



KUNJAN AND KAYAMI

FABIYAS M V

From the land of hills and valleys, Kunjan comes to the west coast of God's Own Country. He and his spouse are in search of a shelter. They are homeless peripatetic laborers. After a tedious wandering, the couple reaches Umeera's house in the gloaming. Umeera cannot unwelcome them.

She has been alone in her big house for several months. Her one and only daughter has been married off. She lives in the city. It's only when she comes with her naughty boys for holidaying that Umeera's house wakes up from silence.

"You can use my outbuilding, just behind my bedroom." Umeera opens a shelter for Kunjan and Kayami.

Umeera's husband was bedridden for a few years. His muscles were malfunctioning. Sockets below his silvered eyebrows were graves of vision. But he had a sound mind.

"Umii, where're you?" he called out frequently from his bed. His voice created confidence in Umeera, driving her fears away. Unfortunately, that vibrant voice ceased a year ago.

Kunjan smokes beedi and walks to the outbuilding, followed by Kayami, who has put on a faded tawny sari. He slings a white cloth bag, which is dusty, and with brown stains, over his shoulder. There is an old aluminum box in Kayami's hand.

Thunder rumbles. Nowadays the weather is truly eccentric.

These coolies will save me from loneliness, Umeera muses. After her husband's demise, Umeera has been experiencing a variety of fears within the walls of loneliness.

Last night, Umeera slept long like a brown bat.

9 a.m. Dawn chill still lingers in the morning air. She brushes her teeth, washes her face with cool water. Then she comes out to the portico. Kunjan and Kayami have already been installed in the yard, exposed to the soft sunshine. Umeera whispers, staring at them through her red-rimmed spectacles, “Good *kani!*” Kani is a vernacular word meaning the first sight of the day. *Whether a day will be good or bad depends on kani*, Umeera too believes like others.

“Didn’t you sleep well?” Umeera initiates a chit-chat.

“We did, though mosquitoes drained our blood,” Kayami says, rubbing her brown cheek. Slowly Umeera delves into their life, their secrets and misfortunes intrigue her. She is a typical countrywoman with a craving for calumnies.

She puts forward certain terms in no uncertain terms. Kunjan and Kayami can stay in her outbuilding free of rent, provided that they sweep her floor every day, wash her clothes, and help her dry coconut kernels. They accept Umeera’s conditions with alacrity.



One Hundred Stories ~ Sijia Ma

There are many expatriates’ houses in this coastal village. The expats struggle to earn in the Arabian Desert, while their wives live in luxury. Though it’s hard to tame their prancing passion, most of them keep chastity.

Laborers are always in demand here. Yet the local working class people repeat, “We’ve no job.” Basically, they are unwilling to work. What they like most is to sit simply in laziness like a crow-pheasant.

Kunjan and Kayami do housework here and there every day. They live silently, sleep soundly. Among the tiny twigs of life, they twitter like sunbirds, free from maelstroms.

How quickly one month passes! They get accustomed to the ways of the new village. Kayami assists Umeera in the kitchen every evening.

Compared to other days, Sundays pass fast. Today is a bleary Sunday. People have already been informed about the solar eclipse. They should not stare at the sun directly with bare eyes. The sun is expected to come out in splendor by noon. Suddenly Kunjan feels chest pain that radiates to his left arm and shoulder. “Kayami . . . KAYAMI . . .” his voice rises in ache. Soon he swoons in sweat.

Next week, Kunjan undergoes a coronary bypass surgery. It takes four hours to complete the surgery successfully.

How to meet the hospital expenses? The question grows gigantic in Kayami’s mind.

She borrows a huge amount from Umeera.

After nine days, Kunjan is brought back to the outbuilding. The cardiologist has advised him to take rest. He must avoid climbing the stairs and onerous works. Kayami takes care of him well under the parasol of love. They are left to sink or swim.

It takes just a fortnight for Umeera’s compassion to run out. She demands Kayami her money back.

Kayami journeys through the dawn light to her distant home village of hills and valleys, where she owns three cents of land, her sole property. She has to repay Umeera the debt. Debt is a smoldering thing in mind. She has made up her mind to sell her land.

Kunjan burns in boredom in the outbuilding. He discerns the depth of Kayami’s absence. Love grows in the longing to see the beloved.

The day blooms bright. Umeera spreads coconut kernels on the jute sacks laid in the yard. It will take two days minimum to get the coconut kernels dried in the parching sunlight. Coconut oil is extracted from the dried kernel called copra.

Quite unexpectedly, the weather turns cloudy. Umeera fears that the kernels will be steeped in rain. She needs the assistance of somebody to take the kernels upstairs to the storeroom.

Forgetting Kunjan’s cardiac condition, she seeks his help.

Kunjan is never sassy, doesn't know how to say "No." Dependence is a curse. A mouse-cursor relationship is patent between Umeera and Kunjan. He longs for Kayami's presence. Through the drizzle, he collects coconut kernels in a sack and carries it to the upstairs storeroom. Then he climbs down the stairs and darts to the yard swiftly to take the next sack of kernels, puffing and panting.

"Kunjan, come on . . . FAST," Umeera spurs him.

Kunjan finishes his work in sweat. Unloading the fifth sack of kernels, he climbs down, swaying in fatigue. Like a dummy, he falls down.

Hearing the thud, Umeera comes to the staircase. She stands dumbfounded before Kunjan's still body. Shrieking, shouting . . . she calls her neighbors.

The number you're trying to call is currently switched off. A voice message from Vodafone. Again, Umeera tries to call Kayami, but in vain.

Following the Covid-19 protocol, Kunjan's body is cremated in the public crematorium. Only two neighbors and three health department officials attended the funeral.

"Kayami . . ." Umeera wakes up from the midday nap, looking around. She has neither read nor heard of an auditory hallucination. *A vibrant voice from beyond death!* She wonders and believes it.

Where did Kayami go? Will she ever come back? Umeera prays for Kayami not to return. She yearns to nap again, but she can't, for something pricks her.

Fabiyas M V is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of *Monsoon Turbulence, Shelter within the Peanut Shells, Kanoli Kaleidoscope, Eternal Fragments, Stringless Lives, and Moonlight and Solitude*. His fiction and poetry have appeared in several anthologies, magazines, and journals. He has won many international accolades including the Merseyside at War Poetry Award from Liverpool University and the Animal Poetry Prize 2012 from the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelties against Animals. He was the finalist for Global Poetry Prize 2015 by the United Poets Laureate International in Vienna. His poems have been broadcast on All India Radio. Poetry Nook, US, has nominated him for the 2019 Pushcart Prize. He has been working as a teacher in English at Government Higher Secondary School, Maranchery in Kerala.

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