



# SLIPPERS AND *Garlands*

From the veranda of their new home, the narrator and his wife could see the temple and an old woman who worked there. But how long will the view last for the retiree?

By AJAY VISWANATHAN

We moved here last summer—arched bodies, dying knees and so many repaired body parts—because the house was a minute from the pharmacist, and two minutes from the milkman. Mainly, it overlooked the temple. The cook and newspaperman came in the mornings, the maid every afternoon, and the grocer in the evening. They were nice people who spoke loudly and slowly, knowing we couldn't hear very well. Jaya and I came to live out our final stretch here in this small town, to lounge peacefully on the veranda taking in the sandalwood wafts from the temple and pretending to hear the bells toll during prayer time.

With interest, we watched people leave their slippers outside the temple with a widow who charged them a rupee to keep them safe from petty thieves who prowled the area. At the same time, she sold brightly colored flower garlands from her wicker basket. Our maid Sheela, our main source of neighborhood tales, pointed out that the widow was at least 85 years old,

ten more than me and twenty more than Jaya. She didn't look that old to us, squatting under the baking sun the whole day.

I didn't like her. She made me look older, with my constant need to loll in an almost horizontal position on my special chair, one hand clutching the newspaper and the other buried in my bowl of snacks.

"Impressive," Jaya said, watching the widow talk animatedly to her customers with stabbing gestures. The woman had no trouble remembering where she put their slippers in a haphazard pile of almost a hundred. I nodded dispassionately, unimpressed.

"Look at her," said Jaya, who never stopped marveling. "She keeps track of all kinds of footwear, her money, and even sells garlands to visitors."

I told myself the woman looked scary, her bald head hooded in a white sari. Her mouth moved constantly even when there was no one around. From Sheela we learned that she sang all the time, songs about a lost

# Flash Fiction



*“Look at her,” said Jaya, who never stopped marveling. “She keeps track of all kinds of footwear, her money, and even sells garlands to visitors.”*

traveler, tunes she had been singing for decades. Legend had it that she was married at thirteen and widowed at fifteen. She often shielded her left eye with her palm and looked sideways. I wondered whether she was looking at us and would quickly hide behind the open newspaper.

Come winter, the widow stopped selling flowers, her focus now mainly on people's slippers. Without the accompanying color, she looked frailer to me. It was December when Jaya fell ill again. Everyone had expected me to go first but she was a diabetic who loved sweets. I knew she secretly gorged on *jelebis* and *laddoos* that Sheela smuggled into the house without my permission. This time, it was serious; a neglected wound in her foot that Jaya had chosen to hide from me had grown into an unseemly, painful patch, and now turned gangrenous. The doctor recommended amputating part of her foot, but seeing Jaya's eyes fill with disapproving tears I said no. When he asked me to inform our family about Jaya's condition, a sudden sadness gripped my heart, a longing for that son who had come to us stillborn, a deep regret at not being able to father any more.

Leaning against the bedrest, as Jaya slurped slowly on the lentil soup that I had made for her after almost a decade, her pallid face told me she would never join me on the veranda again. I had all the lights on inside the house at nights, even during the day, trying to eliminate every shadowy corner—they reminded me of a noose closing in on Jaya. Every morning I read the newspaper aloud to her. She would nod eagerly at the beginning, but soon doze off, soft snores escaping her

parted lips. Occasionally, she would half-open her eyes to say *hmmm*, just to keep me going. Once, I abruptly shook Jaya's shoulder and told her the widow had apparently misplaced someone's slippers and the client was screaming at her. “See? She makes mistakes too at that age,” I said. To this, Jaya shook her head tiredly and muttered, “Liar,” and went back to sleep, smiling. I guess she knew me well.

Jaya died in early January. The end came fast.

February and March followed sluggishly. Warm breezes from an imminent summer soon sent budding blooms into a blossoming frenzy. The red, white and yellow garlands were back in the widow's basket, bright, juicy, bees buzzing amok.

I sat inside the house and stared at the two empty chairs on the veranda, imagining Jaya peel her glasses back to admire the busy lady. “Impressive,” she would say. The widow's hand still moved like a machine—slippers, loose change, garlands, loose change.

I didn't feel like sitting outside anymore, where I would be alone, no hand to comfort me when the lady in white shielded her eyes from sunshine and looked sideways, probably seeing me turn older, more scared, more vulnerable.

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