



**THAYYAAL** by Rupavati, translated from Tamil by Geeta Dharmarajan, from "Separate Journeys" edited by Geeta Dharmarajan, Katha & Garutman, 1998.



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# Thayyaal

**T**hey want nothing. No jewels. No gold. Nothing. They won't ask you to spend a single paisa on your girl's marriage. What do you say?"

The coffee he had just poured into his mouth spills on to his bare chest, but does Muthiah care? He looked at the old woman, stared at her, forgetting to swallow the coffee in his mouth.

A toothless grin spread over the old woman's face. She is seated, her old legs stretched out, back resting against the wall. Her long heavy gold earrings, the *thandatti*, dangle. They catch the fire of the sun.

Children scream and play somewhere inside the house. Alongside the wall of the open courtyard lie many bags of grain, stacked in three rows, each as tall as two men one atop the other. Like gold dust, grain lies scattered on the floor. Everywhere you look, signs of prosperity.

Just that morning, Muthiah had seriously started the search for a groom for his daughter. She had reached marriageable age. He would not be able to keep her at home much longer without tongues wagging.... Learning that Ponnazhaghu was looking for a bride for his son who worked in Karaikudi, he had hastened to his house, not even pausing to eat a full breakfast. Ponnazhaghu had not been home. Muthiah had found him in the auction house, leaning on the wheel of a sugarcane cart, and, what did he want?

"Thirty sovereigns of gold...."

Muthiah wiped his face and neck with his towel...

"Three thousand rupees in hand...."

Muthiah, as if his legs could bear his weight no more, had leaned against the cart too....

"Dowry items should be worth not less than ten thousand rupees...."

Without a by-your-leave, Muthiah had moved away...

"Appu... Appu!" called Ponnazhaghu, but Muthiah had slung his towel on his bare shoulders and just walked on.

Muthiah's first son was in the army, living with his family in some distant corner of North India. The result of his marriage—a mortgaged house. The second son was a fitter in a city company. Muthiah had borrowed against his lands for this son's marriage. The sons, of course, quite religiously paid back the interest every month. But, the principal? When Muthiah had gone to the bank again, thinking he could take one more loan with the same surety, he found out that he would be able to raise no more than two thousand rupees. Of what use was that?

The income from his field was enough for the repayments of loans on his field and for feeding the three mouths at home. Their two, three cows of local breed yielded enough money under his wife's persistent coaxing for her to join a monthly chit fund in order to buy some stainless steel utensils for their daughter's dowry. This also, when the need arose, took care of small expenses, unexpected emergencies.

Muthiah lay down in the garden house in the park. The evening *mantharai*, the night-blooming *arali* etched upon his mind's eye. Gradually, his anguish dimmed.

When he reached home, his wife Kunjaram was getting ready to milk the cows. She had tied the hind legs of the first one tightly together. She had got the saliva-dribbling calf away from the swollen teats of its mother and had tied it up too.

She saw Muthiah. "Oh, you have come! Where were you all this while?"

What had he achieved to offer as an answer?

"After you left, the old mother from the Big House sent for you. Aatha's man has been sent back and forth, back and

forth, three times already."

Sprays of milk hit the vessel sharply.

"What does she want? I can't think why.... Well, let me go see."

"Wait. I'll make you some coffee first."

The old woman is very wealthy, a millionaire with many sons, daughters, grandchildren. To Muthiah, she appears like an outspread banyan tree. Widowed a year ago, she was a distant relation of his. For functions and funerals, they send word to him. Muthiah too visits them on occasions such as these. The old woman always seems to have a special affection for him.

Why had she called? What could be so urgent that a messenger should come three times in search of him? Thoughts running pell-mell within him, he took time only to wash his face before he hurried to her. The paved road would take time. A short cut?

Muthiah stepped out of his house through the back door. He walked briskly, along the winding narrow path between two fields, dense with undergrowth, overgrown with wild bushes....

Thayyaal walked, a basket full of garbage resting lightly on her head.

She had the heart-stopping loveliness of a sixteen year old.

Height, taller than the average girl.

Colour, the burnished gold of young mango leaves.

Her saree rode jauntily over the tender softness of young ankles to reveal feet good enough to be eaten.

Her hair, thick and glowing black, a cascade that would reach to well below a slender waist, was now pulled back and rudely shoved into a knot.

Bare under her saree, her firm rounded breasts stuck out of the folds, moving rhythmically as she walked, and seemed to want to tear out of the restrictions of the breast cage.

In preparation for the heavy *thandatti*, the earrings she would have to wear after she was married, she had screws of cane in the holes in her earlobes and the cane would get thicker as the holes grew.

Her nose, a connoisseur's delight.

Her lips, full. Tempting.

Hers was the unselfconscious beauty that made young hearts throb.

Hers was a beauty that rose unbidden behind closed eyelids. She was the heavenly goddess of Thenmaapattu

This month's story is by a writer about whom nothing is known or available. We also do not know if she wrote anything else. Though published long ago, the story brings alive life in rural Tamil Nadu as it continues to be even today.

village.

Daily, at dusk, she would collect the cow-dropping, leaves and grass from the cow-pen and take them to the fields. It was something all the young women of the village did and no great burden for her anyway.

She changed hands to support the basket on her head. The movement made the saree slide off her right bosom. It fell into the valley between her breasts.

A cool breeze touched her skin, flirted with it.

Bold in the knowledge that there was no one around, she did not think it necessary to cover herself.

He had reached the spot before Thayyaal got there...

Waiting for her to reach there...

Walking swiftly along the path that abuts on the village, and then slinking under the spreading tamarind tree, to watch, to wait, to look ....

As she came, closer... closer....

Descending into the gentle slope to hide....

Burying himself into the lush undergrowth that sprawled onto the slender pathway....

Staring with drunken eyes....

Staring, staring, Chandiyar Vellaisami watched her beauty, his eyes ready to fall out of their sockets, his mouth hanging open....

"What is this, Ayyah? I have been asking you for the past few minutes and you just sit there, not saying anything?"

Muthiah quickly swallows his coffee.

"Oh, nothing, Aatha," he begins to say, hesitantly.

"When someone says he wants no dowry when asking for the hand of a girl in marriage, I wonder if something is wrong with the boy and ..."

"Oh, you idiot of a man! You know my younger brother, don't you?"

"Chokkan!"

The *thandatti* shook to indicate a No.

"Muthukaruppan!"

"His elder son is in Madurai, as you know...."

"In the Collector's office!"

"Yes, Rajangan. I ask your daughter's hand for him."

The happiness that had started spreading through him, at the beginning of this conversation, disappeared like a bubble.

"For his status, his wealth... Me.... my...."

"As soon as your wife Kunjaram gave birth to a girl, I had decided that she would come to our house as a bride."

"Does your brother agree?"

"He was here this morning. Waited for you till now. He just left."

In Muthiah's heart a fullness grows, a happiness dances within.

"Here, Chegappi, bring those things."


The old woman's daughter-in-law, who has come into the inner courtyard on some work, now withdraws into a

side room.  
 Unaware that two victorious gloating eyes were enjoying her every movement from within the bushes, Thayyaal walked into the fields.  
 His veins ached when he saw the gentle movement of her back, the swell of her thighs under the saree.  
 She turned the basket upside down.  
 The fields were quiet and serene, languishing in the after-heat like a woman who has just given birth.  
 Thayyaal sighed. She shook the end of her saree off her head where, till now, it had served as a support for the basket. She wiped her neck and face and the sweat that dribbled between her breasts.  
 "Aaa...ha!"  
 Clicking fingers, he jumped. He trembled and twitched with impatience.  
 Arranging her saree to cover her modesty again, Thayyaal picked the basket in her hands.  
 "Ayyyoooo!" A cry of alarm rose from here. Startled, she pushed herself away from him. Her eyes filled with fear, the numbing fright of animals. Her basket fell. It rolled down the slope.  
 Chandiyar grabbed her with both hands....  
 The large tray is meticulously arranged. There are full coconuts on its fringes, bunches of bananas. In the middle are a silk saree, a silk blouse bit, a silk-edged dhoti, and a towel. On this is a stack of rupees. And, balancing on top, are the auspicious turmeric roots, fresh and green-yellow.  
 Slowly, resting her weight on the palm that is pressed against the floor, the old woman gets up, leaning on her daughter-in-law for support. She takes the tray and holds it out to Muthiah.  
 "For me...?" He gapes. He quickly gets up from where he's sitting on the ground. "Is all this for me? I don't understand...."  
 The old woman laughs like a child, her heart brimming over with love.  
 "Cheee! Let go!"  
 With sudden swiftness the situation was clear to Thayyaal. Like a hunted deer she tried to flee.  
 Chandiyar Vellaisami bounded forward and snatched the end of the saree that lay on the ground.  
 He wrapped this round his wrist. He clapped his hands and laughed. He started pulling her towards him.  
 Panting, one hand covering her breasts, Thayyaal used the other hand to pull her saree towards her.  
 "I warn you... let go! When my father comes to know, he will skin you alive!"  
 Thayaal pushed aside the need to cry that welled up inside her.  
 "What do I care what happens after now, dee? Now, all I need is you." He slobbered.  
 "Chee! You drunken dog! Let go!"

She pulled at the saree.  
 Slowly, deliberately, enjoying every moment, he gathered her saree, pulling her along with it.  
 There was nothing she could do.  
 Then, in a flash, she pirouetted. Leaving the saree in its entirety in his hands, she fled, Thayyaal.  
 With three yards of the saree in his hands, the other three on the ground, Vellaisami growled at the sudden emptiness....  
 He flung the saree to the ground.  
 "Where will you run, now?" he snarled. "I am a drunkard, am I? You won't marry me, will you? Well, we'll see, we'll see. We have to decide one way or the other today, or my name is not Vellaisami...."  
 Fingering his handsome moustache, he proceeded to examine each and every bush.  
 He pulled apart bushes, his hands unsteady, shaking with anger.  
 A thorn pricked. His anger spilled over.  
 "Oh God... God... please, please...."  
 He was searching in the bush opposite hers.  
 She froze.  
 She called on every god she knew.  
 And from above her head, a call from the branches of the tamarind tree. "Chillambane... Karuppane... Bhumatha.... I have knocked down all the tamarind fruits. Come pick them up!"  
 It broke the silence of the forest.  
 Like a hurt snake, Vellaisami shivered.  
 He looked up.  
 The blue sky. The small sombre leaves of the tamarind tree. The fan-spread of the tall palm. They twirled and swam like a merry-go-round in his eyes.  
 Who, who was up there? One... or many?  
 Swearing profusely, "Ai! Who's that?" screamed Vellaisami.  
 "It's me."  
 A ghostly, oracle-like voice.  
 "Ai, you! What are you doing there?"  
 "I am shaking the tamarind tree. Bhumatha! There are lots of tamarind fruits in the pond. Pick them, too!"  
 Chala... Chala... Chala...  
 The adjoining tamarind tree shook and jumped like a ghou.  
 Like a flurry of shooting stars came the tamarind fruits.  
 "Ah... hath... thu!" Vellaisami spat out a thick glob of saliva. Venom.... The bastards had spoilt his game!  
 He peered at the surrounding bushes. He mumbled, "Okay, so you have got the better of me today. But just you wait, wait. Where can you go, after all?"  
 He swore. He slowly walked towards the village.  
 As soon as Vellaisami disappeared, two coffee-brown legs shimmied down the trunk of the tamarind tree and

jumped off its lowest branch. Slip-sliding down the slope, he picked up the saree.  
 "Aatha! Aatha! Sister, sister!"  
 "I am here!"  
 From a bush, an arm appeared. It took the saree.  
 Some seconds.... Thayyaal emerged hastily, tucking the saree at her waist.  
 She could not believe her eyes. Before her stood a tassel-headed, naked, eight-year-old.  
 Tears welled. They dripped from the sides of her eyes. She bent down, took his hands in hers, raised them to her eyes... to press them reverently in thanksgiving.  
 "I can never forget this, Aatha," says Muthiah.  
 Words slide into each other, their edges touched with emotion. The old woman frees her hands. Taking the bag that her daughter-in-law holds, she takes all the things from the tray and puts them in.  
 When she picks the paper currency, Muthiah is astonished once again. How much money! At least five

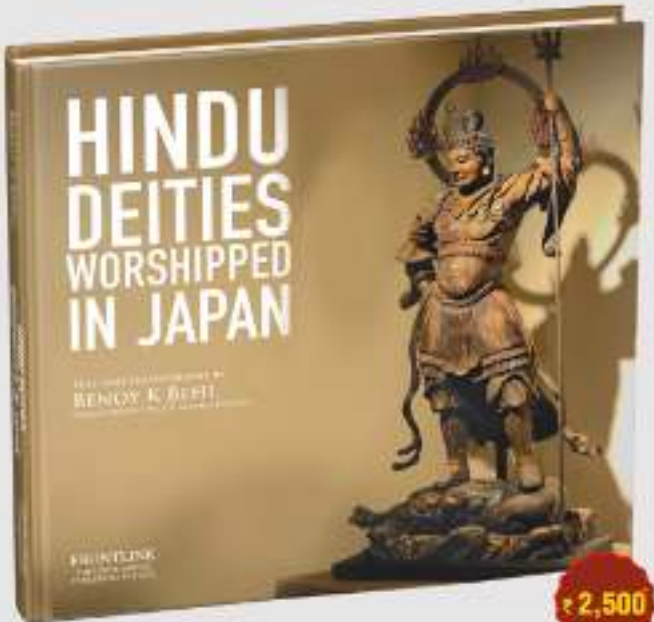
thousand rupees there! The silk would have cost not a paisa less than a thousand. Is the old woman mad?  
 "If your brother is going to be spending on everything for the wedding, then why this saree, this money..."  
 The smile fades from the old woman's face. Her mind seems to wander: "Do you not remember that day, many years ago?" she asks. "Of course, then you were a small boy, curly-haired, eight years old..."  
 What could Muthiah say?  
 "The very next month I got married. He was rich. I told my husband then that I wanted to give my fair share of the family money to you. A young lad may not know what to do with it, he said and, taking the money, he went that same day and put it in the bank. Let him marry, have a daughter, you can give it to him then, he said. That money has also grown and branched, like me," says the old woman, Thayyaal. □  
*Story selected by Mini Krishnan  
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