdi Hassan. He was addressing the audience. In the background of tabla that grand voice was creating an irresistible melody.

Suddenly the Professor got alert. Mehdi Hassan was talking about his son Tariq Aziz, who was sitting next to him. "Nowadays I take this boy along for stage programs, like a mother cat taking her kitten to the houses in the neighborhood to show things....."

Cat! Suddenly the Professor remembered the unfinished class.

He started dialing. The computer message again. '*The number you have dialed is.....*'

He did not like unfinished classes. So if it is the last class, he would leave the students only after finishing the subject. But today.....

"Hameed's cousin is in Mumbai, isn't it? Rahim? Have you tried him?"

"Seems he is not in town. The phone rings, but nobody picks it up. He's always on tour."

Mehdi Hassan is singing. "*Ranjish hi sahi dil hi dukhane keliye aa....* 'even if you are annoyed with me, you please come at least to hurt my heart.....'

"Nothing would have happened." Ramachandran tried to console his friend.

Hameed didn't say anything. He was thinking about the worst fate. To help his self defense it has become necessary. This habit of his helped to have courage and strength to face anything. But can you include this in the category of 'facing anything.....'?

"What they do is not right." Hameed said in a loud voice.

"Who?"

"They! How many bomb blasts? The Coimbatore blast took place just a few days ago. How many innocent people died? Had all the bombs they had planted went off the entire city of Coimbatore would have turned to cinders. What have they earned out of it? Destroying a few homes?"

Ramachandran was thinking about the young woman Nabeesa, who was rolling on the floor beating her chest. She has lost her two children. The children had gone to Coimbatore to spend the holidays. They lost their ball while playing cricket with their cousins and while they were looking for it a bomb hidden in a bag suddenly came off and they died instantly. Nabeesa today is a housewife with a deranged mind. The people who planted the bomb, what have they gained? Remembering the tearful face of that mother, Ramachandran said.

"People have become insane."

"Yes, but isn't it necessary to try to treat it?" Hameed said. "But see what the politicians try to do? It was a wrong thing to demolish that Mosque. Sure it has created a big wound in Muslim psyche. I agree, but every wound has to heal, isn't it? Just to see that it won't heal, to keep it infected and to see that worms crawl on it..... Isn't it with any political aim? Is it a big issue with a common man now? People of my community are being fooled, made a scapegoat of. In an issue like this, they should not support Pakistan."

"The Indian Muslims do not justify Pak actions." Ramachandran Said. "The media are responsible. Each media has their own axe to grind. All their actions and comments are centered on that. I have seen an article in one such weekly on the 7th anniversary of the masjid demolition. At least the editor should have used his discretion to stop publishing such fire vomiting poisonous articles. They sure know that the news papers and magazines do influence the mental balance of the general public."

"People are made to believe that these blasts are in response to the demolition of the masjid. When will they understand that it is a weak alibi and that it's only a ruse of Pakistan to make our country weak and disintegrated? When will my society realize that they are being made scapegoats of actions they are not responsible for?"

Professor Hameed was very angry. Far away in the city his only son lives. Lives? He cannot say that for sure. He remembered his daughter. She's in the States. She has

married an American, a Protestant. She has not changed her religion, and so also her husband. She is a Muslim and he is a Christian and live there peacefully beyond the vicious grip of religion. Professor was proud of it. She mightn't have known about the bomb explosion in Mumbai. Even if she knew she wouldn't have guessed that it is so near the office where her brother works.

Mehdi Hassan was singing. Professor Hameed wished to immerse himself in that divine melody and forget about everything.

Ramachandran switched on the TV and changed channels, and stopped at a news channel; same shots that came streaming yesterday. The death toll has risen to 18. They have found out the explosive material used, it is RDX, the same as the previous blasts, and the perpetrators are the same. No one else is responsible for this also.

'It is Pakistan only,' Ramachandran said with apparent animosity. Hameed felt that this comment is resentment towards him. It could be just a feeling. He felt that the continued and sporadic blasts, the naked aggression towards a people have instilled a sense of guilt in his mind. It is not his fault or that of people of his religion; still they have to bear the burden of guilt for a crime they have not committed. All the same they have paid a good price for it by now. The scar in my mind is only a tiny part of the big scar on my society. God, when will it go?

Mehdi Hassan was singing. Breaking the manmade barriers of countries and religions the voice of that gifted singer was heard streaming, ballads of eternal love. He felt love and respect for that man. He wanted to cry alone somewhere.

"Let me go to my quarters. There could be some message in the land line."

"I'll also go with you." Ramachandran got up. "Or better still, I will prepare dinner and come to you. I am planning to make *avail curry*. I will come after I prepare the food, and call you. You don't prepare any food there. We can eat together here."

"Okay."

The Professor left and Ramachandran listened for some time to the ghazal. '*Phool hi phool khil uthe.....*' All the buds are blossoming into pretty flowers.....' Are they blossoming or getting burnt out before they get a chance to blossom? He knew his dear ghazal singer Mehdi Hassan is a tragedy today.

Professor Hameed was in a trance. Something is coming in search of him. Something that is fated, but could not realize in what mode it is coming. Far, far away beyond the limits of sky the lonely cat is travelling in a casket. How can he find out whether it is living or not? He will find a dead cat if he opens the casket, because the moment it is opened the cat would be dead. So how will he find out the state of the cat? It was interesting to explain this uncertainty to intelligent students who are responsive. He hated an unfinished class.

He heard the *adhan* call from a mosque afar. When that consoling sound came to him in waves Professor spread a mat on the floor and sat to pray. Oh, the God Almighty and All Merciful, why do you make me suffer like this?

When he heard a knock at the door, the Professor got up. He knew that it was not Ramachandran. At last is it coming to me? He went to open the door. There was a postman in uniform.

'Telegram.'

At last! He was frozen there scared to open it. As moments of uncertainty passed drumming away, he saw outside through the half wall of cut to height henna plants Professor Ramachandran coming.

Suddenly the phone started ringing from inside.

Included in the collection "Doore Oru Nagarathil" (In a City Far Away).

Translated from Malayalam by the author.



index

Stories with Evil Characters

Suchitra is writing a story. Sitting in her room with doors closed, creating a world of her own, she is getting ready to write a story. A sheet of paper that she pulled out in haste from her Social Science notebook lies in front of her with a sentence, "Mother is an evil character". Writing the first sentence was easy for her. In fact all her stories begin by portraying somebody as an evil character.

That first sentence, for her, flows out from the tip of her pencil to be imprinted between the blue lines of her notebook. It is done with the ease of a little bird landing on the window-sill, tucking its feathers closer to itself and turning its head to look straight at her. Now, what is the next sentence? It is here that Suchitra is in real trouble. It is easy to imagine somebody as an evil character, but it has to be authenticated with valid evidences. It should be given a halo of truth, capable of standing on its own legs. Not enough being just a sentence, it should stand tall in the arena of literature and above all, the story starting with that sentence should immortalize its creator.

Her previous story began with the sentence "father is an evil character". She cried for long after writing those words. 'How painful is writing' she realized. When she stepped out of her room with swollen eyes her mother queried.

"Why is your face swollen up?"

She had written only one sentence but those words pained her. Yet she could not keep away from telling the truth that "Father is an evil character".

I stop writing. A sheet of paper that is half-written lies on the table, in front of me. I write in tiny letters because my story is about a ten-year-old writing a story. My letters should be small and soft like her. She is in front of me; no, not in front of me but in my mind. After writing seven stories based on evil characters she is writing the eighth one.

The first story was about a butcher. She met this character when she accompanied her father to the market. He smiled at her as he was cutting the meat with a big knife. She did not like his coy looks. How nice it would be if he chops his fingers off along with the meat, while glaring at me, she wished.

Neither what she hoped for happened nor was he perturbed while doing this heinous act. She turned away to free herself from his fixed glare. It was then that she noticed severed head of a goat hanging on a hook. Suddenly she felt dizzy.

**STORIES WITH
EVIL
CHARACTERS**
Short story by
E. Harikumar
translated from
Malayalam
by Usha Prabhakar
Included in the
collection
'Doore Oru
Nagarathil
(In A City, Far Away)

With this incident she stopped eating non-vegetarian food. On reaching home she closed and bolted the door of her room and cried for a long time agonizing for the dead goat. When those helpless pair of eyes kept flashing in her mind she pulled out a sheet of paper from her Social Science notebook, took her pencil and wrote, yes, that very sentence... The butcher is an evil character. On realizing that her sentence was not as powerful as she wanted it to be, she added, "yes, really an evil character."

The magnitude and power of the word 'really' descended on her on that day. She completed her story within fifteen minutes. Paradoxical indeed, the story, like the sad end of the goat in front of the butcher, was put to an end by the Malayalam teacher herself or maybe it was a feat, inevitable in the history of literature.

Anyway that inspired her to write more stories and it motivated her to keep her stories safely, away from the hands of the Malayalam butcher. The story of the evil butcher was re-written. In the remake she portrayed the butcher's wife as a good character. She narrated how this lady saved an innocent goat from the sharp razors of her husband, at the risk of her own life. Female characters were generally good ones. Flawless, they fought valiantly and outlived the male characters. At that young age, Suchitra had not yet gone through the works of feminist writers like Sara Joseph or Gracy. Yet the same innate fervor that led these two writers made her also to write feminine stories. The fact that even the Malayalam teacher who killed her first story with the brutal nature of the butcher was not portrayed as an evil character is a fact to be made note of, in this context.

Her second journey in search of evil characters ended up one day, while returning from school. Saji was her class mate, true, her neighbor, friend, et al. But why did he call her "Fatty" in front of everyone. She was fat, it may be true; a phenomenon till unnoticed need not have been brought to the forefront of public attention by Saji. An unwanted provocation was indeed well braved. Throwing her school bag on to the floor, she pushed Saji on to the ground. Sitting on his stomach, she scratched his face. With a scarred face, she let him go off for introspection. As soon as she reached home, she closed the doors of the room, pulled out a page from her Social Science note book and wrote the sentence Saji is an evil character.

I stop once again. A question might arise, why is Suchitra pulling out pages only from her Social Science note book? Going ahead with the story without knowing this fact may be meaningless. A student of Standard V, she has 22 note books for various subjects. That included micro biology and quantum mechanics. Why is she not taking pages from these note books? The reason is simple; her Social Science teacher, Mini teacher, slim and soft spoken was a good character, the only one teacher out of the 15 who did not thrash her. Not only that, she is not going to find out waning of the Social Science note book or if the book itself disappears into a Black Hole. Suchitra made it sure that she writes a story about her sweet Mini teacher. But amidst evil characters where is the room for a sweet-natured teacher? Thus shoving this seed of thought along with various other unfulfilled aspirations deeper into her mind, unexpressed by words, she begins to write about Saji, the evil protagonist. While in a trauma to glide into the second sentence, after the easy first one, she heard a knock at the door. It was her mother who, as usual, interrupts while she was transcending the pains of creativity. Tucking the written sheet of paper under the bed she opens the door of the room.

'Haven't you changed yet? Tea is ready since long, what were you doing here?' Though the interrogation was a rude one it did give her some time for thought. And that respite altered the direction of the story. After tea, she continued to satiate the pangs of her creativity. Her first sentence 'Saji is an evil character' continued to implore her for a deconstruction, for a change for better. Instead it helped her to climb up from the base role of a creator to that of the lofty world of a critic. It led her to further troubles as she was transformed into both the convict and the judge at the same time. Passing through the first phase of her deconstruction, a realization dawned on her. Is there not an aspect of unjustified inaccuracy in my first sentence? Didn't Saji tell the truth?

At this juncture, she stealthily goes to the bedroom to stand in front of the full-size mirror fixed on the cupboard. Critically analyzing herself from her back and from the front, she stood looking at her figure in front of the mirror. Wait. Let me analyze my protagonist with my aging eyes. A little on the fatter side, true, but only a cartoonist can call her a fatty. Her face exuded the grace of childishness, podgy fingers, and plump arms like that of a baby. She always had a child-like demeanor that attracts attention and love from others.

A ten-minute analysis was not in favor of the writer. Back in her room, she sat in front of the table, disconcerted. The first sentence pleaded for a change of letters. 'No, I will not correct it' she said vehemently to herself. 'Saji is indeed an evil character'. The anguish that was taking root while in front of the mirror outgrew in the form of cruelty towards Saji. Without any further rethinking she continued writing. The act of pounding on him and making scratches on his face was conveniently forgotten — such trivial acts, in your creative moments, usually plunge deep down into the whirlpool of oblivion, .

Later, many evil characters unfolded from the tip of her pencil. Due to fear of elaboration those stories are not described here.

'Father is an evil character.' This sentence became a stepping stone in her literary life. She cried for a long time. She fondly remembered the way her father used to pamper her. At times when her mother used to pet her younger brother, she used to look at it with envy. Those times it was none other than her father who used to give her, her due. He used to bring chocolates for her while returning from office and was a timely mediator to reduce the intensity of punishments given by mother for not finishing her homework. Even with all these positive thoughts about him, she had to write that father is An Evil Character.

Here the writer's interruption is inevitable. The context for portraying her most beloved father as an evil character has to be understood. For that, the layout of the place where it all happened has to be described. My protagonist may not be aware of the reality behind the superficial. Though she has been informed about this topic in many lessons in microbiology, Suchitra, the 10 year old is totally ignorant about the nuances of macro-biology.

Let us delve deeper. There are two cots in the bedroom. One is a double cot. It was here that she used to sleep with her mother and father. Where? No doubt, right in the middle. It was while leading this happy life with the top-of-the-world feeling, that the uninvited intruder, her younger brother was born. Things became topsy-turvy after that. One day when she reached home after school she saw a new cot placed close to the wall with a bed sheet full of cartoon characters spread over it. Father was always complaining of lack of sleep due to Nandu's wails and due to lack of space. Maybe he wants to move separately on to the new bed and have a good night's sleep. Nandu will also accompany him if he gives up on his own, his bad habit of suckling, she thought. In a spree of thoughts to create a world for women or to give prominence to women folk Suchitra hardly realized what was in store for her.

Her father lifted her and told her: 'From today, my little darling will be sleeping on this cot with a bed that has lot of cartoon characters of Mickey Mouse and Tom and Jerry. It will take you to the wonderland of dreams.' These words, he told her while he was swinging her around holding her high in his arms. But the reality in the message dropped her down. Who would want a Mickey Mouse at the expense of all other little delights, she pondered. While she was lying among the 'burnt cinders of her dreams' (I have put it in quotes because the little writer herself had used the term in one of her stories), she hadn't embarked on her literary career. Had she started writing earlier, father would have already tumbled down on to a sheet of paper as an evil character.

A year later, after getting accustomed to her new place of sleep and on realizing the advantages of sleeping alone did this incident take place.

She wanted to give her story the title "Female harassment" at that instance. When she woke up suddenly from her sleep she heard the sound of her father and mother testing their might on each other. Her father was harming her mother, lying on top of her, the glimpse that she could catch in the dim light of the room. The thought of her pouncing on Saji came to her mind. Mother was crying softly lest she would wake up the children, she

thought. Will father kill her mother? She was apprehensive and fearful. Closing her eyes tightly she tried hard to fall asleep. Slowly, the sounds diminished and she slid into a slumber.

Morning came, and on waking up she remembered the incident and went to look for her mother. Her mother was fixing breakfast as usual as if nothing had happened. She went close to her mother and looked if there were scars on her mother's face and finding none, concluded that may be father would not have been able to scratch her face as she did to Saji. Yet, consoling her mother was her duty, she thought, especially, as a representative from the world of women - the oppressed class. So she asked her mother. 'Father hurt you in the night, isn't it?'

'Father? Hurting?' her mother asked in return. Suchitra did not like the stance of Seelavathi, the mythological loyal wife, taken by her mother. 'Gone are the days of Seelavathi and Savithri. These are times of feminism and female writers she retorted in her mind.

'I saw father hurting you and you were crying softly without making any noise'

'So, where you awake then?' she asked with a smile on her face and her hands on her head.

'Oh, this mother!' Suchitra portrayed her mother in her story, as one who was inflicted with pain. Silently bearing with grace all harassments posed by her husband, the woman finally fight for her liberation. On getting the apt sentence Suchitra runs to the room. The one who was harassing her mother the whole night was in the drawing room reading newspaper pretending to be innocent. She pulls out a sheet from her notebook (yes from her Social Science notebook only), wrote the very first sentence 'Father is an evil character'. Quickly memories rushed to her mind and she started crying bitterly.

She had concealed all her stories under the bed, since she realized that protecting her creations from the eagle eyes of her mother was essential. She did it with the zeal and valiance of a nouveau writer who has started writing postmodern stories ardently defending his works. It was a routine to take census of all her works every day after returning from school. Four more stories will make it fit to be given to a post modern critic for a preface and then to get it published as an anthology, she decided. 'To climb up the ladder of success in the field of literature a lot of gimmicks have to be done, a lot of people have to be met'; these were her apprehensions. As she was dreaming of becoming a known literary figure, fate would have it that an incident that charred all her aspirations took place. All her dreams were burnt down to ashes. (The cliché 'charred aspirations' is not authored by my story writer).

Now let me play the role of a newspaper journalist. On packing her daughter off to school and her husband to office mother was trying to lull the suckled baby to sleep so that she could continue with her daily chores of washing and so on. Nandu with his stomach full, was ready to hit the sack, promptly assisted by his mother who was rolling her fingers on his head invoking the God of sleep. On pulling out the bed sheet of Suchitra for washing it, a sheet of paper fell down. Picking up the paper, she moved towards the window to read; if it was something essential and to keep it safe. On top of the sheet was written, 'Female Harassment'. Anxiously she skimmed through the lines and was shocked to see the first sentence, 'Father is an evil character.' It forced her to read further, and the initial shock has ended with a smile and then to a laughter. She quickly decided to scan her fingers under the bed for further revelations. With a single story Suchitra became a permanent glory in the horizons of literature. The little writer's works came out one by one and smiled at her. After reading all the nine stories she was about to tear them off. But suddenly it occurred to her that she should make the 'evil character' read the story about him. So she folded them and kept it safe in her cupboard.

The tigress that returned from her prowl for raw materials for stories, realized that her cubs have been taken away. She ran to the kitchen screaming

'Where are my stories?'

The kidnapper had not beautified the cubs. She asked 'Oh that, are they stories?'

'Yes, where are they?'

'What type of stories are they?' Mother asked with a smile on her face. That question sounded silly like what kids are they to a mother.

'What all have you written. I tore them off.'

'Tore them?..... My stories?' Suchitra could not control her agony. The estrangement and insensitivity of the postmodern writers are confined to their stories alone. In personal life, they are full of emotions and senses like any other human being made of flesh and bones. Or else why mix up the creations and the personal life of the creator. Crying aloud she ran to her room bolted the door and lay down crying. She did not open the door even though her mother kept knocking at it repeatedly. After a while she got up, pulled a sheet of paper from her Social Science notebook and started writing under the banner 'Female butcher' and her very first sentence was naturally 'Mother is an evil character'.

Included in the collection 'Doore Oru Nagarathil' (In A City Far Away).

Translated from Malayalam by Usha Prabhakar.



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A Kung Fu Fighter

Sheranz is a Kung Fu Fighter, so said Raju and his description of Sheranz is spine chilling. Back home from school, Raju throws his bag and water bottle away, takes the stance of a kung fu fighter in front of me and gifts me with a hard punch. Though painful, I pretend not to have felt it. I am father and he is my son; a six year old son.

'Doesn't it hurt?' he asks me.

'No'. 'Do you call this a punch?'

'I'll show you.'

He takes a leap forward and punches me a second time.

'Ouch, it hurts.' I scream. I am getting angry. There was no need for him to punch me a second time.

Yes, this is how Sheranz punches and this is kung fu fighting.

He was just imitating Sheranz right now. If this was so fierce how would the punch of the original Sheranz be!

Sheranz was a terror at school - children hide away from him, none dare breathe in front of him, why even the class teacher is scared of him. He is Raju's friend. My wife and I are happy because our child is safe under the shelter of Sheranz.

Once a boy had kicked Raju and Sheranz was quick to respond. He scratched the boy's face until it bled. Though happy within, I put it differently to him.

'Is it right to scratch and hurt the boy, just because he kicked you?'

'Sheranz is my friend'

'So what?'

'If anyone hurts me Sheranz will pay them back with the same coin.'

Eager to see Sheranz my wife and I had been to Raju's school without informing him because if he knew that we are visiting his school he may not allow us to do so. 'Daddy, you don't come to school, let mummy come alone' he says.

'Why?'

'Daddy doesn't look good,' he says. I am annoyed.

'What are you saying son, daddy is looking handsome.' says mummy.

'No he does not look good. Mummy alone can come to my school.'

'Does mummy look good?' I asked him.

'Of course.'

Later when his mother is not around I ask him. "Why do you say daddy does not look good?"

'You look very old, your hair and your moustache, they don't look good. Thanai's daddy looks very handsome.'

So that's the reason why our visit to his school was not mentioned to him earlier. Walking towards his classroom after paying the fees in the office, we could not identify Raju in his class as all of them were looking alike in their uniform. May be Raju has seen us and is looking at us intently without making any noise. All little eyes were on us. A little girl's voice was heard, "Raju *tumhari mummy aye hai.*"

Turning towards the sound of the girl, we saw Raju ducking himself under the desk.

During interval we asked him "who is Sheranz?"

Raju pointed his finger at a boy who was standing a little away and was curiously looking at us. Feeling self conscious and shy he ran away.

'Is that Sheranz? What a little boy is he; as small as our son !' I told my wife.

'What else did you expect?' my wife asked me.

A KUNG FU FIGHTER

Short story by
E. Harikumar
Weekly in 1980
Included in the book
'Dinosaurite Kutty'
which won the
Kerala Sahitya
Akademi Award in
1988
Translated by
Usha Prabhakar

How can this little one be a kung fu fighter?

I had a stout and masculine boy in my mind. How foolish of me! My imagination must have gone astray about a second standard student.

Thus Sheranz, the fear factor of the class, diminished to a little slim boy and the loss is mine. I should not have gone to his school.

For my luck, Raju's kung fu fighting spirit did not last long. Now he is eloquent about another boy, Romid who is a very good singer. It seems he sings very well like Amitabh Bachchan.

'Amitabh Bachchan doesn't sing.' I told him.

'Why not, you heard the song *tune abhi dekha nahi* in the movie *Do Aur Do Panch*? It's sung by Amitabh Bachchan.'

'That is not Amitabh who sings it. It is Kishore Kumar.'

He did not believe it. He says it is none other than Amitabh who sings it in the movie; Kishore Kumar would have sung the song some other time. Anyway Romid according to him is a very good singer.

Immediately the figure of a man holding the mike, dancing to the tunes of his song came to my mind. But when the image of the kung fu fighter flashed in my mind, the charismatic singer disappeared. I should visualize my son's friends only through his eyes.

'Today Romid sang the song of *sher* in class.'

'Sher's song?'

'Yes the song sung by Amitabh Bachchan in Mr. Natwarlal.'

'Oh the song about the lion hunt, is that a song?'

'Um. What a nice song so well sung by Romid.'

There was no end to praising Romid for a long time and he was the main topic in all his conversations.

Romid comes alive as soon as Raju reaches home from school. The way he sings with the accompaniment of instruments, new hit songs reverberate in our ears...there is Kishore Kumar, Rafi and Yesudas. This goes on until bed time.

Then one day he no more talked about Romid. Raju, with his crayon set at hand was on the lookout for something. No song, no sound...That made me a little uneasy. What was wrong? When impatience took over me I enquired,

'Didn't Romid sing today?'

Indifferently he was continuing to look out for something on the table, tossing his notebooks and finally trying to pull out a page from his notebook.

'Haven't I told you not to tear pages from notebooks?' I shouted.

He stopped tearing but continued to hold the book still holding the page he was about to tear. There was mischief in his eyes. He wanted to quickly pull out a sheet from the book and run away soon as I turn my eyes away from him.

'Why do you need paper?'

'I want to draw pictures.'

'Where is your drawing book?'

'That book is for drawing in class. I want to draw at home too. Please buy me another drawing book.'

'Okay,' I agreed.

He took his hands away from the book. But within half an hour I was holding his hand and going to the book shop. Then for quite some time the house was adorned with pictures of animals.... cats, rats, dogs rabbits, and that is how we came to know about the artist, Thanai.

'Thanai is a very good artist. How well he draws pictures. *Sher* that he sketches looks like live one.'

He is talking about lion. Lion is his favorite animal.

'Can a *sher* hit an elephant?' or, '*Sher* is the king of the jungle and he has a big palace.'

'Don't be foolish,' I said, 'lions live in dens; only human kings live in palaces.' Raju's face was downcast.

'So lions don't have palaces?'

'No.'

He was disappointed and I felt sad for having destroyed his imaginary palace. What is wrong if a lion had a palace, especially if it adds colors to a child's imaginations?

'Thanai draws *sher* and its palace very well' said Raju. The days ahead were all meant to praise Thanai

and his creations.

Raju's crayons diminished to the size of capsules and were lying scattered and the pages of the drawing book turned into aero-planes and boats. In the remaining pages half done lions and their unfinished castles lay strewn.

'Our son will definitely not become an artist,' I said.

'Why? What is the reason?' my wife looks at one of the pages of the drawing book and says "This cat looks really good, see he has built a house for it, too.'

'That is Raju's lion.'

'Oh !'

Slowly as Thanai fades away behind the curtains of prominence, I was apprehensive and eager to know what would come next.

One day he says, 'Daddy I want a car.'

'You have lot of cars and you don't need anymore.'

'Not that type of car. I want a car that turns automatically on reaching the wall. I can play with it on top of the table, it will come back on reaching the edge of the table. It will not fall off at all.'

'You wont get such cars here, son.'

'Tapas has such cars.'

'Maybe somebody gifted him when they came from abroad.'

'Tapas has lots of such cars in his house. He has a train that runs on battery.'

So, Raju has gone to Tapas's house on his invitation.

'Let us see in the shop,' he said. 'We get small foreign cars over there so we may get this one too.'

An automatic car that comes back on reaching the wall edges has gifted me and my son with sleepless nights. Walking up and down the shops on this car hunt he said, 'Let us have a Thumbs up. I am tired.'

Allowing him to have one I refrained from drinking saying that I need not drink it just because Gavaskar drinks it.

'Maybe these cars are costly and that is why these shops do not sell them.'

I took pride in my son's knowledge of economics. He did not speak about those cars any more. He was content with taking his little cars up to the edge of the wall and bringing them back manually.

Slowly he grew to be very silent and I noticed this change. Nowadays he does not talk about the kung fu fighter, nor does he tell about Romid the singer, Tanai, the artist or about the cars of Tapas. He sits alone in the house after returning from school, deeply immersed in thought. He was growing thinner.

'I think he has worms in his tummy,' my wife said. 'We can give some medicines.'

Medicines gave no relief and eventually he was taken to a doctor who said he is fine and prescribed a tonic.

'Isn't he eating well?' I asked my wife.

'Of course he takes five *chappathis* for lunch, he packs it himself and brings back an empty lunchbox.'

He does not eat much for dinner but having five *chappathis* in the afternoon surprised me. Something is wrong somewhere.

'How many *chappathis* do you have in the afternoon?'

'Five *chappathis*.'

'You don't look as much as you eat.'

'I am quite strong like Muhammed Ali. I look like a muscle man.'" On saying this he exhibited his biceps to me and I pretended to be surprised and scared seeing it. I hoped he would continue to talk about Mohammed Ali and put an end to his silence. But he continued to be quiet, remaining on his own and then asked,

'Daddy why doesn't everyone have lot of money?'

Wisdom begins to dawn on my son. Did he tread under a *Bodhi* tree likie Gautama Budha?

The secret of Moahammed Ali's strength was discovered when my wife went to the school one day.

It was lunch time, children were all seated in their places and having lunch from their small lunch boxes. In one corner our little Mohammed Ali was also biting on to his *chappati*. There was a slim dark boy in front of him eating lunch from Raju's lunch box.

He had a guilty look on his face when he saw his mother. He quickly pushed away the other boy and continued eating as if he had no connection with him whatsoever. The other boy, on the other hand, not

realizing that a threat in the form of his friend's mother was looming large above their heads, was looking aghast.

It was the class teacher who told her. Raju shares his lunch every day with Bansi, the son of the peon, a poor boy. He is the only one who is poor and all others come from affluent families in this school,' continued the teacher, Raju is the only one who is kind to him and all others hurt him.

In the evening when I heard about my son's sharing nature I was getting angry because he was lying to me. I called him and asked, "How many *chappatis* did you say you used to have?"

He became scared and said doubtfully, "five"

'Were you eating all the five?'

By now he realized that mummy has sold him out and said, 'no.'

'Then how many were you eating?'

'One.'

'Just one?'

I was shocked. I did not expect that. He was eating one and giving four to the other boy. That was the reason for his pulling down in weight.

I got so mad, he was lying to me. I took a ruler lying by and started beating him. Raju was trembling with pain. When I cooled down I stopped beating and I asked him. 'If at all you felt like giving, you could have given one or two and had the rest, isn't it? Why did you give four to him?'

He did not utter anything.

'Are you listening?' I shouted angrily. 'Why did you give four?'

'Daddy, will you beat me?' He was shivering.

'No, tell me.'

'I can have food even when I come back home, but Bansi, he won't be getting anything at home. All children hurt him, he is a poor boy.'

Raju continued crying. I never expected such an ending and he was sobbing bitterly.

Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself.

Raju was eloquent about Sheranz, the kung fu fighter, Romid, the singer, Tanai, the artist and Tapas, the car fleet owner, but he concealed the love and care he had towards this poor boy. I punished him with beating in return for his empathy and care towards fellow beings. I felt extremely sad.

While hunting for a good toy to buy to compensate for the painful thrashing Raju received, he said,

'I want to become a kung fu fighter when I become big.'

I did not know why he said that just at that moment. I said.

'Already you are one in your mind.'

Included in the anthology 'Dinosarinte Kutti' (The Dinosaur's Baby)

which won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1988.

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