

Annam Manthiram

Thathaka Boothaka

"When you were young, the children teased you. Your mother tried to abort you with a clothing hanger, and then tried to kill you by suffocating you while you suckled milk. However, you lived, continuing to exist as only a retard can. Then, as you got older, your cleft lip only became uglier. Your first husband tried to cut it off, but you threatened to cut off your left breast. He divorced you. At age nineteen, your parents married you to me, a seventy-year-old man. I don't know why I love such a hideous creature. But I do."

Murty makes this proclamation as they are making love.

"Was I ever young?" she asks into his shoulder.

"Yes," he screams as he thrusts into her.

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Poornima peers into the window as if she were looking at a mannequin dressed in a yellow chiffon salwar fit for a queen. Instead, she is observing real children playing in a toy shop. One child is picking up another, and in the process, drops him. The baby starts to cry, and before the older child can receive punishment for his misconduct, he turns around and sees Poornima. She smiles inside, and the boy cries. She presses her nose harder and harder against the pane in an effort to be childish and piggy-like—her cartilage bending in a way not biologically possible.

The boy continues to cry, and the mother exits with her two children. When Poornima steps away, she leaves blood from her nose onto the glass. She wipes away blood; or is it tears?

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Murty and her father are talking. Poornima is respectful—she is standing against the wall adjacent to the kitchen. This way, she can keep a steady eye on the payasum that is bubbly with syrup and milk.

Today is Deepavali, Festival of Lights. Normally, she'd light a myriad of firecrackers in front of her house in celebration. Many of her neighbors have already gone ahead, but she is not in the mood. She wants to light one with a child of her own—to be able to insert the large stick into a small hand and watch it struggle to hold on. To see the lights reflect in the child's eyes—so bright that her child must close his eyes because of the overwhelming glare. She wants to hear her child's laughter—short little bursts of happiness intermingled with the sound of popping and sputtering.

Tonight, she has settled on hearing her father's voice. Although not comparable to that of a child, his is the voice that sings her to sleep in her head. He sings a very special Tamil nursery rhyme called "Thathaka, Boothaka, Thavalakoothe," about a frog who is trying to find his way back to his lily pad.

"I visited her mother today," her father says. "She wants to come home." Poornima sits near the stove and lightly dips her finger into the scalding pudding. "I cannot take care of her needs, but Poornima can. I suggested she come here, and the doctors have agreed it is a better arrangement. What do you think, Murty?"

Murty leans back into his vasti, allowing it to loosen around his midsection. "Did I ever tell you the day Poornima was born, I was in the hospital? It had been one of many visits that year. I was laid to rest in the very bed that my wife, Saroja, had passed away in, and this fact took a toll on me. There was a nurse who, knowing this, had taken a liking to me. She was young, but moved very slow, as if she were trapped in an old woman's body. She brought me chicken vindaloo, when I was only allowed white rice and yogurt with cashews. She wiped my brow when my fever became an unbearable hand upon my forehead. I only saw her on the day of Poornima's birth. After I had regained partial health, I asked for her, but the others simply nodded and patted my head, as if I were a silly old man who had dreamed a woman in order to lessen the pain of Saroja's death. But I knew she was real. She is real."

Poornima's father listens and nods. Poornima strokes her hair away from the nape of her neck the way Murty does when he is trying to get her to close her eyes in bed.

"If her mother comes into this house, Poornima will not be real anymore. She will fade the way she faded in the hospital on the day I had regained partial health."

Her father strokes his head. "I don't understand, Murty. My wife has regained some of her mental facilities. She is kinder—more gentle."

Murty stands up—a feeble old man leaning on a cane. He wavers like a paper effigy in the wind; however his voice is not shy—it is loud and strong like a buffalo's scream.

"My dear Uncle, I will not tolerate the intrusion of that woman into my house unless Poornima says so." Both sets of eyes look to Poornima in the kitchen. She's heard everything, but chooses to busy herself scooping out the payasum into three containers. No one says anything for five whole minutes. Poornima wishes for a child's inappropriate interjection.

"I'll visit her tomorrow and see," is all Poornima says before the conversation returns to other matters.

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"Be patient," her father says to her as he teaches her how to hem the end of her sari. Her fingers are peppered with little red dots from the needle. She stops and stares at the unraveling fabric. She dabs her cleft palate with her handkerchief. Her father smiles at her, and she wishes she could smile back, but she can't. "Are you thinking about having children soon? Murty is not young, and I would like some grandchildren."

She licks her mouth—what little there is of it.

They are sitting in a rickshaw, going to a wedding. Behind them, the city of Chennai is bustling with activity. Fruit and vegetable vendors carry large bowls on top of their heads and shout out prices. College kids bike to school, and socialite women motorbike to work. Lazy ladies with umbrellas stroll down the dirt roads, chatting to each other and ignoring catcalls from male suitors. The road is bumpy, and with every jolt comes a prick.

“Poornima? Did you hear me?”

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Poornima’s father tells her that when she was a baby, he used to lick the top of her head. Poornima, when she first hears the story, trembles and withdraws her hand from his. She isn’t sure if she wants to know this, but her father continues. He says that the first time, because of her mother’s carelessness, Poornima’s head had gotten into a container of molasses, and her father, trying to conserve, had licked off some of the sticky sugar from her head. When he noticed how hard Poornima laughed and clucked like a mother hen, he continued licking, even after all of the sugar had been cleaned off of her egg-shaped head.

“Why did you take your hand from mine?” Her father asks, after he finishes the story. She looks up and both of her hands are feeling the top of her head—trying to recreate some of the joy that she might have felt at that young age.

“I like molasses in coffee,” Poornima says. She lays both of her hands in his.

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“They are finally letting me home, if you can properly take care of me. Do you think you can do that?” Poornima begins to rock her head back and forth; however, the only music she hears is the droning of an invalid in her head.

“Your father said you would. The past is the past, Poornima. Only those who are repulsive allow it to affect their lives and those around them.” Poornima starts to grab one hair at a time from the side of her scalp.

“Don’t do that. Your grandmother used to do that when she was thirty and lost all of her hair by the time she was forty. You don’t want to look like Murty, do you?” Poornima continues to pluck at the hairs on her head.

Her mother holds onto the bars with her fingers and pulls herself up off of the toilet. She sticks her nose through the slats and looks closely.

Poornima holds out her hand and she takes it, sniffs it, then drops it.

“Are you talking now?” her mother asks her. “Your father tells me that you do have a voice after all.” Poornima rubs her elbow very hard. Behind her, the orderlies are sitting behind their administrative desks, whispering. All of the mental patients (with the exception of Poornima’s mother) are

taking their daily naps. The pill bottles are stacked in alphabetical order by prescription name in the shelves that line the hallway. No one walks the halls at this hour.

“You and Murty aren’t having sex, are you?” Her mother itches her nose against the bars, and Poornima steps back and forth, simultaneously closer and farther from the bars and ultimately, her mother.

“Don’t blame me for that marriage. You were born that way. It was your fault.”

Poornima turns to leave and whispers, “I am happy.”

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“There are too many words to describe the pains in my legs tonight, Poornima. Please, let me rest.” Poornima has climbed onto Murty’s lap and is playing with the tiny patch of white hair that has grown on Murty’s ears. She climbs down, pouting as well as she can, and crosses her arms against her chest. But that posture doesn’t last for too long; soon she is wrapping her left arm around Murty’s frail shoulders.

“Did you visit your mother today? Has she indeed changed the way your father proclaims she has?” Poornima gets up and starts pacing the room. “Please sit down and tell me.” He gets up and walks stiffly toward her. Upon reaching her, he takes one of her long, black braids and kisses it.

“She is the same. Nothing has changed. But can you stop her?” The question is vague, so neither of them answers. Instead, Murty with great effort struggles to hold her in an upright position.

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“Be patient,” her father says, but this time in another context. He is helping her pick out fresh meat at the marketplace. She has a hard time looking at the pieces of raw meat hanging from the makeshift poles because they remind her of the way her cleft palate looks sometimes in the mirror.

“Look for the meat that is tender. Poke it with your finger if you cannot tell from sight. A pink tinge is good. A brownish tinge is not. The leanest meats are those that have the least amount of fat—the white skin you see hanging off of the edges. Go on, touch this.”

Poornima closes her eyes as she reaches out and stabs the product with her middle finger.

“Yes, if closing your eyes helps, do that.” Poornima nods her head yes.

“Good. Now open your eyes and examine the grade.” She peers closely and nods yes again. “Good. You are a fast learner. I am so proud of you.”

Her father calls to the man in the white apron, and he cuts down the slab and wraps it in a piece of newspaper. Poornima has often wondered if she could exchange her face for a different newspaper-wrapped face at a much cheaper rate than what she has paid for the original.

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Sometimes when she sits in front of the mirror after Murty is already asleep and the livestock have stopped chewing, she'll unbraid and comb her hair for hours. If she focuses on just her hair—gallons of black water spilling out in all directions—she feels beautiful.

She has even gone as far as to put tape over her mouth. When she does, she feels as though her face rearranges itself into something more appealing. Her eyes become more rounded like the eyes of a swan, and her eyelashes thicken like glue. Her nose becomes more pointed instead of stubby at the tip, and her cheekbones rise up to touch her lower eyelids.

It is at moments like these that she wants Murty to make love to her, but he refuses to do it this way.

"When I first met you, I may have agreed to it. Now that I know you, I do not want you to change the part of you that makes you who you are. Poornima, my child, you do realize that you would be a different person without your mouth arranged the way it is, yes?"

Poornima resents her cleft being attributed to some sort of "arrangement," but she doesn't hold fault with Murty. She holds fault with herself.

"Perhaps I want to be different," she says as she takes a piece of sari and stuffs it into her mouth. Murty tugs it out, barely able to pull on a skinny piece of thread.

"You cannot be different. You are who you are. When are you ever going to realize that?"

"I want to be like everyone else."

"Silly girl, then how would I recognize your face in a crowd?" Murty sticks his finger into her hair. "Come lie down. Don't worry about such things. You are too young to be worrying about aesthetics."

"He's wrong. I am like everyone else inside," Poornima says, but Murty has already fallen asleep again. She inserts her tiny 4'11" frame inside Murty's 6'2" one and feels safe. She can hear his heart skip a beat here and there, but she's gotten used to its irregular rhythms. It used to scare her—now it is like an air filter quietly humming her brain to bed. She hears the frog song.

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"With your mother, you must be patient," her father says. This time, Murty has gone to the doctor alone. Poornima had insisted on accompanying him, but he had refused.

"I am not an invalid, just yet anyway," Murty had said with a slight chuckle.

Her father has taken the opportunity to speak to Poornima alone about her mother without Murty's influence. Poornima doesn't want to talk to him right now, and if patience were a dog, she'd starve it. She is in

the middle of knitting a small, purple slipper. She will hang it at the temple's fertility tree, so that the gods will know that she wants to have children now.

"She is like a child. She doesn't always hold her tongue. But some of the medication is helping. She is not violent anymore. The nurses even sense a spirit in her eyes. A youthful spirit has returned—one I remember seeing when I married her." Poornima plays with the ball of yarn while her father continues to speak.

"Please, Poornima. Can you hear me?" She wonders why people so often equate being mute with being deaf, and she drops the yarn. It rolls from her chest down to her father's folded feet. She reaches to get the ball and touches her father's wet feet instead.

"Appa, why are your feet wet?" She dries them with the end of her sari.

"She's my wife. I can't take care of her anymore. I am so sorry," her father says. She sticks the ball of yarn in his hands and gets up to close the door. Her love for her father makes her chilly.

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Since she was five years old, she has been going to the same place to buy fabric for saris, blouses, and skirts. Her mother would give her less than what she knew the fabric she had wanted cost in order to test her daughter's skills at haggling. Being so little, Poornima didn't understand why the man in the red shirt would yell at her or laugh at the amount of money she carried in her pocket.

She'd go back, face her mother's scoldings, and then sulk in the corner of the kitchen, dreading the next time her mother would make her go out again.

In order to get through the shopping disaster, she'd focus on what made her feel good—feeling the fabrics on her skin, seeing the peacock blues and blood oranges with mounted beads or sequins, and smelling the jasmine the fabrics were bathed in for added elegance.

She also remembers a pair of U-shaped eyes peering out from beside the angry shopkeeper. They moved from side to side, like a pair of cat eyes on a swinging clock. They would look at her and even though she couldn't see the rest of his face, she knew that he was smiling at her.

Eventually, the visits became enjoyable and even something that Poornima looked forward to. She began to understand the nuances of haggling—how to squint the eye in a threatening manner, how to slant one's face in a pensive way, and how to always act as though the fabric were of a low quality not even worthy for holding cow dung. She no longer dreaded the visits and knew her mother was pleased, which pleased her even more.

The pair of U-shaped eyes have grown. The scrawny, dark male still

smiles at her from beneath his gold-crowned teeth. He had eventually taken over from the angry red man, and Poornima no longer needed to haggle quite as much.

Today Poornima must buy some fabric for temple tomorrow. She wants to buy a new sari and matching blouse in order to show the gods that she is quite serious when she prays for her mother to stay in the hospital instead of moving in with her.

The first cloth she tries stretches taut over her body, and the lavender purples and pepper pinks swell over her breasts and hips, creating an illusion of an hourglass seen through a kaleidoscope. She wraps it around her head and shoulders as well, and the touch of silk to her bare skin creates a sensation between her thighs.

"Poornima, try the yellow," the scrawny man says. She picks up a marigold-colored fabric with golden brown woven in at the edges. The instant she touches the silk, her entire body plumps to fill the thin cloth.

"I like this. How much?" Poornima moves very slowly.

"Free. Take it. But hurry before anyone else sees."

And she gives to him what she's been giving to him for years. She raises his head up, covers his face with her sari, and kisses him on the lips through the fabric.

"Thank you," Poornima says.

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"I used to tell you stories when you were little, do you remember, Poornima?" her father asks her. They are alone again, and she wonders why her father is not tired of talking about her youth. Isn't she still young? Poornima feels as though she is still a little child who plays house when everyone is looking, but plays hooky when everyone is not.

She does remember the stories. There had been a story about Besraji Mata, goddess of the Earth. Her blood was water, her bones the trees, and her hair the dark clouds that passed when it rained. She struggled to protect the Earth and went to great lengths to do so. Upon seeing a factory leaking toxic chemicals into the Ganges River and with no one to aid her (all of her friends were busy celebrating the birthday of Anju, Goddess of Sugar), she cut off both of her breasts and used them to block the pipes. The rounded flesh formed a good suction cup until a pipe fitting could be made.

From then on, Besraji's friends referred to her as Besraja Mati, a masculine form of her name. Some say on certain rainy nights when Besraji's hair is particularly dark and gray, women may feel an aching in or even a grabbing of their breasts at night. They say it is the hands of Besraji Mata—the jealous hands wanting what was given up in order to protect the Earth. Poornima does not think the sacrifice had been worth it. There will always be pipes leaking, but God only gives women two breasts.

While her father continues to talk, she glides her feet across the cement,

trying to skate with her sock-covered feet.

"Your mother used to tell you stories as well. Do you remember those?"

There had been one. A green goblin named Anarkali who had a dog nose and rabbit ears. She had five feet and a tail that looked like that of a rat. When little children didn't read before bed, she would poke their eyes out with her teeth. When little children didn't eat everything on their banana leaves, she would vomit in their mouths. And when little children didn't use the toilet everyday like their parents had taught them, she would stick her nose in their bottoms and blow hard. Poornima always wondered why Anarkali only bothered little children.

"Poornima, they were only stories meant to keep you a good girl. None of them were true. Please do not look at me that way." Poornima is looking at her father the way she'd look at Anarkali if she were to face her. The look is a subdued, laconic expression of resignation.

"I've already signed the papers. She'll be coming tomorrow." Poornima stops skidding and begins to take off her socks.

"Where's Murty?" Poornima asks.

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"Do you touch the fabric boy? Do you?" Poornima's mother asks her. She has moved in and has only brought two items with her from the hospital: her Bible and her wedding sari.

Poornima is busy ironing her mother's old wedding sari because her mother wants to wear it to temple. Even though it is not considered auspicious to wear one's old trousseau to a temple function, Poornima's mother does not listen.

"You must. How else would you have gotten that yellow kanjipuram for free?" Poornima had told her mother about the 100% discount she'd received thinking that her mother would be proud. Her haggling skills have reached their pinnacle, but touching? She only kisses him out of love, not for money.

"I knew it! He's in love with my retarded daughter! How classic is that? A low-caste falling for a deformed mute. I always wondered how you got our fabrics for so cheap. And you had me thinking it was because you were so smart."

"She is smart," Murty says. He has returned from the outhouse.

Murty and Poornima embrace, and her mother cowers in the corner.

"Now who has become mute?" Poornima whispers. She stands behind Murty's openly flapping vasti, resisting the urge to put one of her fingers in her mouth. The iron burns a hole in her mother's wedding sari.

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"Do you think Prabhu is in love with me?" Poornima asks Murty. Their door is closed although they can hear Poornima's mother scratching the

wall next to their bedroom.

Murty is wrapping sheets around each of Poornima's legs because that is the only part of her body that gets cold.

"Who is Prabhu, my love? And why must that matter? Is one old man not enough for you?" Poornima giggles, and some of the sheets fall off. Murty struggles to put them back on.

"Please, be still. This is not easy."

She kicks off the sheets again, and Murty must start all over.

"Poornima, please."

"Shh," she says, and she lowers his head to her knees.

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"Poornima, please come here," Murty says. He is hunched over the stove, making sure the fish does not overcook and become a pulpy mess.

Poornima exits the bedroom with her hair pulled up in a wet towel. Murty takes the towel and smells it.

"Sandalwood. You finally have listened to something I have said." Poornima smiles, and Murty nuzzles his nose through her thick hair until his nose becomes wet.

"Does your mother worry you?" Murty asks. Poornima takes her hair and wraps it around Murty's bony ring finger.

"No. I am strong, remember?"

Murty chuckles. "I remember, but what I'm afraid of is that you don't." They hug while the fish disintegrates into the red curry and Poornima's mother watches from the patio.

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"I am dying," Murty says during another round of love-making. Poornima dries up like a sponge left out in the sun too long, but she lets him continue, even though her insides chafe and burn.

"Seventy is not the age to die. You will live forever." He stops and breathes heavily. This is the second time in a row where he has not been able to perform. She grabs his white-haired head and sticks it into her lap. She rubs her cleft palate across his bald spot.

"You are strong. God made such monsters as you with the strength of Krishna. What you lack in grace, you make up for in dexterity," he says.

Poornima grabs a knife and holds it to her left breast.

"You die and this goes." She is steadfast.

"My child, once I die, I will not enjoy it, will I? Please, put that thing away before you hurt yourself."

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Anarkali visits Poornima's bedroom at night. Murty is asleep; she is awake. Her tail wraps itself around Poornima's hand and drags her into the kitchen.

"I will always be here. You know that, yes?"

Poornima stands very still, hoping that her lack of movement will throw Anarkali's sense of smell off. The goblin does not have very good eyesight.

"When Murty is gone, you and I will share a bed." Poornima looks down at the floor and notices claws for feet.

"We must learn to work together, you and I. Sometimes being scary isn't being at all." Poornima inhales sharply (she'd been holding her breath for what seemed like a year). The goblin takes a step forward and latches onto Poornima.

"Please." Poornima just stands there, hoping that Murty will wake to find she is gone.

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"Don't fling yourself onto his funeral mound. That is the old way, and we now live in the new way," her father says.

Poornima stands in white—her bosom out towards the burning pyre. She has lost her voice again, and she cannot cry. She cannot even frown.

"She should respect the old traditions. She should join her husband in his ashes," her mother says.

The two argue—her father dressed in a silk shirt and a teacher's dhoti, and her mother in an old-fashioned sari made by Gujarati peasants and a cross around her neck. Poornima puts her hands over her ears and sticks her mouth into the dancing flames—a compromise that promises freedom more than death.