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Old Houses and The Ghosts That Linger

Navya Benny

If old houses could speak, they would perhaps have quite a few tales of their own to say, and the white bungalow that had been built back in 1928 was no different,

Like how every member who ever passed away in Plackamoodu family have been immortalized on the walls of their ancestral house, and how Xavier had to grow up under the 586 pairs of watchful eyes of his ancestors, not including his parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who resided with him there,

How Andhrayose Appachan, the doyen of the family and the one who stood tall and proud holding his cane made of dark ebony with a lion's head at the top, that had been the family heirloom, had passed on the same to his son Mathaayichan Appachan, who in turn, for lack of any male heirs of his own but not wanting to bestow the same to the sons of his siblings, had hidden it in his trunk before his death, and from where it was dug up by the daughter of his brother's son, Sosamma Ammamma, who now left the cane beside her bedside, where it lay uncared for, while she herself lay awaiting the cold embrace of her final abode,

How Saramma Ammayi was the very first feminist in the family, and who could often be found whistling 'like a man did at those times', and had pursued her dreams, and chased the man of her dreams with the same passion, and had not bowed down to any of the patriarchal rigors that had been imposed on her, and whose spirit now lived on in the youngest one Rebecca, whom the family fondly referred to as 'spitfire' – 'she even holds her nose up in the air just like Saramma Ammayi did' – Gracy Aunty is found to quote often exasperatedly but with a tinge of slight amusement,

And how, oh I do not know if I am supposed to tell you this, so I'll tell you in a very hushed tone, hush now, don't tell anyone else that I told you,

But how Rosie Vellyammachi who really did look like a full blown rose doing justice to her name, and was the belle of the village at the time had eloped with the 'athar' merchant Kareem, and had been brought (nay, dragged) back home by Andhrayose Appachan, but she had already been carrying a babe in her belly, which is why she was married off in a hurry to Ambrose Appachan, and which is also the reason why Pathrose Appachan, and Paulose Appachan look so different from each other and so do their kids and their kids, and why they still hold some amount of grudge towards each other, and so do their kids and their kids,

(They say Rosie Vellyammachi died of heartbreak the very next day after athar merchant Kareem died in 1987 even after so many years had passed since the affair, but hush now, don't tell anyone I told you that either)

And how Kousalya Amma had first served Andhrayose Appachan's wife, Marykutty Ammachi, and her daughter Bhavani Amma had served Mathaayichan's wife Mariamma, and now her grandchild, Janaki was studying medicine with Xavier and Sharon, and was their playmate as a child, and can often be found visiting Plackamoodu House during the breaks and celebrates festivities with them as part of the family.

So you see, no one ever leaves Plackamoodu House, and when Jeejabai was handed the keys on a Saturday evening to sweep the bungalow, while the family went away to attend the annual 'Palli perunnal', she swore to her neighbours that she was being watched by 586 pairs of eyes and felt goosebumps prick her skin as she dusted the carpet right below the picture of Andhrayose Appachan, and heard a faint whistle from the room in the farthest end of the western wing, the room that Rebecca now used, and which had once belonged to Saramma Ammayi.

Purpose of Life

Ayush Kumar

An old man named Suraj, about seventy years old, with a big white beard and dressed like a priest, sits before an empty frame surrounded by puja materials. It is the prayer place of his home. His eyes are closed; he is in deep meditation. Suddenly, he feels a sharp pain in his heart. His eyes open, unable to bear the increasing intensity of it. Yet, even in such great pain, he smiles. His face resembles that of a child who has finally received the toy he longed for.

He is dead now. His soul has passed into the afterlife. Before him lies an empty path. To his right, he sees beauty resembling the heaven he had imagined all his life. To his left, darkness and fear—exactly like the hell people had always described. But he is not interested in either of them. His eyes are searching for something else. He cries out, “Oh God, where are you? I have waited my whole life to meet you. Where are you? I want answers to my questions!”

Suddenly, a man appears before him. He looks like a normal person, just like anyone else. He has a very sweet smile and looks at Suraj with that smile. Suraj looks at him and says, “God, it’s you, isn’t it?”

He replies, “Yes, but right now I’m someone else.”

Suraj is confused and asks what he means. God says, “You’ll get the answer in a moment, but why were you calling me?” Suraj smiles and says, “You’re God; everything happens by your will, and my coming here was also your will.”

God gestures for him to stop. “You are not here because of me. You chose this path. Don’t blame me for your choices.”

Suraj is shocked and hesitant—not only because of what God said, but also because God is looking at him like a defeated father who could not stop his child from taking the wrong path.

Suraj hesitantly asks God why he is looking at him that way. God replies, “I am not able to understand whether I am seeing the failure of my creation or my own.”

Suraj, trembling, asks, “God, why are you calling me a failure?”

God replies, “I really want to say that you know the answer, but if you truly knew it, I would not have needed to come meet you.” Suraj still cannot understand why God is saying such things—what wrong has he done? He looks into God’s eyes and asks, “What mistake have I committed? I have worshipped you all my life. Why are you behaving as if I am something despicable or some indecent creation?”

The Lord responds, “You are one of the few people who worship Me with all their heart, and among them, you are in the first place. But when you were young, you worshipped Me only when you felt like it; if you didn’t, you didn’t pray, even if you were scolded or beaten for it. But as you grew up, you began worshipping Me twenty-four hours a day, just like others. But it wasn’t your fault.”

God turns back and begins walking down the empty path. Suraj walks with Him.

Both walk silently. Suraj keeps looking at God, hoping He will say something, but He does not. Suraj grows impatient, the question—*What have I done wrong?*—killing him from within. “If this is not my fault, then what is?” he asks. God orders him to keep walking. There is no emotion on His face.

Suraj continues. He looks to the right and left—they are walking toward neither heaven nor hell. They walk silently for about twenty-two minutes. God stops, and Suraj stops too, staring at Him with hopeful eyes.

God says, “Look that way. You know who that is.”

Suraj looks and sees a twenty-year-old version of himself sitting in his room. “This is me, when I was twenty,” he replies.

“Do you remember this day?” God asks.

“Yes,” Suraj says. “I remember it very well. This was the day I decided that worshipping you was the only goal and purpose of my life. Before that, I was confused about what I should do. I wasn’t good at anything—just an ordinary person. But I knew one thing: I worshipped you with all my heart, not like other people.”

God smiles. “Yes, that is true. And what was the real reason for choosing this path?”

Suraj answers, “If I worshipped you with all my heart, like Ravana, then I would receive the answer I had been searching for since I was nine years old. Many others in the past had spent their entire lives searching for the same answer. I believed that when I died, I would meet you, and you would tell me the purpose of human life. Then, in my next birth, I would be born with all that knowledge, and I would fulfill the purpose for which human birth takes place.”

God says, “You spent your entire life searching for purpose, even though it was only a few months away. You feared failure. You worried about people—what they would say, what they would think, how they would react. Finally, you achieved what you wanted: respect in the eyes of people, and that too by becoming a priest. You didn’t want to fail, nor did you want to embark on a journey to find the answer to your question.

“You know that when a person wants something and achieves it, their happiness doesn’t come from the achievement itself, but from the long and painful journey to reach it. And you abandoned that journey. You told yourself that you wanted to worship Me, that worshipping Me was the purpose of your life. But you only used Me as a shield to protect yourself from the troubles of the world.”

God begins walking again. Suraj, now broken, feels terrible. Like every human being, he doesn’t want to take responsibility for his actions. He wants to blame someone else. But he knows it is his fault. He is fighting his inner demons.

As they move forward, Suraj stops. He looks around, confused. There are many people like him—some in their twenties, some in their thirties, some in their sixties and

seventies. He looks at God and says, “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. Please explain!”

God replies, “All the people you see here—you could have been one of them if you had made better or worse decisions. Now look at that old man standing at the end. You could have been him if you had made the worst decision. Look at him—he’s happy, even though he will die in a few moments. He has no burden in his heart. Look at yourself. All you have is burden—the burden of what you could have been, what you could have done, and the fear of whether all your prayers and all your hard work were in vain.”

Suraj falls to his knees. His head hangs low, and he cries. He starts hitting his head on the ground, cursing himself loudly.

God lifts him up and says, “You will surely find the answer you wasted your entire life searching for. What is the purpose of life, after all?”

Now Suraj is completely dead inside. Even the one thing he had yearned for all his life—that one answer—brings him no emotion now, only shame.

“The purpose of life,” God says, “depends on how you want to shape it—on what kind of person you want to be. Whether you want to be a billionaire or live an ordinary life, there is no shame in that. The shame lies in not doing what you want to do because you fear failure.

“When people ask themselves, ‘What is the purpose of life?’ they imagine an ideal life. But the truth is, humans want a goal they love to pursue, so that even if they ultimately fail to achieve it, they will not regret the time and effort they invested.

“Do you know what your life’s purpose was? You were born to be someone who would be remembered for decades. But you chose to waste your entire life worshipping Me.”

Hearing this, Suraj smiles and says, “Do you know what the best and worst thing is? The answer I searched for all my life—I always knew it. Yet I kept searching everywhere because I didn’t have even an ounce of confidence in myself.”

God smiles. “Do you remember, Suraj, that many times when you prayed, you felt a strange energy? You ignored it, thinking it was something negative. In reality, it was Me. I came to meet you many times to tell you the truth, but you were so engrossed in worshipping Me that you ignored the One you were worshipping.

“It is good to worship Me, but merely worshipping Me—worshipping Me blindly—will take you to a place where you reach neither hell nor heaven. You think there is only heaven or hell. But there is a special place for those who waste their lives. There, you will relive again and again the moments where you made mistakes and see the versions of yourself you could have been.

“This path you see—the empty path—is that very path. You must walk it completely. You must relive all your mistakes, and at the end, you will receive another birth. You cannot go backward on this path. This is only for those who blindly and unhesitatingly follow Me and use My worship as a shield to avoid the difficult situations they must face to confront the truth.”

In life, we work so hard to make the right decisions that we forget to make decisions at all.

Constant Metamorphosis of Touch

Moge Basar

Our touch is reduced to perverseness;
our longing to some phase.
Our needs are defenestrated,
and then the windows are shut.

Our existence is reduced to conflict,
and when we go about
the drudgery of the day-to-day
it is some choice;

our living reduced to cliches
and the panegyrics on our resilience
flood the papers when our blood is spilled.

Why do we let people suffer so long as they are not dead?

A perpetual struggle
between the need for gentleness
and the need to rage against the world,
resides in me.

No, I do not crave martyrdom.
I only desire the softness of love;
the ease of living freely,

without constraints.

Why must my search for acceptance lead me to my deathbed?

Do not bring me your pulpits,
I don't want your sermons
on oppression and struggle.
My life is not the niche topic
for your research grant.

Why must I shed my skin
each time I step out
only to realise that there are
more layers beneath?

My skin doesn't grow thick,
like a snake's it grows anew.
Each time I move,
I morph myself to the environment.

I do not change because I want to,
I change in order to survive.

The Toddy Shop at Dusk

Aardhra Chandran

The typewriter carbon stains the gravel where the path meets the mud track.
The cement structure sits low beneath the leaning coconut groves,
its doorway covered by a curtain of plaited palm fronds.

Inside, the rough-hewn wooden tables smell of salt and sour sap,
stained grey where glass bottles have sweated through the heat.
The shopkeeper ladles the opaque liquid from a clay vat.
A sharp, fermented tang cuts through the humid evening air.

On small tin saucers, chunks of tapioca and curried fish
glisten under the glare of a bare, dust-coated bulb.
Outside, the gravel path is quiet, swallowing the sound of footsteps.
An extra glass sits near the corner bench, catching the condensation.

The liquid in the clay vat holds a thick sediment that colors the glass yellow.
The stool scrapes once. A hand reaches to steady the un-sat wood.
Heavy iron spades rest against the outer wall.
A stray dog waits at the threshold for a dropped bone.
Crickets begin their rhythmic sawing in the grass.

The extra glass continues to fog.

My Mother becomes a Planet

Vidhya Ajitha

Mother at 50 goes on a trip with her schoolmates.

In photos she is sending me on WhatsApp –

she is sitting on the limb of a banyan tree,

stands on a rock by the sea, her hands

showing the victory sign with a caption

that reads- rocks. Next—

she leans onto a coconut tree that leans onto

the air, her tongue stretched out between

her lips, closed –

Beside her, people from her life, before

she was my mother, laughing.

Their laughter reaches me the way Jupiter

in evenings dares me to wonder.

My mother becomes a planet with many moons.

In the evening when she comes home

I will make her tea the way my mother likes

wondering she still likes it or not.

വിത്ത്

മണ്ണിന്റെ മേലിലെ മൃഗപക്ഷികൾ,
മൃഗം പുതച്ചുറങ്ങുന്ന സ്പർശം
തരൂ തൂങ്ങി പെർത്തിന്റെ കരിവിനായി,
കാതോർത്തു നിൽക്കുന്ന ജീവിതനാമം
കടുപ്പമേറിയതാകാ കവചത്തിനുള്ളിൽ,
കാടായി മാറാനുള്ള കരുത്തുണ്ട്.
ചെറുതെട്ടെട്ടാണു തഴുകുന്ന നേരം,
ചിറകു വിടർത്തുന്ന പച്ചപ്പൂസ്
മണ്ണിൽ തെച്ചിട്ടതല്ല നിന്നെ,
വിണ്ണോളം വരോൻ നട്ടതാണു.
നൂറു പൂവായ് വിടരാനും
വാണോളം പടരാനും
നിന്നിലെ ജീവനെ മനർത്തുക നി.

Tender Debt

Riya Agarwal

To all my fellow old school romantics in the world of modern casualness, this one is for you!

She thought she was in control of it, of how much she felt, of how much she gave. But some connections don't arrive loudly — they settle quietly, and before you realise it, they begin to take more than you ever planned to offer. But readiness has never stopped longing. And longing has a way of settling quietly into the body — threading itself around ribs, making a home in the spaces no one else can see. There are invisible strings that wrap around you when someone looks at you just right, when they use your name a certain way, when their silence begins to feel like something you need to decode.

She told herself it was light. Fleeting. Something that didn't demand too much. Something she could hold without letting it consume her. But feelings rarely stay within the limits we assign them. They grow in quiet corners. They deepen in unnoticed ways. And soon, she found herself learning his silences as if they were love letters.

"You're not ready yet... but you will be," she would think.

Not out loud, not even consciously. But somewhere, she had already begun waiting. There's a kind of hope that doesn't feel like hope — it feels like patience. Like loyalty. Like staying just a little longer because something *might* change. But sometimes, that hope is just delusion dressed as commitment. She didn't see it that way then. Delusion feels softer than rejection. It protects you from the harsher truth — that someone can care about you and still not choose you. That you can give and give and still not be met halfway.

And so she stayed. Not because she was weak. But because she had already built a version of him in her mind — one that matched her effort, one that eventually came around, one that loved her the way she was already loving him. Leaving him would have meant dismantling that version too. And that felt harder than staying.

So she stayed longer. She loved more deeply. Hoping, quietly, that if she stayed long enough... if she loved fiercely enough... he would finally see her the way she saw him.

But love doesn't work like that. It doesn't convert. It doesn't reward endurance. It doesn't turn effort into reciprocity.

And yet, she kept giving. Time. Energy. Attention. Pieces of herself she didn't realize she was handing over.

Until one day, she paused.

And the question surfaced — not loudly, but persistently:

What have I allowed?

It wasn't just about him anymore.

It was about the version of herself she had become in the process.

She looked at the past few months, and it felt reckless. Not in the obvious, chaotic way — but in the quiet, dangerous way of abandoning yourself slowly. Of choosing someone else, again and again, without realizing what it was costing you.

And that's when she understood it.

This wasn't just love.

It was debt.

Not the kind you ask back.

Not the kind anyone acknowledges.

But the kind you carry.

The kind that sits in your chest, heavy and unresolved. The kind that turns your peace into overthinking, your clarity into confusion. The kind that makes you replay conversations, question your worth, and wonder what you could have done differently.

Her mind, once quiet, had become a courtroom.

Every memory was evidence.

Every feeling, an argument.

Every silence, a verdict she didn't know how to interpret.

But here's the truth she arrived at, slowly:

Loving deeply was never the flaw.

The mistake was believing that depth guarantees return.

That if you give enough, stay enough, understand enough — you will be chosen.

It doesn't work like that.

And maybe it's not supposed to.

Maybe some people are meant to teach you the cost of abandoning yourself.

Maybe some connections exist only to show you where your boundaries should have been.

Maybe some love is not meant to stay — only to leave you with a clearer understanding of what you deserve.

She doesn't regret loving, - she understands it better now.

But if she could do it again, she would love differently.

Less blindly.

Less endlessly.

Less in a way that forgets herself.

Because the most dangerous debt isn't what you owe someone else.

It's what you owe yourself —

after giving too much to someone who was never going to return it.

Childhood Tangents of Onam

Akila G

I.

Marking the birthday star
in the Malayala Manorama English calendar is a ritual

Thiruvonam is in bold red, anyway.

Amma is lucky.
No one forgets.

II.

Thatha dwelt in stories.

Putheri came home every year
from the rice mill

Kalyani Amma was a regular visitor long after the mill closed down

In her home
of cement and distemper paint
Thatha was her Mahabali.

III.

Onam sadya was a potluck of memories and a story of survival—
chakka, pappadum, sarkara upperi savoured as epitaphs of brown cartons that
journeyed from Kerala to Delhi.

IV.

I had a deal with a friend.
We superimposed the world
with our language on this day

She twisted the tongue
in the right places for the narrative of Manichitrathazhu
the ornate lock in the movie
glinted in her voice

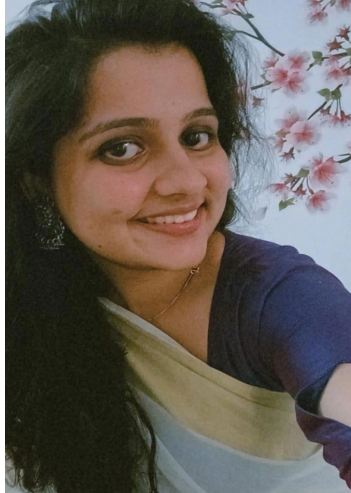
‘Haven’t you seen the movie?
Not even once...oru murai?’

I slapped my hands
to divert her
without any eye contact.

Bios

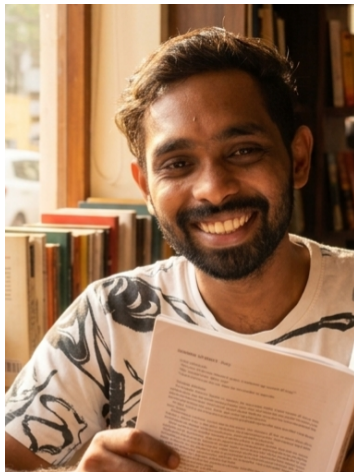
Navya Benny

A Lawyer, Academician and a part-time people watcher, Navya finds joy in writing about the mundane things - it's almost always about the hearts and flowers. When she's not busy teaching her students or scribbling her thoughts, you can find her romanticising the smallest of things.



Ayush Kumar

Ayush Kumar is a 20-year-old emerging writer from India. He is passionate about storytelling and enjoys writing fiction that explores the reality of society, talks about harsh truth. This publication marks an important step in his writing journey.



Moge Basar

Dr. Moge Basar is a poet and writer from Arunachal Pradesh. He teaches literature.



Aardhra Chandran

Aardhra Chandran is a postgraduate student and poet from Kerala, India. Her work has appeared in Eunoia Review, Active Muse, The Punch Magazine, Borderless Journal, and other literary journals. Her poetry explores landscape, labour, weather, and traces of time.



Vidhya Ajithaa

Vidhya Ajitha is a creative writer and research scholar from Keralam. She is currently completing her PhD in sociolinguistics.



Anagha Shaji

This author has not provided a bio and photo.

Riya Agarwal

Riya is a 25-year-old writer who writes about the emotions we often leave unspoken—love, loss, memory, and everything in between. Balancing a career in footwear manufacturing with a passion for storytelling, she hopes her words make readers feel seen.



Akila G

This author has not provided a bio and photo.

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