

The Sackclothman

Jayasree Kalathil



Illustration
Rakhi Peswani





First published 2008

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Design: Chinnan

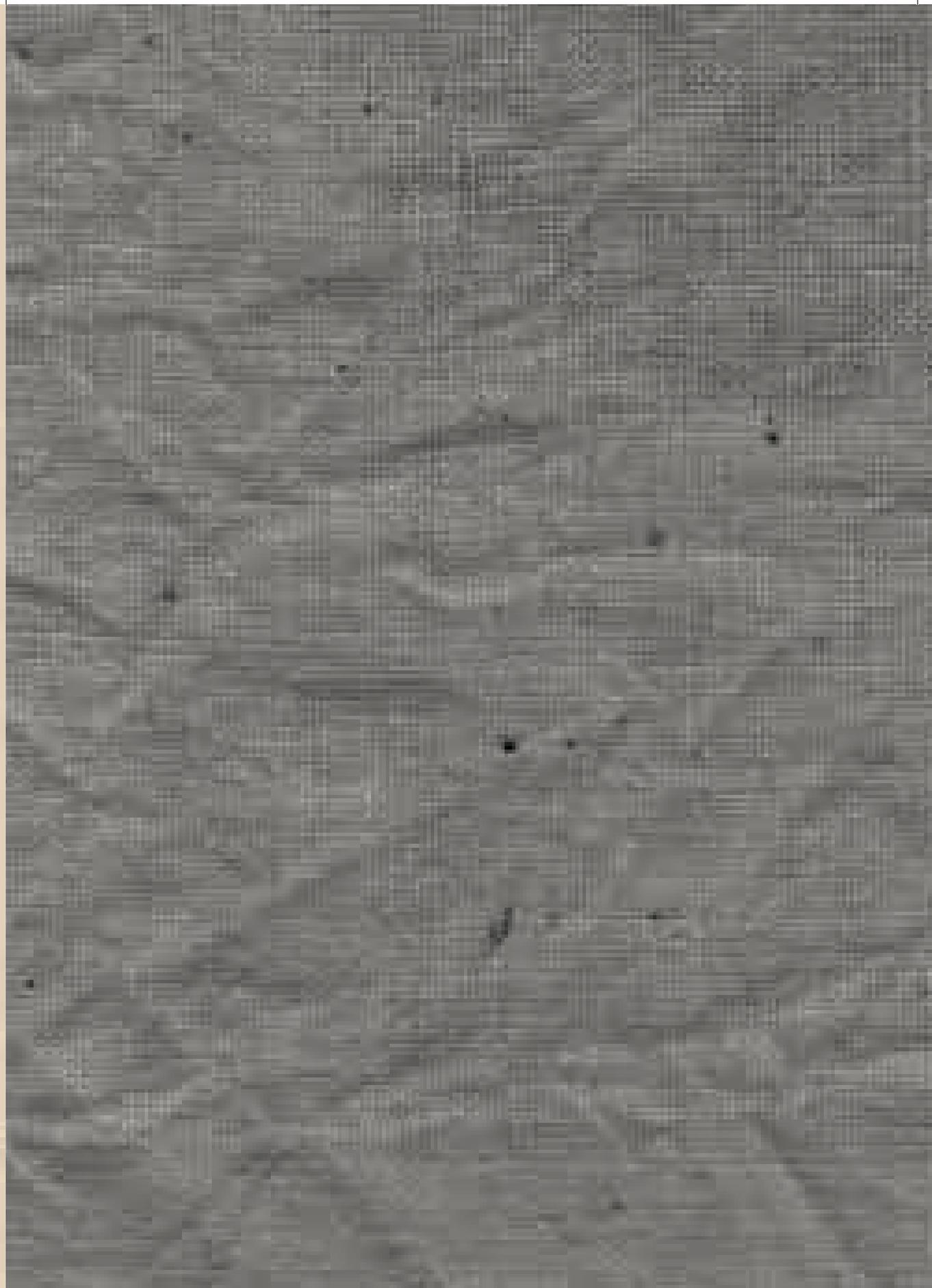
Printed in India by:
Pragati Offset Pvt. Ltd., Hyderabad, India.

Published by:
Mango
D C Books
D C Kizhakemuri Edam,
Good Shepherd Street
Kottayam - 686001
Kerala, India
www.dcbooks.com

ISBN
978-81-264-2032-2

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D C Books: The first Indian Publishing House to get ISO Certification





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The big clock on the wall behind Fatima Teacher's head showed three minutes to four. Aayamma was already walking towards the west veranda to ring the bell. And that would be the end of this school year. Tomorrow summer holidays would begin.

I was not looking forward to it. Okay, it would be good not to have to listen to Fatima Teacher nagging me about my handwriting. And hopefully next year I wouldn't have to sit next to Malathi with her gold earrings and pink ribbons. So it was good school was over. But this was the first summer holidays without Sajichechi. What would I do for two whole months?

The bell rang. Fatima Teacher was coming towards me. I quickly gathered my books and stuffed them into my bag.

"Looking forward to your holidays, Anu?" asked Teacher.

"Yes." No point in telling her how I felt.

"Any big plans?"

"Not really," I said. "I have to go. My amma will be waiting."

I hurried out. She came out of the classroom and started chatting with Aayamma. I could imagine their conversation. "Poor thing," they would be saying, lowering their voices into a whisper, "she must be so lonely, what with her sister dying and her mother in that state and that good-for-nothing father . . ."

I didn't like any of it. But people were always whispering around me these days. Sajichechi would have known how to deal with these whisperers. She always knew exactly what to say to people who annoyed her. But nowadays she was the main cause of their whispers. Because, you see, Sajichechi died four months and twenty-three days ago. Nobody knew how a little fever could have developed so quickly into something so serious. Prabhakaran Doctor had sent her to the Medical College Hospital but nothing had worked.

I didn't want to think about it. Because I would start crying and then I just couldn't stop. I missed her so much—all the time. I couldn't cope without her. If only she came back and bossed me around . . . told me how to coax Amma to get up and have some food because all she did nowadays was to lie on her bed all day.

I wanted her to come back and tell me how to make Achchan come straight home after work and not stop at the Radhakrishna Bar on the way.

Then there were the little things. Like painting my toenails without getting the nail-polish all over my fingers. Sajichechi had also been teaching me how to hold my breath under water without bobbing back up like a cork. I could still only count till sixteen before my lungs screamed for air. Now I'd never learn.

Oh! How I missed her!

Groups of children, some from my class, were going down Nayadippara. They seemed to be in no hurry to get home today. I ran down ignoring them. My house sat silently in the hot sun. The hibiscus plants looked thirsty—I'd have to water them in the evening.

The kitchen was dark. It didn't look as if Amma had done any cooking today. I went in and ate two bananas from the bunch hanging there and then went upstairs. Amma was lying in her bed. She looked tired and unhappy—as was usual these days. She stirred when I climbed on to the bed and put her arm around me.

"How was school today?" she asked.

"It was okay. No more school from tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Amma, it is summer holidays. Exams are over. No school till June."

Amma seemed confused. "Is it already summer holidays? So you will be at home all day." She took her arm away and rubbed her eyes. "What am I going to do with you?"

I could see she was getting upset. "You don't worry," I said, cuddling up against her. "I have made loads of plans with Rasheeda. I'll be alright." Rasheeda was my best friend after Sajichechi.

And since she was paying attention, I pushed through. "Amma, why don't you get up and have a bath? I'll boil some water for you. And then we can water the hibiscus plants."

But she had already drifted off. "I will, in a minute," she said. "I just want to rest a bit first. Why don't you water the plants? Then I'll get up."

But I knew she was not going to get up today. She had good days and bad days and today was a bad day. Prabhakaran Doctor called it “depression.” I lay there pressing against her body. She smelled of sleep. It used to be so different in the evenings when she came back from work. Sajichechi, Amma and I would walk about in the garden. Sometimes Achchan joined us. He would pluck a hibiscus flower and stick it behind his ear, and dance “hawa-hawai” wiggling his hips, with Sajichechi and me jumping around him. Amma would laugh and laugh, and tell us off, pretending to lose patience. Then she would comb and plait our hair for the night. And we would go inside to do our homework until dinner time and later watch “Stree” on Asianet.

These days I rarely saw Achchan because he came home very late. Sometimes I woke up when he came and looked in on me. I decided today I would stay up and wait for him. I got up and went outside to water the plants.

I didn't watch “Stree”—it was boring to watch TV on my own. And anyway, all they did in that serial was to cry all the time. Instead I decided to write in my notebook because one day, when I grew up, I wanted to be a writer. Achchan said, to be a writer, you had to practice all the time. So far I had written two stories. One was called “My Village—Mailakkara,” and the other, “The Dove and the Monkey.” This one was about a talking dove and a soldier monkey who go travelling all around the world. Achchan called it a “travelogue” and said that it was “an accomplishment” for a ten-year-old.

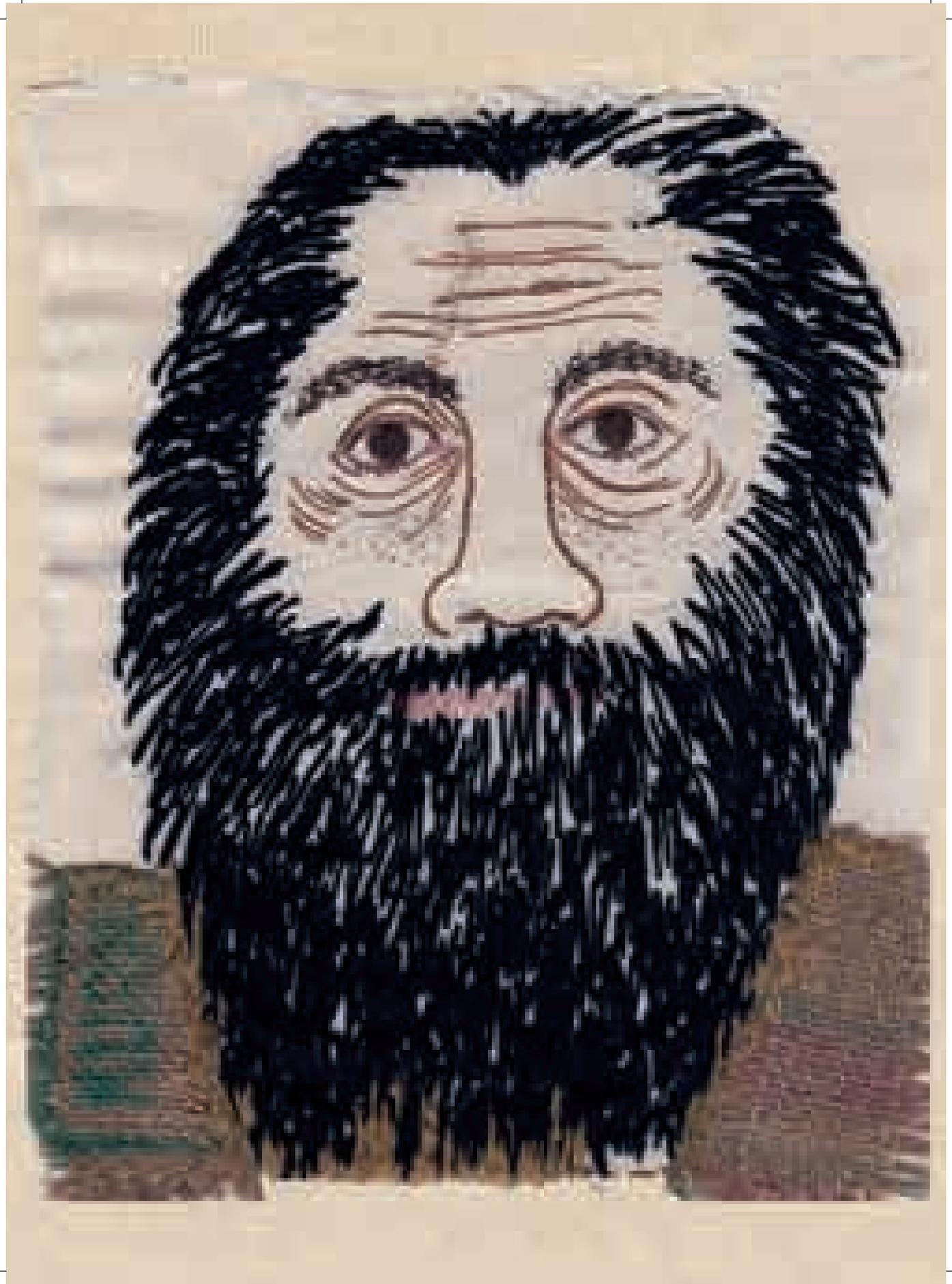


I lay on the floor and thought about things to write for another “accomplishment” when I heard a noise outside the back door. I knew who that would be. Crawling into the kitchen, I peeked through the window. There, in the dim light of the electric bulb outside, was Chaakkupranthan. I knew he must be hungry and had come to see if he could get some food. Amma always gave him some *kanji*. I was a little scared of him and anyway there was no *kanji* today. Maybe if I waited quietly he would go away.

Chaakkupranthan was weird and he liked to dress in bits of sack-cloth. That was why people call him “Chaakkupranthan.” Rasheeda’s grandmother Khadeejumma told us that when he was first seen in Mailakkara, he looked very handsome and wore proper clothes. No one knew where he came from. One day he was there and he never went away.

Chaakkupranthan slept on the shop veranda next to the Post Office across the street from my house. I liked watching him although Sajichechi said it was rude to keep staring at him like that. The Post Mistress Amminiamma was always swearing at him for peeing on the veranda, but she never tried to make him go away. When she opened the Post Office in the morning, Chaakkupranthan got up and left. I had seen him sometimes sitting under the banyan tree or watching us play outside the English school. Some of the children taunted him sometimes, but mostly people let him be.

Except one time, when Sajichechi and I saw Murali Menon—who owned the vegetable shop—beat him. We had gone with Achchan to the market that Saturday. Chaakkupranthan was walking about the market, very excited because there were sacks everywhere. He walked by and picked an empty one lying in front of Murali Menon’s shop. Menon came running outside and started scolding him and tried to take the sack back. But Chaakkupranthan was in no mood to give it back. Menon started beating him. And everybody started shouting at Menon to let him go.



Sajichechi said next time Menon tried to pinch our cheeks and give us sweets we should stick our tongues out at him.

I wondered why he came to Mailakkara. Where was his family? Would there be someone looking for him? There were days when Achchan did not come home even at ten o'clock. Then I would get upset and start thinking what would happen if he never came home. Maybe I should write a story about Chaakkupranthan's family. But when I started thinking about it, I couldn't come up with anything.

I peeked again through the kitchen window. He was gone. Maybe he would go to Madhaviamma's house next door. I told myself that if he came again tomorrow I would be brave and give him some food.

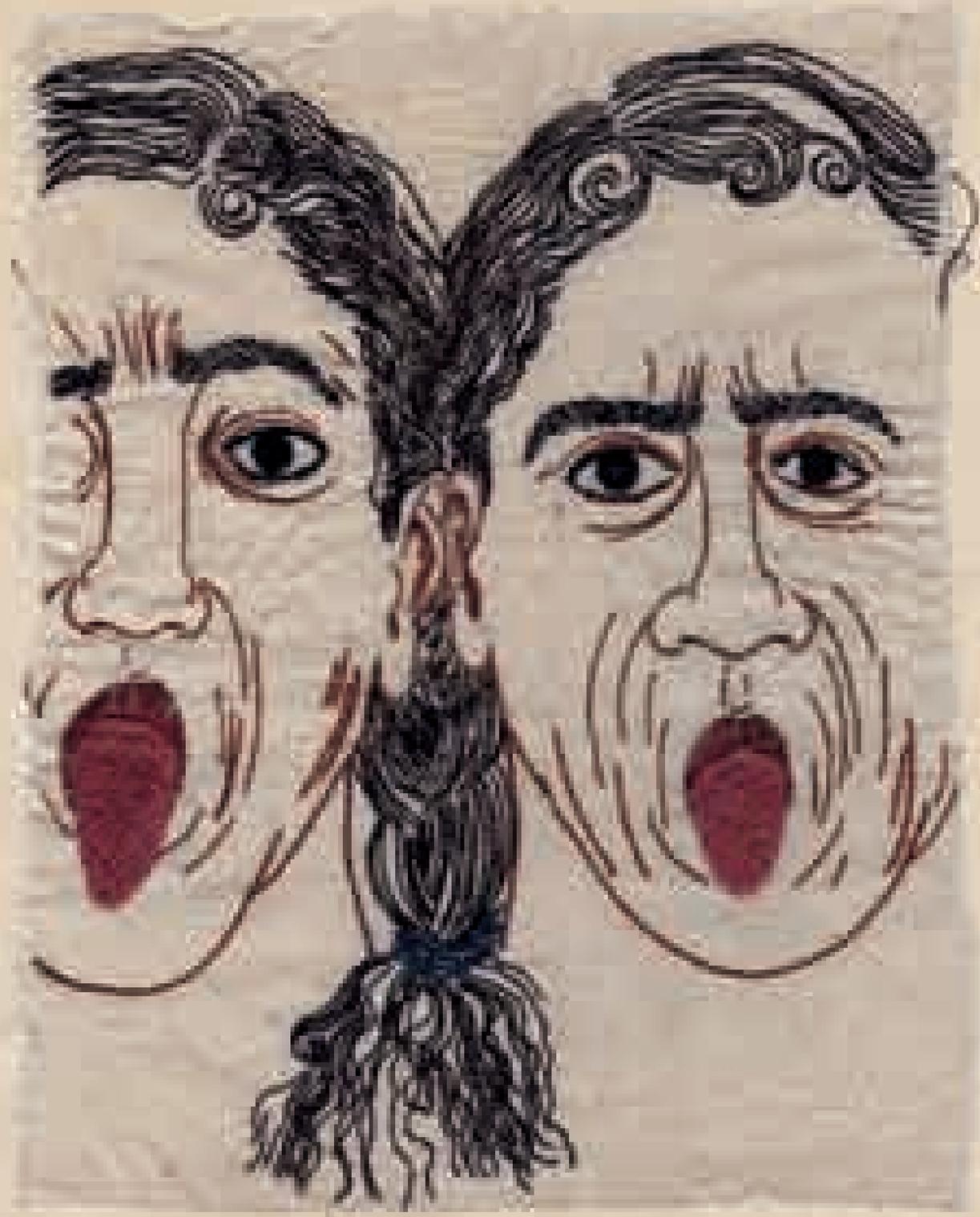
It was difficult to sleep properly that night. A mosquito kept buzzing in my ear. And whenever I dozed off I kept dreaming that Fatima Teacher had me in the classroom on my own and wouldn't let me go home until my handwriting improved. But when I tried to write properly in a straight line, it kept going from "Thrissur to Timbaktu" as Sajichechi used to say.

There were noises downstairs. I went down to find Valiamma in the kitchen. Valiamma was Amma's older sister and my favourite relative. They used to say that when Sajichechi and I grew up we would be just like Valiamma and Amma. But now with Sajichechi gone, I was not sure how I was supposed to be when I grew up.

Amma was sitting on a stool. Valiamma was drying her hair with a towel and scolding her.

"You should make more of an effort, Sarada," Valiamma was saying. "I don't know how long I can keep running across the fields everyday in this heat. I can't even get an auto rickshaw from my house to get here."

Amma didn't say anything. Just sat there with her head bowed.



"Did you take your tablets yesterday?" Valiamma asked. "I wish Ramu would show some more responsibility instead of sitting in that bar all evening. Both of you seem to have forgotten that you have a child who is still alive. That child wanders around all day like a stray cat. Does anyone bother whether she eats well or gets to school on time?"

I didn't like it when Valiamma went on like this. I knew she was just frustrated. But it only made Amma more unhappy and depressed. So I went inside and when she saw me, she stopped.

"Anu, did you sleep well? Do you want some coffee?"

I took my coffee and went and sat next to Amma. She patted my head. "No school today then. What are you planning to do all day?"

"I'll go see Rasheeda," I said. "And then we'll go to the English school ground and play there."

"Stay out of the sun. I don't want you getting sunstroke." Amma got up from her stool.

"Aren't you going to have some breakfast?" Valiamma asked her.

"I will in a minute. Let me lie down a bit first," Amma said and walked upstairs.

Valiamma was about to say something but changed her mind. She looked at me. "Go and brush your teeth. Then you can have breakfast. I made upma."

Achchan had already left for work. After breakfast Valiamma forced Amma to have some milk and her tablets. Amma didn't like taking them. She said they made her drowsier than before. Sometimes I thought this was true. Maybe I should stop pestering her about them when Valiamma was not around.

After Valiamma left, I looked in the fridge. She had made lots of food. At least Amma wouldn't have to worry about that. I didn't know what to do next. So I decided to do some more writing. Maybe when I had a story ready Achchan would look at it and spend an evening working on it with me.

I wrote about a little girl called Daisy who had magic powers. She could talk to plants and animals and birds and also hear them speak and so was never lonely. But after I finished all the descriptions I didn't know what else to write—I couldn't think up any adventures for her.



Then I decided to go to Rasheeda's house. When I went to tell Amma, she seemed asleep, her face to the wall. There was no response when I called her softly. But I decided to go anyway.

Rasheeda lived eleven houses away, near the English school. She was also bored, not knowing what to do. We played cricket for a while. Very soon it was too hot to play outside. So we went back to her house and played snakes and ladders. Rasheeda told me that she was going to Ernakulam to her cousin's house for two weeks.

"We are planning to go to Water World and boat-riding and to watch lots of films," she said. "Are you planning to go anywhere?"

I said no. I said I will just watch films on TV and get some videos. Rasheeda had the new *Balarama* which she said I could borrow. On the way home I thought I could give Daisy some adventures in Water World.

Amma was still in bed but not sleeping. "Did you have a good time with Rasheeda?" she asked. I told her that Rasheeda was going to Ernakulam to her cousin's place. Amma said I could visit my uncle's house at Calicut if I wanted to. I said no. Leaving her and Achchan here on their own was not a good idea. Besides, there was no one to play with in Calicut. All my cousins there were in college.

I sat reading the *Balarama*. Very soon I dozed off from all the playing and the heat. When I woke up it was getting dark. I lay there without switching on the light. And then I heard a noise outside the backdoor. I went into the kitchen and looked through the window. Chaakkupranthan was standing there.

Although I had promised myself that I would give him food if he came today, I was still scared. I went upstairs to see if I could get Amma but when I called, she didn't respond.

Coming back into the kitchen, I opened the back door a little bit. Chaakkupranthan saw me and extended his plate. It was battered and dented all over. I asked him to wait and went back inside and put some rice and sambar on a plate. I added a pappadam to it. I took this and placed it just outside the kitchen door and quickly got back inside. Chaakkupranthan took the plate and poured it all into his own. Then he sat down and started eating.



I watched him eat. His hair was matted with dirt. He had a thick beard as well. There was a little scar on his forehead and his hands were covered with mosquito bites. He rooted around in his sack bundle and pulled out a tin mug, as battered and dented as his plate. I went back inside and brought him some water in a jug.

I sat there silently watching him, trying not to stare too much. He ate quickly, without chewing much, and when he finished, he said something that sounded like "tomorrow" and then he was gone.

After Chaakkupranthan had gone away, I decided to watch TV until Achchan came home. It was nine o'clock by the time he came. He smelled of cigarette smoke and rum. Before Sajichechi was gone, he only drank when Karunan Maman who was in the army brought him a bottle of rum or if he was invited to a wedding celebration. But nowadays he came home drunk everyday. This was bad, I knew, but what could I say? It was safe to pretend that nothing was wrong.

After changing into his lungi, Achchan went into the kitchen and I followed him.

"Did you have dinner?" he asked me.

"No, I was waiting for you."

"I've told you there is no need for that. It's better if you have your dinner with your mother without waiting for me. Has she eaten?"

Something in his voice made me upset. "What do you care?" I said. "It's not like you make sure she does."

He looked down and closed his eyes. I knew I had hurt him with what I said and immediately felt bad. Quickly I added, "But she got up today. Had a bath in the morning."

He held out his hand to me. "Come, let's see if she wants any dinner."



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We went into her room. But she had already taken her medicine and was fast asleep. Achchan stood there looking at her. In a low voice he said,

“Poor thing. I wish I could . . .”

And he stopped. I wondered what he wished for. I knew what I wished for. I wished I could bring Sajichechi back. Then everything would be as it was before—back to normal. Achchan and Amma would go to work and come back and play with us and laugh. Amma would help me improve my handwriting. I would be able to discuss new adventures for Daisy with Achchan. And instead of feeling so lost on the first day of summer holidays, I would be busy making so many plans with Sajichechi.

All these thoughts came rushing and suddenly I started crying. I couldn't stop. Achchan scooped me up and sat on the chair, rocking me and saying “Oh my poor baby.” As the crying stopped, I really started feeling like a baby and a bit ashamed for making Achchan so upset on one of the few evenings he had come home early.

Afterwards Achchan took me to bed and tucked me in. As I drifted off to sleep, I could smell his cigarette smoke. He would be sitting under the *chambakka* tree, alone, smoking, and crying.

Today was a good day because Amma was already up and about by the time I got up in the morning. Achchan ate breakfast with us. They didn't say much to each other. I tried to keep things normal and chattered on about Rasheeda going to Ernakulam and my new story about Daisy, the magic girl, and my plans to tidy up the garden. They just kept smiling and nodding.

Then I told them about Chaakkupranthan coming for food. That seemed to get Achchan's attention.

“Did he say anything?” he asked.

“No. He just ate and then went away.”

“Well, he is harmless enough.” Achchan said. “Just don't go too close to him. Give him the food, come back inside and shut the door.”

After breakfast I ran to Rasheeda's house because I wanted to see her before she left for Ernakulam. I asked her if I could borrow her collection of *Balarama* so that I would have lots to read while she was away. She said yes and we put them in a carrier bag along with a color book of Russian folk stories, which her brother had given her. It was tattered and had no covers but looked interesting. I said goodbye to Rasheeda and walked home carrying the heavy bag of books. Amma was still up and about, so I asked her if she wanted to tidy up the garden with me.

After reading books and writing stories in my notebook, gardening was my next favourite thing. It was something that Amma, Sajichechi and I used to do together. Achchan was not a big gardener although he would bring cuttings and seeds for us from his friends' houses. In the front yard we had flowers of all kinds—roses, hibiscus, a jasmine bush, *mandaram*, *techi* and *odichutti*. We also had tomatoes, beans, ladies fingers and chillies.

There were lots of weeds and grass growing among the plants. When she was well, Amma would never have allowed that. Now she simply sat on the veranda and watched me pull them out.

Afterwards Amma and I had rasam and rice. I spent the afternoon reading the Russian folk tales book. There was a story about a boy and a salmon. The boy had no parents and lived with his aunt who was cruel to him. She made him do all the housework. One day the boy caught a salmon in the river. The salmon said he would grant the boy a special power if he let him go. The boy put the salmon back into the water. Now all he had to do was to say: "It is my wish and the salmon's command" and then whatever he wished for came true. He would say "It is my wish and the salmon's command—let there be water in all the pots!" and the pots magically filled with water without him having to lug water up the snow-covered hill. So now his aunt had nothing to be angry about.

I wished I could write stories like that. But my heroine Daisy was still sitting in page thirty-three of my notebook with nothing to do. I also wished a salmon gave me such magic power but I had never even seen one.

In the evening Amma said she was tired and went to lie down again. I tried to think up something to make her stay with me for longer, but couldn't come up with anything. Sajichechi would have known just the right thing to say, but then when she was around Amma never slept during the day unless she was very ill, which was never. Well, at least today she was up for most of the day.

By seven o'clock I was looking out of the kitchen window to see if Chaakkupranthan was coming. I had already put some food on a plate for him. Then, when I was about to switch on the TV, I heard him outside.

I opened the door and pushed the plate towards him. He put the food on to his plate and sat down to eat. I sat just inside the door and watched him. After a few mouthfuls he looked at me and said, "You are Anitha, no?"

I said yes. "Everybody calls me Anu."

"I'll call you Anukutty," he said. "How old are you?"

"I will be eleven in three months."

"Do you know my name?" he asked.

"Chaakku . . . no," I said. "I don't know."

He smiled. "Everybody calls me Chaakkupranthan. But that's not my name. My name is Narayanan."

Narayanan. That was also Valiamma's husband's name. It seemed so odd to think of Chaakkupranthan as Narayanan. I wanted to ask him lots of questions but was not sure whether I could. After some time I decided to ask anyway.

"Don't you have a house? Where is your house?" I asked.

"Hm, my house." Chaakkupranthan looked up. "I used to have a house. I don't have one any more."

"Why not?"

Chaakkupranthan—no, Narayanan—didn't say anything for a while. Just kept staring at his plate. "Sometimes home is not the best place to be," he said. Then he sighed and looked up at me, "Where are your parents?"



I said Achchan hadn't come home yet and that Amma was not well and was lying down.

"What's wrong with her?"

I didn't know whether to tell him about Sajichechi's death because whenever that was mentioned everyone started whispering and shaking their heads. "She's sad," I said.

"Aren't we all sometimes," he said. "I'm sure you are looking after her. You seem like a brave girl."

I suddenly felt very happy that he thought I was brave. "It's just . . ." I started, "It's just that sometimes I wish she would be like she was before—you know, go to work, and play with me and all that."

Chaakkupranthan had finished eating. Now he leaned back against the wall and lifted his glass of water. "Yes, well . . ." he said. "Sometimes when we are sad, it takes a long time for it to go away. But you will see—she will be alright very soon."

His voice was very soft and sometimes it was difficult to hear what he was saying. I had seen him talk to Rasheeda's grandfather but this was the first time I had actually talked to him myself or had even heard his voice.

"Do you have children?" I asked after some time.

"Yes, I do. I have a little boy. His name is Soman." He laughed and shook his head. "Well, he is probably not so little anymore. You see, I have not seen him for a very long time."

I thought of the time Achchan decided to go to Dubai and how Sajichechi and I missed him so much. Achchan missed us too and came back after only three months.

"You must be very sad then," I said. "Why don't you go to your house and see him?"

Chaakkupranthan got up. "It is getting late," he said. "You should go back inside." He picked up his plate and glass and walked away into the dark.

I knew I had upset him with my questions but I wanted to know more about him—why was he fond of dressing in sack-cloth? Why didn't he want to go home? What did he think about when he sat alone on the Post Office veranda? I thought about these things as I waited for Achchan but that night he was late. I waited for him until ten thirty but finally fell asleep.



After that Chaakkupranthan came on most days. I would give him his food and we would talk. A couple of times when he came, Achchan was at home. Then I would give him the food and shut the door immediately because I knew Achchan didn't like me talking to him. He didn't scold me or anything but I knew he was concerned. I was scared that if I hung around talking to Chaakkupranthan, Achchan would stop him from coming to our house.

Most days, he didn't say much. I would just sit and watch him eat and he would say or ask something occasionally. Chaakkupranthan was like most adults—if you asked something he didn't want to talk about, he would say, "You won't understand. You are too young." And then there was no point arguing.

On other days he was in a talkative mood. He would tell me a little about his son Soman—how he cried all the way to school on his first day, how he would get full marks in Maths but could not get one word right in a spelling test. In turn, I told him a little about Sajichechi and how much I missed her, how much I hated having to go to school these days with my bad handwriting and people whispering around me. I had also started writing down my conversations with Chaakkupranthan, except when I wrote in my book I referred to him as Narayanan.

He told me about his jeep. He had a license to drive it all around the district as a taxi. His eyes twinkled when he talked about how he used to drive it fast, around the curvy roads near Kaalasseri. And then, one day, he had an accident.

"What happened?" I asked him.

Chaakkupranthan looked very upset. He was breathing hard. He was saying something but I could hardly hear him.

"Voices," he said. "Oh the voices . . ."

I tried to tell him it was alright and poured some water for him to drink. We both sat there without speaking, and then he got up and left without a word.

The talk about the accident had upset him. It had upset me too and I badly wanted to ask Achchan about it. But he would be really angry if I told him. Next time when Chaakkupranthan came, we didn't say anything about it and just sat as usual.

One day he didn't turn up. I waited and waited but there was no sign of him. He didn't come the next day or the day after that. Next morning I went and looked for him where he slept on the Post Office veranda, but he was not there.

Rasheeda was back from her visit to her cousin's place. I went to her house and we went back to the Post Office. Amminiamma was getting the mail ready for collection by the main Post Office. Sometimes she gave us the ends of lac sticks that she used to seal parcels with. We went to the window pretending we had come to see if she had any bits for us.

She asked us the usual questions—were we enjoying the summer holidays, did we also remember our school work and so on. I asked her, "Have you seen Chaakkupranthan recently?"

She looked up from the post. "What is this sudden interest in Chaakkupranthan?" she asked, looking at us over the top of her glasses in a way that made you want to slowly slink away.

"Nothing really," I said quickly. "It's just that he used to come home for food and he hasn't turned up for a few days now."

"Well," Amminiamma got up and searched in a little box on the cramped shelf in the corner. "He must have felt like wandering off for a bit. He does that when he is not in a good mood."

She gave us a piece of red lac each and said, "Run along now, and don't you be worrying about Chaakkupranthan. It's not any business of little children like you."

There was no point asking anyone else. So we decided to just wait and see if he came back.

In the evening I lay on the floor with my notebook. My story about Daisy had not progressed well—not even Rasheeda's accounts about Water World inspired me to write any adventures for her. It looked like I wouldn't have "an accomplishment" to show Achchan any time soon. So I was lying there feeling a little sorry for myself when Achchan came in. It was not even seven o'clock—this was too early for Achchan to be back. But he was already drunk and seemed to be in a bad mood.

After some time he came and sat next to me and lit a cigarette. He saw my notebook.

"Have you been writing anything recently?" he asked.

I quickly picked up my notebook because I didn't want him to read what I had written about Chaakkupranthan. I said I was still stuck with Daisy not having anything to do. Achchan said that was okay because sometimes even big writers didn't know what to write.

That was when I heard the noise outside. "Chaakkupranthan!" I shouted and jumped up. Achchan held me back.

"Anu," his voice was stern. "What are you so excited about?"

I told him how Chaakkupranthan had not come for a few days.

Achchan said, "I have told you to be careful around him. That man has not been well. Madhavan saw him in Chelembra two days ago and he was shouting and screaming. He was not as quiet and harmless as he usually is."

"But," I protested, "He must be hungry. He probably hasn't eaten for days."

Achchan was beginning to get angry. "Well, that is not your concern. You sit here and I will go and see what he wants."

He went into the kitchen and I heard the backdoor open. I couldn't hear anything for a while. Then I heard Achchan's raised voice although it was not clear what he was saying. After a while he came back inside and said, "He is gone now. I don't think you should open the door if he comes again, at least, not for a few days."

I went to bed wondering who would give Chaakkupranthan food. Even after about an hour I couldn't sleep, so I got up and went to Amma's bedroom. She must have taken her tablets today because she was fast asleep. I lay down next to her and put my arm around her.



I must have fallen asleep at some point. When I woke up it was still dark, so I lay there thinking about yesterday and what Chaakkupranthan must be feeling and then dozed off again.

When I woke up and went to the kitchen, Valiamma was there. She told me to go and have a bath. She went to Amma's room and I could hear her persuading Amma to get up. When I went out after my bath, Achchan was sitting on the veranda with Raghu Maman, drinking coffee.

Raghu Maman was Achchan's cousin. He was also the President of Bharat Arts and Sports Club. Everybody called it BAS Club. All the members of BAS Club were men like Raghu Maman who were in college and their office was in a room above the Post Office. Every year they organised various activities during summer holidays. Sometimes they had football or cricket matches with other clubs from nearby places. Last year they had even organised a *ganamela* with M.G. Sreekumar and Sujatha! Sometimes they also did public service activities like cleaning the big pond or painting the shops around the bus stop.

Raghu Maman was discussing this year's activities with Achchan. I sat down to listen.

"This year the fund collection has not been good," Raghu Maman was saying. "Nobody wants to give much money these days. So I don't think there will be any sports competitions or cultural functions this year."

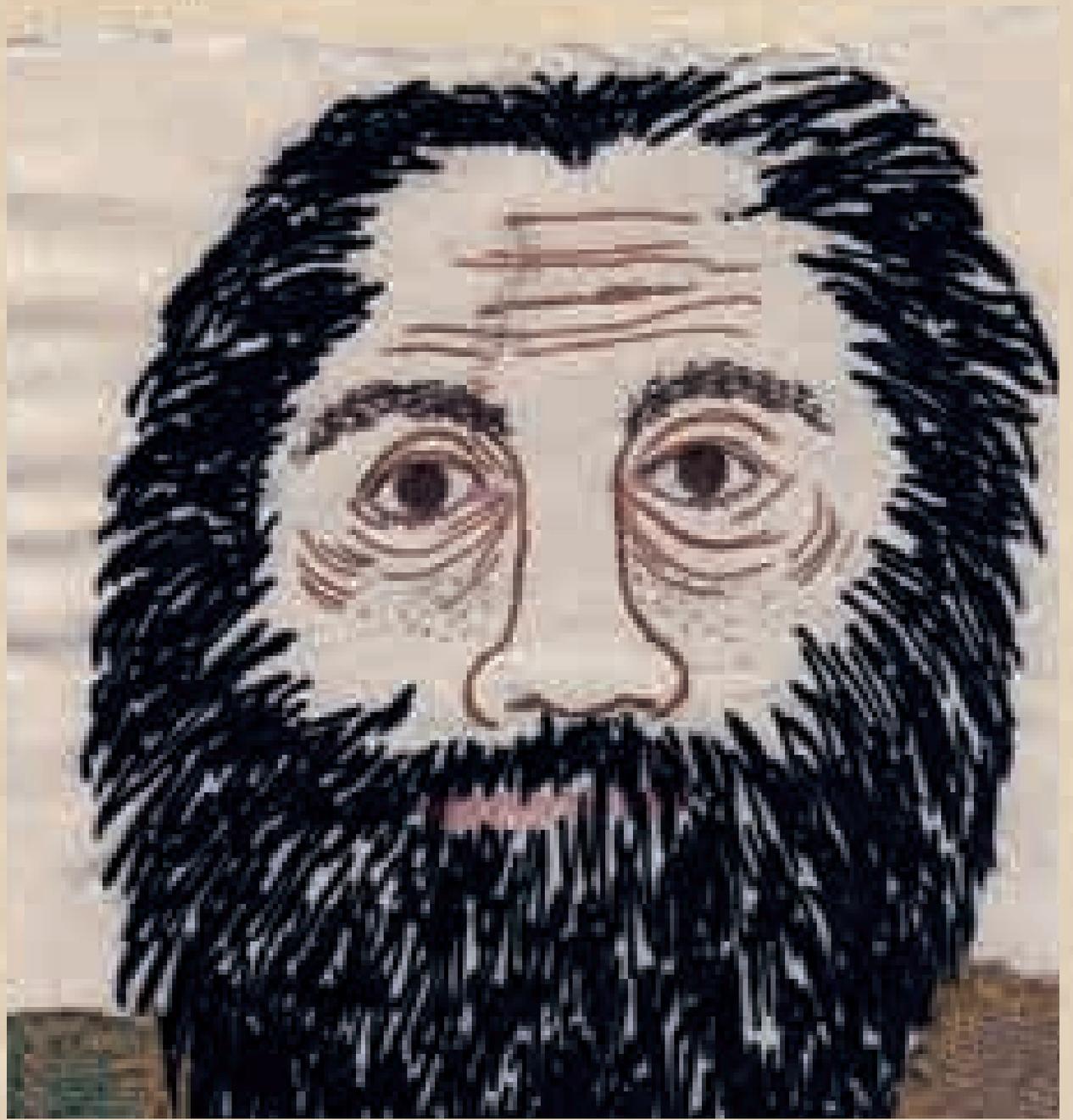
"So what are you planning to do this year?" Achchan asked.

"We have decided to do a charitable activity this year. We've decided to take that Chaakkupranthan to Kuthiravattam for treatment."

"It's shameful," Raghu Maman took a sip of his coffee and continued. "That man is ill. He cannot be hanging around here like this with none of us doing anything. He needs proper treatment."

"But is he going to come with you?" Achchan asked.

"Oh there will have to be some persuasion. It is for his own good. We have already talked to a psychiatrist at Kuthiravattam Hospital. They have a programme for wandering mad people."



Achchan looked at me. "Anu, why don't you go inside and see if breakfast is ready?" I knew he didn't want me to hear them discussing Chaakkupranthan and just wanted to get me out of the way.

I got up and went inside. I did not know what to think. Maybe Raghu Maman was right, Chaakkupranthan needed treatment. But then, Prabhakaran Doctor's medicines seemed to make Amma more sleepy and sad and not get any better. I wished there was someone who could explain these things to me. I wished Sajichechi was here to talk things over.

I moped around all morning until Valiamma finally lost patience and sent me off to play with Rasheeda.

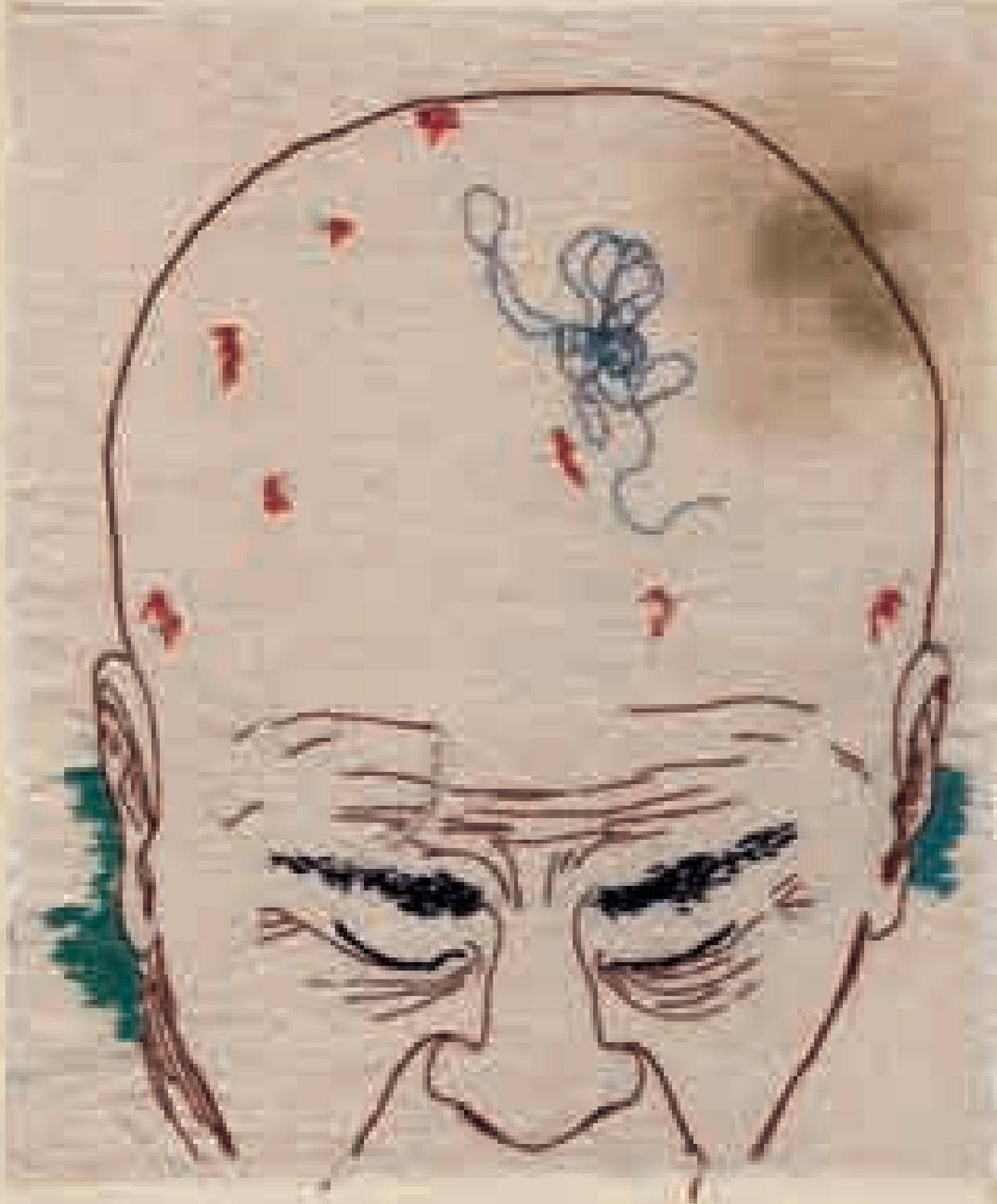
It was a Saturday. Before leaving for work, Achchan told me sternly that I was not to go out today because the BAS men were taking Chaakkupranthan to the pond to get him ready for the trip to Kuthiravattam. Rasheeda came at ten o'clock and we sat under the *chambakka* tree playing snakes and ladders. I kept getting all the wrong numbers and landing in the snake's mouth.

At that moment, we saw Raghu Maman and his friends coming up the road. There was Hameedkka, who was the wicket-keeper of their cricket team, Dileepan who ran the video shop, and some others we didn't know very well. We ran to the gate and across the road to the Post Office.

Chaakkupranthan was sitting there in his corner. As soon as he saw the group of men, he got up and grabbed his sack bundle. Raghu Maman climbed up the steps on to the veranda and said to Chaakkupranthan, "We want you to come with us. Let's go to the pond and we can all have a bath."

Chaakkupranthan tried to rush away but the men had no trouble catching him. Raghu Maman tied his hands behind him with a towel. And then they pushed and pulled and walked him to the big pond. I could hear big heaving sobs—Chaakkupranthan was crying but he wasn't saying anything.

Rasheeda and I ran after them. So did most of the people we met on the way. Soon there was a crowd. They took him down the eastern side of the pond and sat him on the step. While a few men held him down, Raghu Maman and Hameedkka started cutting his hair. It dropped around him in clumps. Then they shaved his head.



We heard someone say loudly, "What are you two doing here?" We turned around and there was Rasheeda's grandfather. He looked very angry. "You have no business being here," he said. "Go home. Now."

"But Uppappa . . ." Rasheeda started.

"Don't say anything. Go home now or else . . ." he said. "Come, I will take you back myself."

There was no use pleading with him. Rasheeda's grandfather walked us to her house and waited until we went inside. We switched on the TV. There was a movie on Surya channel with Jayaram in it. We sat there watching it but couldn't pay any attention. We kept talking about Chaakkupranthan and whether he was alright.

When I finally walked towards my house, the road was empty. Everything seemed quiet. It was almost four o'clock. Amminiamma would have closed the Post Office at three and gone home. So I decided to go see if Chaakkupranthan was there.

When he saw me he huddled into his corner and wouldn't look up. He looked very different. He was wearing brown striped pyjamas and a green shirt. None of his pieces of sack were in sight. There was a plate of rice and curry in front of him but he had not touched it.

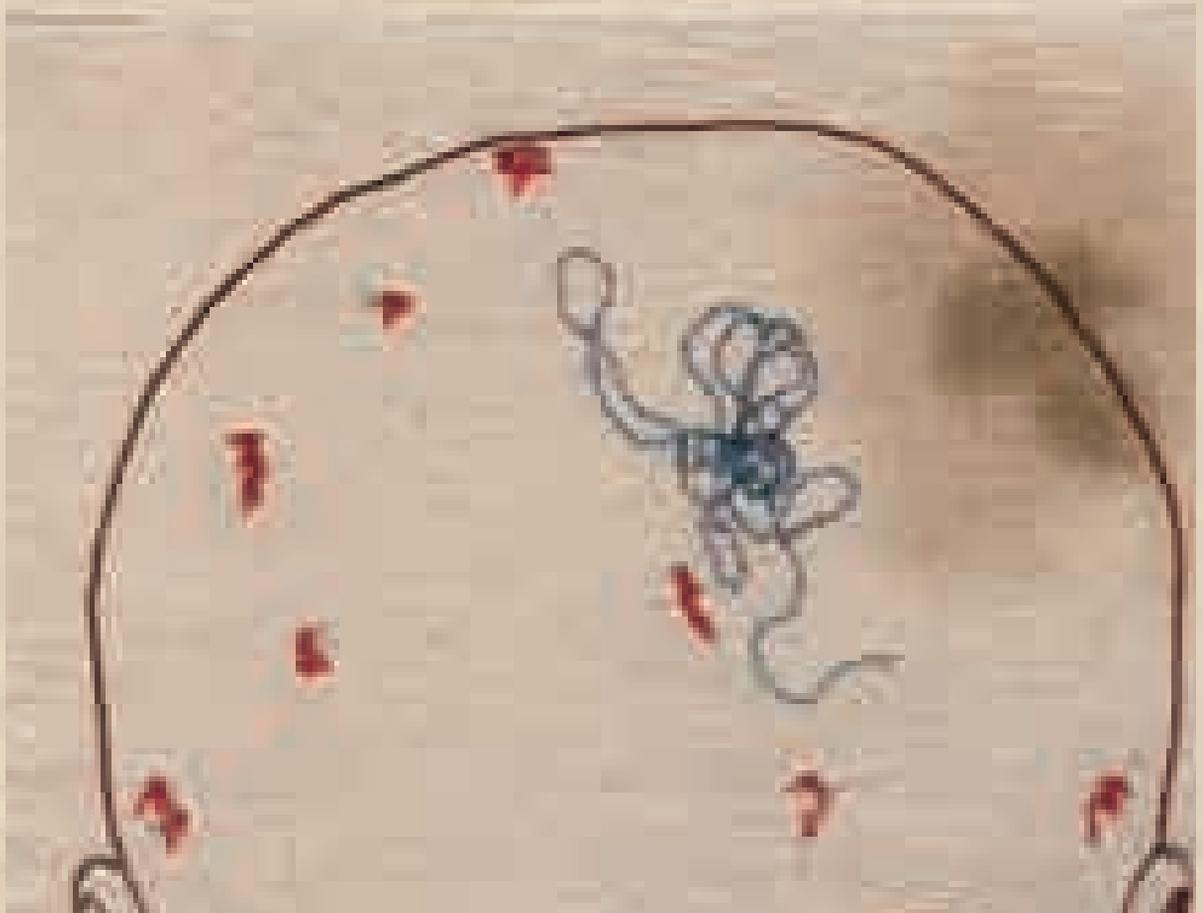
But his face . . . and his head He had no hair left on his head or his chin. It seemed as if the razor had shaved out chunks of his skin, leaving it raw and bleeding. Under his left elbow, there was a big patch of scratched skin, as if he had grazed his hand on rough stone.

I climbed up on to the veranda and sat down. "Are you okay?" I asked. "Does it hurt?"

He didn't look up. When I put my hand out to touch his elbow, he moved away, drawing further into the corner. I said, "Maybe you should go, you know, to the hospital. I hear it is a very big hospital."

No response. He didn't even seem to have heard me. I was not sure what to say next. "Maybe you can get better. And then you can go back to Soman."

After that I just sat there. Chaakkupranthan did not even look up at me. Now I was getting worried—also because it was the time when people were going back home from work, and someone would tell Achchan that they had seen me sitting there with Chaakkupranthan.



So I left him there and went home. He didn't come home that evening. Anyway I didn't really expect him. That night I didn't want to sleep alone so I climbed into Amma's bed and lay there. Why did they have to force him like that? He was not hurting anyone. All he ever did was sit there quietly or just walk around or eat what he was given. I wished someone would tell me. But there was no one to ask.

The next day Valiamma was oiling my hair when I heard loud voices outside. I slipped away from her hands and ran outside. There was a small crowd in front of the Post Office. I heard Achchan shouting for me to come back but I ignored him and ran there.

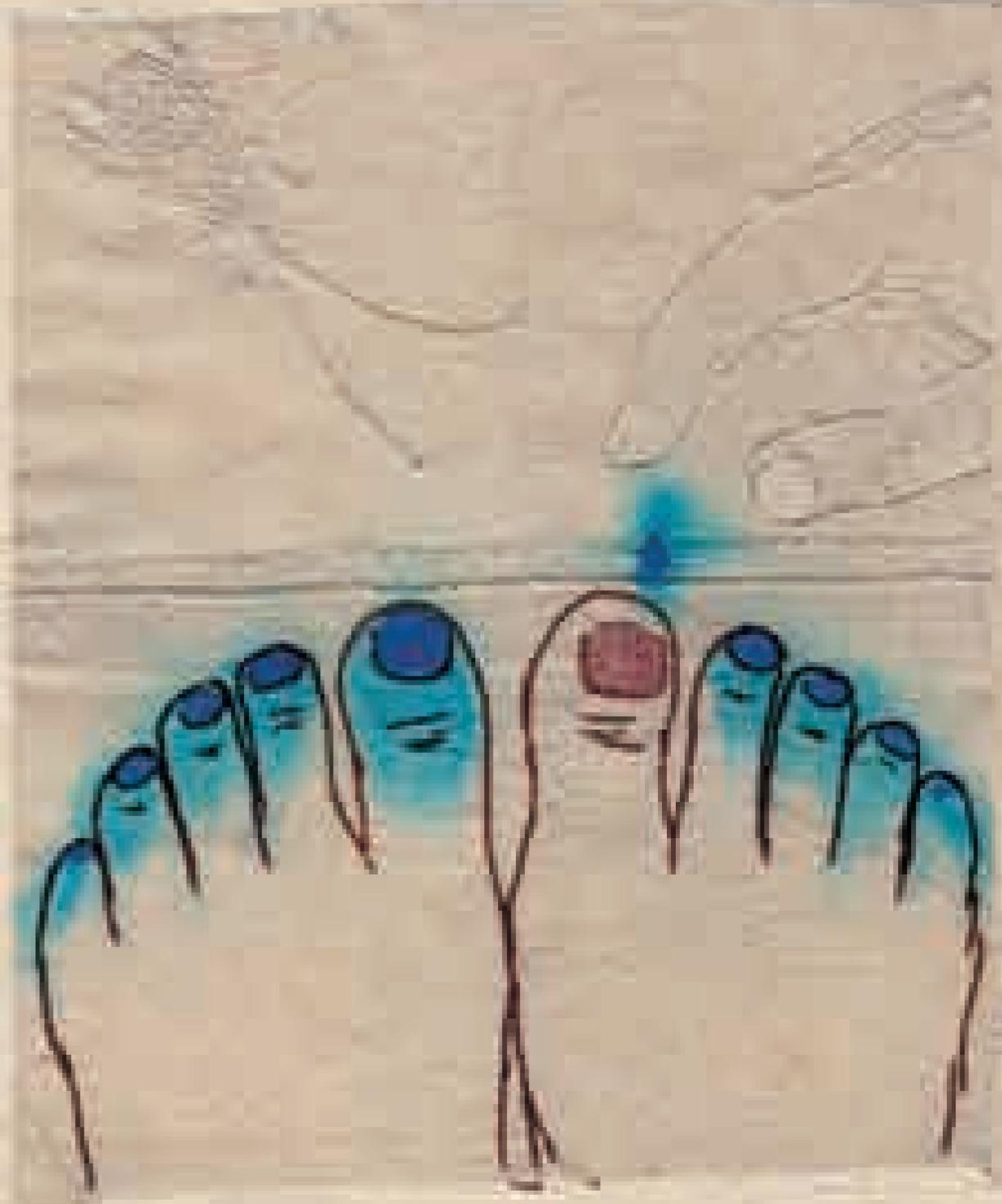
Chaakkupranthan was in the middle of the crowd. He had a stick in his hand and he was waving it around. The BAS men were there and they were trying to fight him down and catch him. There was so much noise with everybody shouting at the same time. "Catch him! Catch him!" someone said. "Be careful of that stick." "Take it away from him." Chaakkupranthan grunted and screamed and waved his stick around ready to hit if someone touched him.

Someone pushed Chaakkupranthan from behind and he fell. There was such commotion as men fell on him and pressed him down. Raghu Maman bent his hands behind his back and someone tied them with a rope. They stood him up.

I couldn't stand it any more. I ran to Raghu Maman and pulled at his hands. "Let him go!" I shouted. "Let him go! You are hurting him. He doesn't want to go with you." Raghu Maman pushed me away, shouting at me to go home. They lifted Chaakkupranthan up and put him in the jeep. I could hear him screaming. I ran after the jeep. "Let him go!" I shouted. "Let him go! Don't hurt him!"

Suddenly I was picked up. I started kicking and scratching. The jeep was disappearing up the Nayadippara hill and I couldn't do anything. I screamed and screamed until my throat hurt. I didn't care what Achchan or anybody else said any more. I didn't want them to take him away. I was crying so hard I could barely breathe. I fought as hard as I could as Achchan carried me back into our house.







I am not sure what happened after that. At one point, I felt terribly hot and thirsty. I felt as if there were cockroaches crawling all over me. Afterwards, there was Sajichechi. She was painting my toe nails with bright blue nail-polish. She blew on them to make it dry quickly. I looked down at her bowed head. Her hair was so black—it was almost blue.

We played hide and seek. I knew she would hide in the overgrown backyard of Madhaviamma's house next door. I searched and searched but couldn't find her. I woke up shouting her name. There seemed to be people in the room but I couldn't see her face. She was gone and the cockroaches were back.

When I woke up again, Amma was lying next to me. She hugged me and said that I had scared everybody—I had had a fever for five days and was in and out of sleep all the time. Achchan came in and tried to make me drink some soup. Later Prabhakaran Doctor came in to see me. He also told me how scared everyone had been.

In the night, Amma lay next to me. Achchan came in and sat on the bed. He had a little paper parcel in his hand.

"*Injimittai* . . ." I smiled.

"Yes," Achchan said, with a big smile. "I know I haven't brought you any in a long time. So I thought I would make up for it."

I ate three *injimittai* at one go. I had forgotten how tasty these were—sweet and sharp and spicy at the same time. No one said much and I fell asleep again.

When I woke up next morning, I got out of the bed and went into the kitchen. Amma was already up and making breakfast. I had not seen her do that in a long time. Her hair was wet from the bath and she smelled of Radhas soap. Later she bathed me in hot water and I felt like a baby.

After the bath I went out. The garden looked well. All the plants looked fresh. Slowly I walked down the path and looked at the Post Office veranda. The corner was empty. There was no Chaakkupranthan.

Amma came up from behind and placed her hands on my shoulder. "What happened to him?" I asked. She said, "They took him to Kuthiravattam, but . . ." Amma hesitated, "Raghu said he ran away on the third day. He has not come back here. He must have gone somewhere else."

I could feel tears welling in my eyes. "It's all my fault," I said. "I should have warned him—told him what they were planning. He could have run away then, before they hurt him."



Amma turned me around and cupped my face in her hands. "It's not your fault" she said. "You didn't know what to do. And no one, including me, was there to help you understand." She took my hand and we walked back to the house and sat on the veranda. She said, "Sometimes none of us know what to do." And then she was quiet. I could hear a mynah and looked up to see if I could spot him in the trees. "He will be alright," Amma said, "You can give him food again when he comes back." She got up. "Come and lie down for a bit. I'll get you some milk."

I wanted to believe her but I knew that he was never coming back. He would be too scared. Maybe, like Amma, he would get better. I imagined him walking along a road, holding a little boy's hand. Then I imagined him sitting in a corner dressed in pieces of sack. I sat on the bed and opened my notebook. Daisy, my magic girl, had done very little this summer. I decided to send her on a journey, where she would meet a wise man with a beard, and together they would have many adventures.

I had written almost two pages when I heard Rasheeda's voice, asking Amma how I was. I closed my notebook, got up and went out to meet her.



Anveshi

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Developed for "Different Tales: Stories from Marginal Cultures and Regional Languages," an initiative of Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, supported by the 'Parag' initiative of Sir Ratan Tata Trust.

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Who is Chakkupranthan? Where does he come from? Anu's curiosity about the village 'madman' leads to an unlikely friendship and a key to her own world.

ISBN 978-81-264-2032-2




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Different Tales unearths stories from regional languages: stories that talk about the life – worlds of children in communities that one rarely reads about in children's books. Many of the stories draw on the writers' own childhoods to depict different ways of growing up in an often hostile world, finding new relationships with peers, parents and other adults. They take us on enticing journeys as they speak of delicious cuisines, ingenious little games, unexpected lessons at school and heartwarming friendships.