



## 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

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translated

by the author.

Published in

Grihalakshmi

Weekly 2004.

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.*