Kite

Raji Pillai

The old man sits still, his eyes looking at the ceiling, but not really seeing. He's looking at the past, remembering the woman to whom he was married for forty-eight years. Had she lived, they would be married now for almost seventy years. He had loved her quietly. How else could one love such a force of nature? She was vivacious, her laughter bright and sparkling. She was the life of every gathering. She held court.

From where he sits, he can see the southern wall of the dining room. There are two photos on it. One, in color, is a photo of a man and a woman, with several pots of chrysanthemums at their feet. It was taken when he and his wife lived in a different state. He had always loved to garden, and, in that small flat, he could only grow plants in pots. He tended them carefully, and once, when all the chrysanthemums were in full bloom, his wife said let's have a photo taken that shows all this work you've done, and she made a request of their neighbor, an amateur photographer. She wore a cream-colored silk sari with a broad red and gold border. He wore dark gray pants, a white full-sleeved shirt, and Hawaii chappals. His eyes are smiling, and his wife has her characteristic brilliant smile, her teeth sparkling.

Next to the color photo is an older black-and-white portrait in a carved wooden frame. A young man, his hair brushed back with Brylcreem, has a slight smile on his face and in his eyes. Next to him, a beautiful woman with a gold necklace and flowers in her hair, not smiling. A wedding photo.

Now, it is the year 2026, and the old man is ninety-nine years old. He looks at his wedding photo. It was taken on September 12, 1957, when he was thirty years old and his wife twenty-six. He did not know it at the time, but he now knows it was the day of his greatest good fortune.

Thirty years old. The old man's mind follows the number thirty to another young man he knew a long time ago. That is how old the other young man was in 1936, when he was shackled with chains around

his legs, outside a house. The house where the old man lived when he was a boy, in a joint family. Today, there is a brick cell not far from where the young man was chained. A dog is kept there during the day and is let out at night. When any visitor enters the premises, the dog barks incessantly with loud, sharp barks, as long as the visitor is visible. If the visitor is invited indoors, the dog stops barking. Still, now and then, he lets out a low growl.

The old man remembers that the young man had beautiful handwriting. He would write on paper that his mother, the boy's aunt, provided—pages and pages and pages. The old man was a boy, only eight years old at the time. The old man does not know what the young man wrote, or if anyone read it. He knows only what the young man wrote on one particular sheet of paper, which the young man gave him when he was a boy.

On the table next to him, on a pile of newspapers, the old man's phone rings. He does not hear it.

The old man's caregiver approaches.

"Saar, phone."

He does not hear Manoj, who comes over and hands him the phone. The old man brings it to his left ear.

"Hello?"

"Saar, wait, let me answer it first."

Manoj takes the phone, swipes to answer, and hands the phone back.

"Hello? Hello? Aanh, Gautam!"

His son has called to ask how he is. "I am okay," he says. "I did four rounds on the landing with my walker. I also did my exercises, and Manoj helped me. Now I am just sitting here. Yes, I'm all right."

The old man does his leg exercises every morning. Three times per leg for each of the eight exercises. Before that, he walks on the landing with his walker. As he walks, he always recites something in his mind. Sometimes, he recites the poems of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, whose wife was related to him distantly on his mother's side. The poet and his wife had been kind to him when he was a boy. When he was preparing to go to a different part of the country many states away at twenty-six for his first job, the poet's wife gave him two

white trousers that had belonged to the poet who had died of tuberculosis by then. He got them altered to his size. The poet's wife also gave him two hundred rupees. He paid it back thirty years later. (She did not accept any interest; he always notes while talking about it.)

The poet's works were widely respected, especially his pastoral elegy *Ramanan*, a poem of loss and longing, about a dear friend of the poet who could not marry the woman he loved, and on the day of the woman's wedding to another man, hanged himself from a tree. He was wearing a jasmine garland around his neck. This is the poem the old man had been reciting. He felt the poem had a cadence that worked with his steps. It helped him keep count. Sometimes, he recites shlokas from the Mahabharata or the Ramayana. At other times, when he is not reciting verses, he counts from one to three hundred. That is usually enough for four rounds. Then he stops and comes back inside.

He likes keeping count. It helps bring order to things. The old man's brain tackles numbers with ease. He remembers the dates of birth of most relatives—the day, month, year, and even the day of the week. He has been known to use a calculator and then perform the calculation "in his head" to verify it. This is the extent of his ease with numbers.

These days, he has trouble remembering certain things. He knows someone visited him yesterday, but he cannot recall who it was. He mentions to his son on the phone that someone visited. He struggles to remember who it was. Manoj reminds him that it was Jayan, one of his nephews.

"Oh, was it? Aanh, aanh, yes, yes, Jayan!"

He has been taking one pill for slightly elevated blood pressure every morning for the past twenty years, and a multivitamin every night. Lately, he has been forgetting to take them. Now, Manoj gives him the pills morning and night. He does not always know what day of the week it is. He rarely goes out. His sense of the world and of time passing is from the daily newspapers, which he reads avidly.

He is aware that he is forgetting things. He remembers what happened with his wife during her last months, and he knows it is not the same thing he is experiencing. She would see things that were not there. Once, not long after they had moved to this flat, she called out to him and said there was a dog in the room. Why was it there? He

assured her that there was no dog in the room. The next day and the day after, she would again point to the same spot in the room and say there was a dog there. One day, he had an idea. When she mentioned the dog, he told her he was going to pick it up and take it outside. He made the movements of bending down and scooping up something, and then walked out of the room, carrying the imaginary dog. When he returned to the room in a few minutes, she was calm, satisfied that it was gone. She did not mention the dog again.

The old man looks around him and his eyes focus as he registers all that he sees. He tries to do this every day. He is afraid that he has forgotten much already and wants to exercise his mind. He wants to keep the mists of memory from melting away.

He looks to his right, through the French doors that open onto the south-facing balcony of the living room. From this vantage point on the sixth floor of the building where he resides, he can see the Cochin Shipyard looming on the horizon, rising out of the coast of the Arabian Sea. The giant cranes are a vibrant red, towering over canopies of coconut palms and mango trees.

The horizon offers no rain, only an unsettling heat from the sun blazing in a cloudless sky. There are four pots in the balcony, in which grow hibiscus, *kariveppila*, and *panikoorka*. A fifth pot has a miniature rose plant, brown, dry. The roses used to be a deep red. Somehow, the plant did not survive. He used to do the planting and watering himself, but now he is no longer able. Manoj does it for him.

M.G. Road, just five hundred meters away, is a bustling thoroughfare traversed by buses, cars, scooters, motorcycles, and autorickshaws, flanked by department stores, banks, the stockholding corporation, restaurants, and shops selling clothes, sunglasses, shoes, ice cream. The din of streets has grown louder over the years, but he can only hear certain sounds and those too, more faintly as the years go by.

Inside the flat, several pieces of furniture rest on the tiled floor. He sits on a wood-frame sofa with three seats. It is long enough for him to lie down and stretch out. At the end of the sofa nearer the balcony is a bolster on which he rests his head when he lies down and reads. It raises his head to a thirty-degree angle from his body. He usually places his right leg over his left, crossed at the ankle. Sometimes, he raises his left arm, so it also rests on the bolster. In his right hand,

he holds the newspaper or a book or his phone. His lips move as he reads, silently mouthing the words.

On the coffee table are newspapers, a few from that day, and dozens from days past. To the side of the newspapers, a little white binder lies open, with three chrome binder rings sticking out. The rings hold together a stack of plastic sleeves with several small compartments, each containing a coin. They vary in size. Some are barely a quarter centimeter in diameter, mere smudges of copper. Others are larger, made of silver. Some were from the time of the British in India, a few with the name of King Edward VIII and others with the likeness of his successor, King George VI. They were called the Emperors of India, to signify their sovereignty over India during the British Empire. It is a fine collection, assembled with thought and care over decades, the oldest coin over a hundred years old, from the 1920s. The old man can recite the denominations and their worth. One rupee was twelve annas. He has one that is one-fourth of an anna. The Travancore Rupee is worth 7 panam or 28 chakrams, as each panam is 4 chakrams. He enjoys looking at the coins and talking about them. They feed into his aptitude and love for numbers and for history.

The northern wall of the living room has three paintings, each fourteen inches high and six inches wide, within pale bamboo frames. On the left, Ardhanarisvara, half Shiva, half Parvati. Brahma in the middle, golden-complexioned, with three visible heads, the fourth facing backwards. And to the right, Krishna with his flute. The western wall too has gods presiding over the room. On the left, a brass plate with a dancing Shiva. On the right, a dark metal Ganapati in a box frame. In the middle, the showpiece, the Dashaavataram, the ten incarnations of Vishnu, for each time he descended to Earth to restore cosmic order.

The old man's favorite incarnation is Buddha, who is also his favorite religious figure. By the front door is a cabinet for shoes. The top of it is adorned with ten statues of Buddha, the largest about four inches high, the smallest about an inch. Knowing his love for Buddha, friends and family have taken to gifting him statues, images and photos of the Enlightened One. There are some in other parts of the house as well. He enjoys looking at the Buddhas. Except for a few which are in boxes with recognizable markings, he cannot remember now where he got each one or from whom.

The old man wants to lie down in his bed, rest his eyes. He sits up and places his hands on the handle of his walker, which is red with a black seat, black wheels and handles. Pushing down with his hands, he raises his body slowly. Finally, he is standing, leaning forward. He shuffles his feet forward a few inches and straightens. He pushes his walker and goes to his bedroom. Through the east-facing windows, he can see a Brahminy kite soaring outside in wide loops, its white head and reddish-brown wings striking against the clear blue sky.

He reaches his bed and sits down. Pushing the walker out of the way, he lifts his legs and lies down on the bed. He looks up at the ceiling fan, watching it spin. It whirs with a rhythmic *tak-tak-tak*, but he cannot hear it. When he lies down, he tries to remember things from his past in detail.

The old man remembers the house where he was born. A traditional Kerala house with a *poomukham* in the front, an open area covered by the roof and supported by pillars where the breeze could blow freely. Again, the young man drifts into the old man's remembering. For two years, the young man had lived in the *poomukham*, day and night, chained to the trunk of a coconut tree. A hole had been bored through the trunk and a chain run through it. The chain bound his legs. He could move a little, but he could not leave the *poomukham*. The young man's mother would bring him food.

The boy would wonder why the young man was chained. When he asked his mother, she replied that the young man was mad, and he was chained so he would not harm himself or anyone else. The boy did not know then what being mad meant.

Through his now clouded eyes, the old man clearly sees the *mittam*. The jackfruit trees, the mango trees, the banana trees, laden with fruit. He remembers that the young man was quiet, gentle. As a boy, he would stand some distance away from the young man on many days and observe him. The boy would see the young man writing. The young man didn't look up much.

One day, the boy had just returned from school. His mother and aunts were busy in the house. His father and uncles were still away at work. As he stood in the *parambu*, observing the young man writing, the young man suddenly looked up and saw him, a thin boy, wearing frayed shorts, standing among the trees, a short distance away. The young man smiled at the boy, who walked away quickly.

On another day, as the boy was standing at a distance and observing the young man, the young man looked up at him and smiled. This time, the boy sat down on the ground. The young man returned to his writing. After some time, the young man looked up and held up the sheet of paper, beckoning to the boy. The boy stayed seated. Then, after a while, he got up and walked a few steps closer, then stopped. After doing this a few times, the boy was close enough to the young man to see the piece of paper he held. It was a drawing. *"De, idutholu, kutty-kye aane."* It is for you. The young man's voice was soft, his diction clear.

The boy did not go close enough to take the sheet of paper from the young man's hand. The young man placed the sheet of paper on the ground and slid it toward the boy, so he did not have to come closer. The boy picked it up and ran back to his spot under the trees. He looked at the drawing and was filled with wonder. It could have been a photograph. It was a picture of the *mittam* with all the trees, and in the middle, a boy in frayed shorts, standing with an intent gaze. It was him! No one had ever drawn a likeness of him nor taken a photograph.

The boy ran inside and kept the drawing inside a notebook. He kept the drawing for years, and then, somehow, he couldn't find it anymore.

On another day when the boy came back from school, a similar thing happened. The young man slid another piece of paper toward him. This time, it had words, in Malayalam. It looked like a poem. Later, he learned that it was the opening stanza of the celebrated poet Changampuzha's pastoral elegy, *Ramanan*, which was very popular at the time.

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പുറകിലായ് വന്നുനിന്നെത്തിനോക്കി.
എവിടെത്തിരിഞ്ഞൊന്നു നോക്കിയാലും
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ഒരു കൊച്ചു കാറ്റെങ്ങാൻ വന്നുപോയാ
തുരുതുരെപ്പുമഴയായി പിന്നെ!

Forests clothed in blossoms,
Their dense profusion
Steeped in emerald beauty:
An unblemished rustic loveliness
That steals the heart and eye.
A thrilling morning light
Peering over mountain ranges,
Caresses the murky mist,
Nudging it gently away.
Wherever you turn to look,
Only trees in bloom;
Should the softest breeze arrive,
Surely it will scatter down
A ceaseless rain of flowers.*

The old man remembers that he had attended the poet's wedding with his parents and grandfather. He remembers the mouth-watering *payasam* at the end of the feast: there were two kinds.

The old man is a little tired from remembering. Lying in his bed, he closes his eyes. Soon he is asleep. His nap is dreamless. After a while, he awakens. He sits up, reaches for his walker. Pushing down on the handles, he raises his body slowly. Then, standing, he straightens his body and makes his way back to the living room. On the way, he sees that Manoj has placed a cup of tea for him on the dining room table. He pulls his chair out, holds it with his left hand, and with his right hand, pushes the walker out of the way. He carefully sits down. Tea in hand, he looks up at his wedding photo.

The following year when he turns 100 years old, it is the only photograph he will take with him. He will leave everything behind, except for his passport and a few essential items—some clothes, his phone,

his tablet computer. He will ask that the photo be taken off the wall and placed in his bag. It had hung in every house he had lived in with his wife. This will be the first time he moves to a new residence without her. He will take her along, in their wedding photo. The albums will remain in the bottom shelves of the cabinets. They are too heavy to take along, and there are too many of them.

He will take a few notebooks. Two blank and three filled with his writings. Three pencils, three ballpoint pens, and his favorite Parker pen, which he always used to sign important papers, such as the sale agreement for the last flat in which he had lived with his wife. He will also take a small box which contained his wedding ring—and hers. And a small orange diary which she had kept, her even, round handwriting on some pages, old letters and memorabilia inserted in others. A faded but intact copy of their wedding invitation in one.

After leaving, he will arrive thousands of miles away. The 100-year-old man will sit in his rocking chair, remembering. From where he sits, he will see *Shantha Samudram*, the Pacific Ocean. Except for the few items he has brought, everything else will exist only in his fading mind. He will see red-tailed hawks soaring in the California sky and will remember the Brahminy kite outside his window in Kochi half a world away.

Today, the old man sits with his cup of tea, looking at his wedding photo and remembering his wife, her smile, her laughter. He becomes a little sad. His thoughts drift back to the young man and he lets his mind take him back.

On hearing whom he wanted to marry, the young man's family was shocked. Who has ever heard of such a thing, they asked. They said it was out of question and tried to reason with him. The young man became agitated. It was determined after discussions with family members and close relatives that he must be mad, mad to suggest such a thing, and mad because he became so disturbed, agitated.

The family considered the options: send him to one of the mental hospitals, to Oolampara or Kuthiravattom or Thrissur. But the patients there were severely ill, physically violent, screaming. It was not a fit place for this young man, gentle as he was, agreeable except in this matter. His mother wanted him near her. She could not bear the thought of him being far away, among strangers. Let us keep him

here, she said.

"*Thadi-il idu*," they suggested. Shackle him to a plank. This is what they did at the time to mentally ill people to keep them from harming others or themselves. And the young man was chained to the trunk of the felled coconut tree.

The young man would take a piece of broken glass and carve the tree trunk, rendering it smooth. For his daily ablutions, his mother would bring him a pan. His bathing would be with a wet towel, a *thorthu*.

Nine years from now, sitting in his rocking chair facing the Pacific Ocean, the old man notes that he is 108. That is twice 54. When he was 54, he retired from his last full-time job. The numbers start dancing in his mind. 108 equals 54×2 = 27×2×2 = 3 cubed times 2 squared. It is a special number, 108. The Gayatri mantra is recited 108 times. There are 108 rudraksha seeds in a mala. Rudraksha, the eye of Shiva. There are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary. Yogis practice 108 Surya Namaskaram, sun salutations. Eight years ago, he turned 100. Hundred equals 5 squared times 2 squared if you reduce it to prime numbers. There is order in numbers.

Almost everyone has died. He has lived through a great many deaths over 108 years. He has outlived most people he knew, many of them much younger than him. Before their time, some say. What *would* have been their time, he wondered. What, then, would be *his* time? Again, he remembers the young man who died so young. It is part remembering and part something else. He does not remember the word for it.

The young man's mother took care of him every day, caring for him when he was ill. As time went on, he became quieter, withdrawn. The second year, the monsoons came, and the waters rose. Many in the neighboring village developed cholera. Some died. The young man too fell ill. He suffered for days, his stomach unable to retain its contents. His mother spoon-fed him water with lime juice, some of which trickled down the sides of his mouth. As the days went on, most of it trickled out. His eyes became vacant. Sometimes, he would look at her and say "*Amme*." Then he began looking out toward the road as though seeking someone, something. "Krishnan," he whispered, "is that you? I'm coming."

"*Amme*," he said. "*Njaan pokatte?*"

May I go?

And she, weeping, held his hand. What had life meted out to her beloved beautiful boy? How did it all come to this?

"*Engotta, monay?*" she asked.

Where are you going?

"*Krishnan-de adutthekye.*"

To Krishnan.

She embraced him, weeping wordlessly. Raising her eyes to the sky, she prayed. *If you must take him from me, give him peace.*

There was a rustle in the *sarpa kaavu* in the distance. The young man turned his head to the sound, then back to the road. "Krishna? Krishna?" The rains had ceased, the air was still. Drops of water clung to the eaves and dropped now and then onto the floor of the *poomukham*.

She wanted to unshackle him. Gently, she put his head on the tree trunk and rose to take the key from inside the house. On returning, she unlocked and removed the chain from his legs.

She gently rubbed his chafed ankles. Her son, who no longer had the strength to rise, to move. She cradled his head and lay down beside him.

"*Amme, Njaan ponu.*"

I'm going.

This time, she knew what he meant.

Holding him close, she felt him draw his last breaths, remembering the baby she had held to her breast, soft, sweet, and gentle. Her firstborn. He was to have lit *her* funeral pyre. But this world did not have a place for him, and here she was, a symbol of the overturning of life's order.

"*Ende kutty*," she said, "*ende ponnu monay.*"

My child. My beloved son.

Did that really happen? The old man can't be sure. He is suddenly tired. Tired of remembering. Tired of sitting in his rocking chair. The breeze feels a little cold. This is not the warm humid air of the Arabian Sea. It is the cooler wind of the Pacific Ocean. He needs to lie down.

He stands up carefully on the deck, holding his walker. This one is blue, with a black seat, black wheels, and handles. He turns it around slowly and heads inside. He sits down carefully on the bed and pushes the walker a short distance away. He lifts his legs onto the bed and lies down. There is no ceiling fan here. There are vents on the wall from which warm or cool air come out when a dial is turned. He looks at his wedding photo, hanging on the wall opposite his bed, and thinks of his wife. How, after their wedding, they had walked together through the gates toward his house, she for the first time. They walked toward the *poomukham*, where she was welcomed into the family with a *vilakku*, the glow of the wick casting a warm light. She entered the house, stepping in with her right foot. The beginning of their long life together, in many places, many different houses.

Closing his eyes, the old man falls asleep. In his dream, he sees the *poomukham* and the gate. It is dark. Raining. He sees the young man—his cousin—and the young man's mother—his aunt. The young man's mother has unshackled him. The young man slowly rises. He looks at his mother with great love and starts walking. The first few steps are slow, belabored. Then, his steps become steadier, his gait stronger. He gets to the gate, which is now open. Another young man is standing there. The two young men embrace for a long time. They turn and look towards the *poomukham*. The mother is watching, smiling through her tears. The two young men are dressed like newlyweds, with garlands of jasmine around their necks. They smile back at her, look at each other, and hand-in-hand, walk out, close the gate, swing the latch on top to lock it, and disappear from view.

As the old man sleeps, loving hands place a blanket over him.

**Translation of Changampuzha's* Ramanan *provided by Gita Krishnankutty.*

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