



## THE NET OF DARKNESS

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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.

“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) which won the Kathapeedom Award in 2006.*

*Translated from Malayalam by the author.*