

# CREATIVE WRITING

---

## SHORT STORY

### Unni & The Unniappam Tree

Namitha Varma

Six-year-old Unni was in gloom. He had nothing to do, and his mother would not allow him to catch butterflies. He sat on the verandah peering at the road beyond the walls of the house, and imagining how much fun it would be to scale the wall and walk on its rim. The old tamarind tree in the compound had a beehive and ever since Unni was stung on his nose by a bee during one of his tree-climbing expeditions, he has kept away from it. Not that he was afraid of being stung again. But because his mother would bring hell down if she found out that he was bitten.

Unni's mother was a distressed lady. She had to run the whole house on nothing literally. His father, apparently, died when he was a baby, and he did not remember his father at all. It was kind of sad, but it did not bother Unni – he could not imagine how it would have been if he had to listen to both a mother and a father. Instead, he had a kindly grandfather who sat on his reclining chair and chewed *vettilla paakk* all the time, except when he was sleeping.

Unni had an important job, though. He was a provider for the house in a way (so he told himself). His grandfather used to take him to all the Namboothiri functions that happened in and around the town. This was a time when it was essential to feed lunch to a certain number of Namboothiris to ensure that your *pooja* or *homa* or *yagya* went well. Unni's grandfather and he were among the Namboothiris who frequented these free food offerings since they had hardly any other way to quell their hunger. They would eat their fill, and a bit more (to last through the day or days, in case there were no functions the next day), and carry one person's lunch home. That packet would be for mother.

This was one of those days when there were no functions, and Unni was bored to death. He wished he could play with the other boys in the field, but his mother would not allow him to. “Filthy *aashaari* and *ezhava* kids. You have no shame. We may be poor, not yet *adharmi*. How dare you ask me permission to play with them. *Shiva shiva!*” she would say.

Plus, he was getting hungry. He looked up at the sun, which was burning right over his head, and decided that it was around noon. He tried not to think of food, but the more he tried, the more difficult it was to keep the hunger pangs away. He dragged some mud from the ground to the verandah and started fiddling with it, just to pass time. He looked in and saw his grandfather snoring away – that was his way of countering the hunger pangs; and his mother was patching up the kitchen with cowdung – keeping busy was her way of forgetting hunger.

Just then, he heard the gate of his house compound open. He ran to the gate – it was Pallavan Namoothirippad from the neighbourhood.

“*Hai, hai*, Unni, where is your grandfather? Tell him it is urgent. Come out, hey!” Pallavan Namoothirippad was obviously in great hurry. Unni ran into the house and shook his grandfather awake.

“Namoothirippad, get ready fast!” Pallavan Namoothirippad said, walking about the verandah in obvious urgency. “Our Shukran Namoothirippad’s mother has died early this morning. Didn’t you hear? They are not waiting long for the funeral. They want Namboorthiris for the *karmams*. There is going to be a lot of food also. Unni, you too go clean up and come!”

That announcement led to a flurry of activity in the household. Unni and his grandfather rushed to the well, drew three buckets of water and poured it over themselves. They took less than 10 minutes to get ready.

Having tied the *poonool* tighter around himself, Unni’s grandfather hurried out with Pallavan Namoothirippad. Unni followed them as fast as his little feet could take him. Unni’s mother stood behind the door and watched them leave.

\*\*\*

After two long hours, when the sun had moved over to the west of the sky and shadows started getting longer, Unni and his grandfather returned. Unni was bouncing in unconcealed glee.

“*Amme... amme* look what we got!”

Unni’s mother came out of the house after having made sure that no other Namboothiris were accompanying her family. Unni ran into her at the door and showed her the small pack he held tight to.

“*Unniappams!*” The child’s joy was insurmountable.

Unni’s mother smiled. She looked at grandfather, who gave her rice and *sambar* wrapped in banana leaves. “The food was a treat,” he belched in content.

Unni counted the *unniappams*. There were four in all. He gave one to his mother – his grandfather nodded his head in rejection of Unni’s offer of one – and he knew he would have the three others to himself. He quickly gobbled up one, and covered the other two in a banana leaf plucked from the backyard. He can eat them tomorrow, and perhaps even the day after. Oh joy!

Unni was glad to have killed his boredom with food and long rituals. The rituals may appear boring, but it was Unni’s learning ground. He wanted to be a priest when he grew up. He looked up and noticed that the sun was far in the west now. It must be past three o’clock. He thought he might take a nap. He rolled a mat on the floor in grandfather’s room – his grandfather was already snoring! The rhythmic sound of the snore slowly put him to sleep, and he dreamt of *rakshasas* and *devans* and magic.

\*\*\*

When Unni woke up, the sunlight was dim. Kneading his eyes, Unni thought it must be past six o’clock. His mother was taking bath – he could hear the sound of water behind the house. He mulled on an idea that occurred to him in sleep. If he sowed one of his *unniappams* in the backyard, would it grow into a tree? He dared not ask his mother – she would find in it a new reason to yell at him. His grandfather would not be able to reply to him through his *vettila*-packed mouth. It was worth a try anyway – even if it did not grow into a tree, he would still have one *unniappam* to eat the next day.

He waited until his mother was out of the bathroom and lighted the lamp. As she walked to the porch with her evening chant of “*deepam*”, he ran to the kitchen and picked out one *unniappam* from the package. He stealthily walked to the backyard and started digging with a small picket kept for

digging out yams and tapiocas. He buried the *unniappam* about one foot into the earth, and covered it with soil. He got one mug of water from the bathroom and poured over the place. “*Daivame*, let this grow into a tree!” Unni muttered.

\*\*\*

The next day morning, Unni woke up and ran directly to where he planted the *unniappam*, ignoring his mother’s screams. There seemed to be no progress in the *unniappam* seed. Unni was disappointed. “Maybe I need to scare the seed a bit,” Unni wondered. He went to his grandfather’s room and opened his *vettila paakk* box. He picked out the penknife from it – the one that his grandfather used to scare him with when he was younger – and ran to his seed.

“Look here, *unniappam*. I have my grandfather’s penknife with me. If you do not germinate by tomorrow, I shall hack you to pieces with this!” Hoping that the *unniappam* was sufficiently scared, Unni went back to the house and carefully replaced the penknife. He may need to use it again!

He passed his day doing this and that, annoying his mother, catching butterflies, playing pranks on his grandfather, gleefully consuming his second *unniappam* (and wondering how tasty the fruits should be), and sleeping. The second day of the *unniappam*-planting dawned soon, and Unni woke up with a jolt. Would the penknife-scare have worked? He was curious to know.

He ran to the spot again, and there it was, a tiny shoot out of the earth. Unni was overjoyed, and did a little twirl in the air. “Aha! So you are scared of the penknife. Good! Let me teach you a lesson!”

He went and retrieved the penknife from the betel box again. He kneeled down at the shoot and bellowed, “Look here, *unniappam* shoot. If you do not grow taller by tomorrow, I shall hack you to pieces with my grandfather’s penknife!” He hoped the shoot would be as scared as the seed was.

Day Three: Unni’s morning started with a visit to the backyard again. Imagine his joy when he saw the shoot had grown into a plant bigger than himself! With more flutter in his steps, he ran to get the penknife. He looked the *unniappam* shrub in the eye and hollered, “Look here, *unniappam* shrub. If you do not grow into a tree by tomorrow, I shall hack you to pieces with my grandfather’s penknife!” Satisfied with the belligerence he had shown, he secured the penknife in the betel box and went out for the day’s play.

Day Four: Unni's now-ritual morning peek at the backyard resulted in a loud whoop. There stood a huge tree at the spot he had planted the *unniappam*. It was bigger than the tamarind tree. But there were no fruits on it yet! How many days would he have to wait! And then he remembered the penknife, and fetched it immediately.

“Look here, *unniappam* tree. If you do not bear fruits by tomorrow, I shall hack you to pieces with my grandfather's penknife!” Unni screamed at the trunk of the tree. There was a sudden pour of dry leaves from the tree, and Unni thought the tree must have quivered from the scare of his threat. *Aha!*

Day Five: And there stood the tree, in full bloom, laden with bright green *unniappams*. Unni's mouth remained frozen in an ‘O’ for a long time before he could believe the sight. For a moment, he wondered why they were green, but unable to resist the sight of kazillions of *unniappams* hanging from each branch, he climbed up to the nearest branch and picked out a large fruit. However, he frowned as soon as he bit into it – “Urgh! They are sour! *Daivame*, now I have to wait one more day for it to ripen?” Unni was getting tired of the ritual. It had been five days. But at the thought of all the boughs of this large tree filled with ripe brown *unniappams* he decided it would be worth the wait. He rushed to the *vettila paakk* box once more.

He gave the tree his best angry stare, and said in a calm manner that his grandfather used on him to emphasise the gravity of the threat – “Look here, *unniappam* tree. If your fruits do not ripen by tomorrow, I shall hack you to pieces with my grandfather's penknife!” Praying that he should not need to take out the penknife again the next day, Unni went back to his chores.

Day Six: Unni woke up with butterflies in his stomach. It was the D-Day. He no longer doubted if the penknife-scare would have worked – he knew now that the tree was a sissy. The anticipation was what he would do with the bounty of *unniappams*. If his mother came to know – it was a surprise that his mother had not yet spotted the giant tree in the backyard, but then she wouldn't notice it until it fell on the house, and Unni was sure such a disaster could easily be averted with his penknife-scare – but if his mother came to know, he might not be allowed to eat the fruits every day. She would say sweets are bad for teeth. However, he did not want the anxiety to be resolved easily. He brushed his teeth with a slender neem-branch, washed himself profusely, fetched a pail of water for his mother – making sure he would have enough time with the *unniappam* tree later. Finally, as the sun shone in its brilliance, Unni legged it for the backyard. As soon as he turned the corner, he smelt

air full of the sweet aroma of *unniappams*. His eyes bathed in the view of ripe brown *unniappams* hanging by dozens on the branches.

Unni lost no time and hopped on to the nearest branch. He could see the road on the other side of the wall – for the tree was very near the rear wall – and he mused if any of the other boys would see him on his *unniappam* tree and demand a share of his precious fruits. Determining not to give them any if they did, he plucked a beautiful-looking fruit, smelt it until his entire body tickled in its sweetness, and bit into it. Oh, the joy of a long wait! Rich, sweet savour melted in his mouth, and he took a deep breath. And plucked another, and gobbled it, and another, and another, and another....

\*\*\*

Now, on the road near this tree, an old lady was passing by. She looked like a courteous Namboothiri woman, but don't we all know that Namboothiri women do not walk on the roads at this time of the day? She was, in reality, a *rakshasi* in disguise. Her name was Kuroopi. Kuroopi was hungry. The last meal she had was a feeble old Brahmin she picked up from a night sojourn three days ago. In this old age, it was becoming more and more difficult to lure people and provide sustenance for herself and her daughter, Raatra. Her daughter, though one of the ugliest young *rakshasis* in their realm, was a total dunderhead. Kuroopi could hardly expect Raatra to fend for herself, let alone for the two of them. Musing on how to get the next meal, the old woman, bent by age and worries, walked almost right into the wall surrounding Unni's compound. She returned from her thoughts with a jolt, and looking up, saw Unni munching on *unniappams*.

If Kuroopi was surprised by the *unniappam* tree, she did not show it. All she noticed was the young, tender Brahmin boy relishing *unniappams* as if they were mere nuts. Her eyes danced in delight at the possibility of having tender Brahmin met for lunch and dinner. Oh, and the blood! There's nothing, except perhaps blood of leeches that usually suck on a variety of human bloods, that comes so close to tasting the best as a young Brahmin's. Kuroopi had to think on her feet to lure Unni down the tree.

“Unni?” The old woman hollered feebly, as old women were expected to holler, at the boy. Unni was momentarily surprised, and dropped the *unniappam* he was nibbling at. *Who could be calling out for him?* He looked hither and thither, and spotted the bent old woman across the wall. He looked at her curiously.



“My child, I have had nothing to eat in two days. Would you be kind enough to give this old lady one of your *unniappams*?” the *rakshasi* pleaded.

Unni thought for a moment. He had decided he would not share his bounty with the boys, but this was an old woman. All old people should be respected and helped. Sighing, Unni picked up a large fruit and hurled it at the old woman. Unfortunately, the fruit rolled right over the wall to the sewage drain along it.

“Oh Unni, it fell into the drain! Can you drop another one?” the old *rakshasi* pleaded again.

Unni picked up another *unniappam*, a smaller one this time, and threw it down as carefully as he could. The *rakshasi*, however, contrived so that it fell into a ditch. Unni became a little impatient as the senile woman cried again, “Oh curse the ditch!”

Unni said, “I won’t have my *unniappams* wasted like this! Do you have a basket you can catch the fruits in?”

The old woman broke into tears. “We are very poor, Unni. Do I look like I would have baskets?”

Unni took pity on the woman. He was not allowed to go out to strangers, but if he could just lean down the branch and over the wall, he might be able to reach the old woman!

He did so, and as soon as Unni was within hand-reach of the *rakshasi*, she dragged him down the tree, and turned into her original form with hurling tresses, a pair of hungry red stares, and large canines – the ugliest female form Unni had ever lain eyes on. He was momentarily shocked out of his senses, and the *rakshasi* took advantage of that to tie him up into a sack dragged from her waistcloth, stuffed a piece of cloth in his mouth, and started walking home with the sack on her head.

Trapped inside the sack, Unni was following the track on which the *rakshasi* was carrying him. He was thinking of ways to escape, and more importantly, return to his *unniappam* tree, when the *rakshasi* stopped and leant the sack containing Unni to a wall. Unni heard her saying to herself, “Oh, the way is long. I need to attend nature’s call! Good to see a *kulam* here.”

Unni listened to her retreating steps, and tested the strings on the sack to see if he could escape. Being an old woman, she had not tied the sack very tight. Unni pried open the strings with his sharp nails (thank God he did not cut them despite his mother yelling at him every day to trim them) and

hustled out of the sack. He saw that the demoness was taking her own sweet time down at the *kulam*. He gathered muck, slushy leaves, thorny rotten plants and everything around the *kulam* as far as he could go without being discovered, and filled them into the sack until it looked as fat as if it contained him. He tied it up securely. Then he took to his heels, went back the track that the *rakshasi* walked with him, scaled the wall of his house and climbed up his tree. Only after he plucked an *unniappam* did he rest for a breath.

\*\*\*

Kuroopi returned from her ablutions and hoisted the sack on to her head. She felt the sack heavier than before, and she muttered to herself for having to carry such burdens for a living. No sooner had she walked a few metres than the slush started seeping out of the sack on to her face. She muttered, “Oh Unni, stop urinating on me!” A few more furlongs, and the thorns started hurting her scalp. Kuroopi muttered indignantly again, “Oh Unni, stop poking me with your nails!” Almost a mile, and she was weary again, her sack growing heavier with the rotting sluice. She dropped the sack and realised that it sounded nothing like a tender, juicy young Brahmin boy being dropped. Hurriedly, she opened the sack and found that Unni had given her the slip. Enraged, she decided to bring the boy back into it, by hook or crook.

A tired Kuroopi walked back to Unni’s house. This time, she disguised herself as a male mendicant. Attired in saffron and twirling the long grey beard, Kuroopi walked around Unni’s house singing *bhajans* in praise of Shiva. She noted Unni munching on *unniappams* on his favourite tree, but pretended not to notice him. Unni, on his part, saw the mendicant and thought: “Ah, another of those *sadhus* from the north. Amma may give him something.” Unni’s mother too heard the gruff-voiced bhajan, but after scouting through her larder, decided that there was nothing the family could afford to give off; so she decided to ignore him. Unni noted with impatience that the mother was not coming out with anything to offer, and the annoying bhajans were destroying the sanctity of his time with the *unniappams*. He must have eaten almost fifty of the juicy-sweet fruits by now, but he wasn’t in the least bit tired or suffocated, and he had no intention of spoiling his mood for anything other than the *uchapooja* at the temple nearby.

The mendicant continued singing, and Unni’s patience was running out. He decided that he must do something. And what had he to offer the mendicant other than his juicy *unniappams*? With a heavy



heart, duty beckoning, Unni plucked four *unniappams* from the tree and walked to the door of his house.

“Here’s something for you,” he said to the mendicant. The saffron-clad sadhu leered at him, and before he knew it, he was back in the clutches of Kuroopi and in her sack, tied securely this time.

\*\*\*

This time, Kuroopi had decided not to stop anywhere on her way home. She hauled the sack on to her head, cursing Unni’s weight, and walked as fast as she could. She took the easiest route through the woods, and avoided the major thoroughfares. Morphing from her real form to the common *ezhava* woman form within seconds in case someone came along on the roads would be difficult to achieve with such a huge weight on her head.

She rested the sack, with Unni squirming inside it tied and gagged, at the door of her house and took a deep, long breath. Oh devils, she was exhausted. She could hear her daughter Raatra working in the kitchen. Silly as she was, she was a hard worker. Kuroopi smiled indulgently before hollering to Raatra: “*Mole*, I’ve got a juicy Brahmin boy to eat today. You come here and take this sack from me!” Raatra came running out to see what her mother had brought.

“Take this boy and brew him into a nice stew. Keep one bucket of blood for me to wash my hands and legs in the evening. And another bucket for us to drink. Now, take care that you don’t open the sack until you are in the kitchen! He’s a slippery one. And close the door of the kitchen too. I’m going for a bath - you have no idea how tiresome it was to bring this one here!”

Raatra stared after her mother. Of course she had no idea how tired mother was. It was a marvel how she got new things to eat every day. Raatra had no idea how to do that. Perhaps there are trees bearing juicy boys, tender girls, withered old men? She would have stood there absent mindedly forever, but Unni squirmed in his sack and she was jolted out of her day-dream of human-bearing trees. She hauled the sack through the floor (and Unni screamed as loudly as his gagged mouth would permit it from this inhuman treatment) and stopped in the kitchen. She bolted the door, and carefully undid the sack.

In front of her stood the most beautiful human being she had ever seen. She was only sixteen years old and she’d never gone out of the house, but she had seen a large variety of humans her mother

brought home for food. Of course most of them would be already dead and some would also have started to stink - most older varieties of the human species did not survive the thought that they were in a *raakshasi*'s clutch. Yet, this Brahmin boy was so pretty that she almost did not want to eat him. She suddenly had the urge to pack him in a transparent box and keep in her room to play with every day. But she overcame that urge when Unni got up from the sack and started shaking his bound fists at her. She took off the gag-cloth and expected the boy to scream. But Unni did nothing of the sort. He stared hard at the dark, fat and uglier-than-his-grandfather girl. He knew he had to get out of the house, but there was no point trying to fight this girl. He was puny compared to her and he did not want Kuroopi to come after him again. He was thinking of the best way to win over the situation.

Raatra melted in his look, but did not show it. She went over to the stove, put wood in it and started lighting fire. Unni could only hop around, with bound feet, but Raatra kept an eye on him and he dared on test her strength.

“You work so hard. Harder than your mother,” Unni said suddenly, and Raatra dropped a pan.

“What?!”

“I said you work harder than your mother.”

“No... no... mother gets the food. I just stay in the house,” she stuttered, unsure of herself. Was it really easy to get food? Was she really working harder? She found it hard to believe.

“No, really. It's so easy to catch us humans. And your mother knows how to make us light as a feather when she picks us up. She doesn't have to do any hard work. But look at you - you have to cut us up into the right-sized pieces, cook us, keep aside the blood, oh, just so much to do! Poor you, you must be really tired, isn't it?”

Raatra held back a sob. So her mother really made her work hard while doing the easier parts herself? Was this the truth? Oh, this divinely pretty boy could not be lying. Such a nice round face, polite words, so much sympathy...

“I know an excellent way to relax after a hard day's work,” Unni continued. “May I show you? May be you can practice it after you cook me, and then you won't be tired any more. I feel so bad for you.”

Raatra looked unsure. What if mother came in while he was showing her the relaxation technique?

Unni sensed her thought. “Oh don’t worry about your mother. She is going to take a long time in the *kulam*. She won’t come in until all your hard work is over, so that she can just sit and eat the tasty dishes you cook!”

Now Raatra felt angry at her mother. Yes, this boy was telling the truth. That’s what mother did every time she went out - she’d say she’s tired, and take a long bath and not return until she is done with the cooking. How mean of her!

“Okay. Show me the relaxation technique,” she finally said.

“Oh you’ll have to undo the knots on my hands and legs.” Raatra did not look confident. “Don’t worry, I promise you I won’t run away. I just want to help you. And I hope you’ll enjoy eating me as much as I’ll enjoy helping you!”

When she’d opened the knots, he stretched himself well before he turned to her. “Come, lie down on this stone,” he said, pointing to the butchering stone in the corner of the kitchen. Raatra looked at him quizzically. “This technique needs lying on a stone, and that one’s the easiest to reach without having to go out,” Unni reasoned with her. Convinced, she lay on the butchering stone, as Unni came and stood next to her. “Now close your eyes and count to thirty.” The *rakshasi* teenager blinked - “You’ll run away when I close my eyes!” she wailed, almost in anger, her voice half-shattered in a realisation of trickery. But Unni checked her right away. “Oh no I won’t. It’s a promise. Hold my hand as you close your eyes then. That way you’ll know I’m right here,” he said.

Raatra was assured. She wiped the half-tear that had welled up in her eyes and held Unni’s left hand. She closed her eyes and began counting.

The moment the *rakshasi* girl closed her eyes, Unni clasped the butcher knife lying next to the stone and hacked at her neck. The naive little girl could not even open her eyes before she died.

\*\*\*

Unni picked up two buckets and collected the dripping blood from the gross body, lining them up against the dining hall as Kuroopi had instructed Raatra. What he really wanted to do was run back to the *unniappam* tree, but he felt like he should end this *rakshasi*’s menace for once and for all. All

the great hero tales his mother had told him through his life came to him in snatches, and he knew he should stick it out and ensure that Kuroopi never bothered him or his family again.

Cutting up the *rakshasi* girl was not easy at all, but he did it as best as he could. He did not know if there was a right way to separate flesh and bones, but he went by instinct, calling on the spirits of all the gods and heroes in mythology who had to cut people up. Someone in the small of his mind told him to just go home, but someone else told him that if he left a dead daughter with a fierce *rakshasi*, she would be impossible to defeat. He loaded all the pieces of Raatra in a huge wok, added water, spices and salt, and put it in the stove that Raatra had already lighted. He closed the lid and ran up to the attic of the house, waiting for Kuroopi to return.

\*\*\*

Kuroopi returned from a refreshing bath at the *rakshasa kulam* a few furlongs away. She called for her daughter at the door, but no reply came from inside. There was a sweet fragrance wafting through the air in the house, however, and she knew the food was ready. Good old Raatra! Silly she may be, but she was a dainty homemaker. The little girl might have gone for a bath behind the house, the indulgent mother thought.

In the dining hall, she found the buckets of blood ready, and the mere sight of them made her mouth water. She took a sip from a bucket, and “Oh my devil! This is the sweetest blood I’ve ever tasted in my life! All that *unniappam*, I’m sure!” she thought. She went into the kitchen and saw that a wok of Unni stew was simmering on the stove. She opened the lid and smelt the best dish of her life. She was contented. “Oh, I could die right now. This is diabolical!” she screamed in delight. She wondered if she should wait for Raatra - but then she’d be in in a few moments, *and how hungry I am!* Without further delay, Kuroopi poured out the stew into a bowl and started slurping away in pure joy.

From somewhere far away but near enough, words of a chant flowed into the house. “Eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter...”

*What was that voice? What is it saying?* Kuroopi wondered, reluctant to stop relishing the stew. Just as she was about to dismiss the voice, it became clearer, “Eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter...”

*What? Eat your what?*

Clearer still, and louder, “Eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter...”

*Eat your daughter!?* *What?* Kuroopi stared at her bowl in livid terror, and frantically ran outside the house to the bath area. Raatra wasn't there. She ran into all the rooms of the house - there was no sign of Raatra. Where was the girl? The chanting continued, driving her mad. “Eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter, eat, eat, eat your daughter...”

She ran out of the house, tearing at her hair, she banged her head on the ground, she bawled at the sky. And there, at the attic window, was the head of the Brahmin boy. She grew red with fury, and ran up the attic, wailing inconsolably. “You pagan saint, you killed my daughter! You fed her to me! You made me eat the fruit of my own womb! You cooked her! You depraved soothsayer! You odious creature! You killed her!”

Unni jumped out of the attic window and crash-landed on the hay-bale he had already marked. And then he ran. It would be stupid to pretend to be brave now - the old hag was really really unhinged, and she was superhuman. Unni ran for his dear life, and all the hero tales he had heard offered him no solace. He tried to remember if *rakshasis* could fly. *No, I don't think so.* But he looked behind him to ascertain the thing - and he saw Kuroopi running at him as fast as she could, which wasn't much, and he did not turn back for a second look.

He took a turn on the path and ran into a well. In a split moment he decided that he should pretend to have fallen into the well. Maybe she'll go back thinking him dead. All his heroic thought of ending a menace had left him the moment he saw her raging red visage. Kuroopi had not reached the turn yet. He took a huge stone and dropped it into the well, and hid behind the parapet of the well just in time. Kuroopi turned the corner to the sound of the stone dropping into the well, and when she looked in, all she could see was ripples. “You vile human, you think you can hide from me inside a ditch?” she screamed. Unni, from the other side of the well, thought he had heard it wrong. *Has the old crone gone mad? It's a well!* But before he could finish the thought, the *rakshasi* had jumped into the well.

Luckily for Unni, deep waters can kill anyone who didn't know how to swim - even *rakshasis*. After what seemed like eternity, he dared to peek into the well, and all he could see was a head of grey hair bobbing up and down. In a few minutes it stopped bobbing altogether.

\*\*\*

Unni walked and walked and walked in the direction he thought his house lay. Of course he got lost a few times, but he figured it out in the end. It was late evening by the time he reached familiar territory. And as soon as he realised that he was in his town, he started running, huffing and panting, and shot through the house door in an instant.

Unni's grandfather was sitting on his leaning chair in the verandah chewing *vettila paakk* as usual. When he saw the boy running in, he yelled to Unni's mother, "Savitri, here comes your son! Ask him where he was!" But before his mother could see him, he ran to the well and drew out buckets of water to wash off the dirt and grime from himself.

"Where do you think you were! Do you know how worried I was! You're taking bath - you went out to play with those *ezhava* kids, didn't you! *Shiva shiva!* What do I do with this boy! He'll get rid of the only asset we have - purity!"

Unni let his mother rant. He glanced towards the backyard - his *unniappam* tree had risen to its full height and was beckoning him. Heaving a huge sigh, he dried himself, ran to the tree ignoring his mother and started munching on its delicious fruits.

### **Glossary:**

*Unniappam* – a fried sweet made of rice flour, banana and jaggery, round in shape

*vettila paakk* – paan, betel leaf combined with tobacco, areca nut and slaked lime paste. Generally eaten after food as a digestive, but also serves as an intoxicant

*Namboothiri/Namboothirippad* – An upper caste (Brahmin) Hindu community, which fell to poor times with the end of feudalism

*Pooja/homa/yagya* – Various offerings and ritualistic deity worship performed according to Hindu scriptures

*Aashaari* – a lower caste in Kerala, literally carpenters

*Ezhava* – a lower caste in Kerala



*Adharmi – without ‘dharma’ or righteousness*

*Karmam – rituals*

*Poonool – white thread worn by Brahmins around their body that they believe to be sacred*

*Amme – the way children call their mother in south India, variation of amma*

*Sambar – A vegetarian curry popular in south India*

*Rakshasas – ogres*

*Devans – Gods/divine entities*

*Deepam – a chant that accompanies the evening lighting of the brass lamp. Literally, lamp.*

*Daivame – an exclamation amounting to “Oh God”*

*Rakshasi – ogress*

*Kulam – pond*

*Bhajan – hymn*

*Sadhu – saint*

*Uchapooja – afternoon prayers*

*Mole – O daughter*