



“The Rent Not Paid”

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After three and a half decades of being a surgeon, last year I quit. I wanted to try my luck as a general practitioner; to find out if I had the mettle to survive on my own, listening to patients, talking to them and treating their simple ailments. My surgical career in far-flung places helped me stock my mental cupboard with untold wealth. Along the way I understood the worth of my own intuitive faculties.

We were like two migratory birds, my husband and I. My love for the rural life and Vijay’s decision to leave mainstream journalism and shape his own creative destiny opened our lives to unpredictable adventures. Ultimately it brought us here, to my own rural countryside. Halligattu, where we now live, is a seven-hour drive west from the city of Bangalore into the heart of Kodagu district in Karnataka, in the foothills of the Westerns Ghats.

The Kodavas are a small community of ancestor worshippers. Along with several other tribes, we have lived in this magically beautiful valley of Kodagu for no one knows how long. Our written history is as recent as the eighteenth-century and so much of what is ancient is presumed, imagined. What we do know is that we have lived by farming and hunting for several hundred years. Most of Kodagu was thickly forested and its fertile soil ideal for growing rice, fruit, pepper, cardamom, and coffee. It attracted traders, mendicants, runaway armies, and invaders. Some, like the Haleri kings (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries) and the British who came soon after, stayed on and ruled, for a total of three hundred years. The kings brought the ritualized Hindu religion, the temples, priests, and trade; the British who deposed the last of the Haleri Kings improved the administration, built schools, and introduced the cultivation of coffee. They also bequeathed us a sliver of “Englishness” that we are reluctant to let go of. We accrued wealth, many material benefits, and some education. Our fortunes and our futures changed forever.

The coffee plantations and the rice fields required workers. In the beginning, our sister tribals – the Yerevas, Kurubas, Kudiyas, and Paniyas – were happy to earn a very modest livelihood from such work, the payment for which was a weekly measure of unhusked rice and a few annas in copper. Then came migrants from the neighboring districts. They are the Moplahs from Kerala, the Tamils, Kannadigas, and people from the northeastern states thousands of miles away. They work hard, demand more, get more. Their children go to school, to college, and move up, never to take up the plough or scythe. They set up flour mills provision stores, repair shops, taxi services, cyber cafes. The transformation of this hill district has been rapid in the last twenty years. Two-thirds of the population of Kodagu is made up of “outsiders.” The life that was once rich in tradition, ritual, and pastoral plenitude is fading. Today Kodagu attracts weekenders from the cities. Those of us who have always belonged are trying to adjust, but it is not easy.

When I was young, the village school was a half hour’s barefoot trudge away. I studied under an oil lamp until age sixteen, when electric bulbs first lit our home. After medical college and surgical training in England, I came back to India and was immediately attracted to rural



work, some of which has been in my own district, Kodagu. Work has become part habit and part need. A year ago, having wound up my fulltime surgical career, I rented a room for a clinic in Ponnampet, a town of modest proportions five kilometers from our home. I furnished the room with a table, chairs, an examination couch, and a few essential tools. I set up trade. That my clinic is between two barber shops is an appropriate reminder of my surgical ancestry, the first association of surgeons, in England, having evolved from the barbers' guild. My clipper-wielding colleagues come to me with their medical problems, refer their clients to me, and at times keep guard when I need to use the only toilet in the building complex (the door latch doesn't work). In exchange, I wheedle my husband Vijay into having his hair shorn by one and then the other. Our professional friendship pleases me to no end. I am as anxious for their trades to thrive as I am for mine. We have not borrowed tools from each other, though. Not yet.

The medicines I use are few and inexpensive. But while I am frugal in the use of therapeutic chemicals, I am lavish with advice about food, exercise, and cleanliness. Most patients listen with polite helplessness, or sly amusement. The regulars sometimes leave their personal belongings in the waiting area – a cubicle with some chairs and a side table stacked with old magazines. They shop, visit the bank, the post office, bakery, or one of the four liquor shops before coming back to collect their things. On a busy day, the waiting room of my clinic contains umbrellas, bags of fruit, and on rare occasions a child or two, quietly tearing bits off the magazines on the side table or indulging in brief bursts of rowdiness until a parent or grandparent comes to claim them. The other day a woman paused to show me a “blouse-piece” she had purchased. Would it match her mango-green sari?

I decided to see patients at home, too, in the evenings, for the benefit of those who live near our home in the village of Halligattu. We partitioned off a portion of the veranda and I stocked up on the essentials – tablets, salves, injections, bandages, and splints. I have no fixed hours. Rural cordiality ensures that patients are willing to wait while I finish bathing, boiling the milk, heating chapattis, or finishing a call. Some evenings I return from my walk to find Vijay with half a dozen patients in our living room. An old woman coughing, a baby crying, a boy retching, and my dear husband offering glasses of water, toys, reassuring words. The curious among them will get a conducted tour of the house, only to go away visibly disappointed by the profusion of books and paper that occupy every room. The privileged class don't frequent my clinic very much. Perhaps they are put off by the “equalizer” effect of my shabby-looking clinic. “You should discourage these laborers,” says a friend. “They spread all sorts of diseases. And how can you trust them? They will observe everything, then come back and rob.” Such fear is regardless of the fact that there has been no such incident in the village. He also accuses me of encouraging workers to send their children to school. “If they study and land better jobs, where will we find workers during the coffee-picking season?”

Patients who seek my advice at my home clinic are the daily wage earners – colorful, chatty, curious. They are neatly turned out unless they have rushed her straight from work. The fish seller stops by late in the evening. He has had no time to go home for a bath before coming to the clinic and is apologetic about the fishy smells that linger on him and later in the room. One woman whom I treat for her arthritic pain regularly requests me to “hide” a few hundred rupees for her, safe from her husband. I think the man knows, or do I imagine the dirty looks I get from



him? Excitement is always ‘round the corner. I see patients with “heart and sugar” problems, with epileptic seizures, dog bites, and injuries that follow drunken brawls.

One early afternoon there came the grumble of an agitated motorbike approaching our house. It signaled an emergency of some sort. The bike bumped to a halt in our front yard, inches away from our semisacred tulsi plant so lovingly housed in by bricks. Rajan, who was riding the bike, sprang away as the bike fell. Mani the pillion-rider jumped, too, but fell sprawling next to the spinning wheels, entangled in which was an incredibly long, yellowish-brown snake, heaving and whipping at the metal spokes that imprisoned it. Rajan had a bite on his shin and Mani was in shock, which changed to relief when he realized that the snake was not a cobra, krait, or viper. “It is a rat snake,” he said, backing away nevertheless. Mani is a carpenter, in constant demand for his work. Rajan, a self-taught plumber, can be counted on to set right any pipeline dilemma. They had picked up the unfortunate passenger when negotiating a stretch of coffee plantation in order to take a shorter route into town. The bite of a rat snake causes a severe chemical reaction. Rajan would need treatment for a month or two perhaps if the bite got infected, but he would be OK. For the snake, it was the last journey.

Snake, wasp, and scorpion bites used to be very common in Kodagu. Now the plantation workers have footwear and better clothing for protection and therefore they are not so common. The Kodavas, like tribals everywhere, tend to stay close to nature. They depend heavily on the animal and plant world for sustenance. The meat seller once wrapped purchases in a plantain leaf and tied with a string stripped from its fibrous rib. Leaves of turmeric and plantain were used to wrap food or tacked together into shallow bowls in which just-plucked blooms were kept fresh by flower sellers. Until a few decades ago the locals could boast of robust health largely due to a good diet, physical labor, and clean surroundings. The good diet comprised wild boar, bison, fowl, rabbit meat, and fresh greens and mushrooms, with rice used in a variety of steamed preparations. Modernity brought many conveniences; but motor vehicles led to sedentary habits and less physical activity, television, and packaged foods. The change in the pattern of disease is very much a part of changed lifestyles. While earlier I treated work-related injuries, wasp and snake and scorpion stings, worm infestations, and the like, the classical triad of high-blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes are the ruling afflictions of today.

The village of Halligattu is home to about five hundred people. Our neighbors are from different local communities – Moplahs, Yeravas, Kurubas, Kodavas, and several Kannada-speaking people of the district. The coffee plantations that surround our home are lavishly wooded with a profusion of birds and creatures that scamper and crawl. Adjoining our bedroom upstairs is a balcony wide enough to hold two chairs, with a bannister on which you can place a book, a drink, and an ashtray. Vijay spends a lot of his time in this most cherished part of the house, reading, doing crossword puzzles, smoking, writing poetry. I join him late in the evenings. We talk about this and that. We look at the trees patterned blackly against a silver sky and watch the bats and the occasional owl swoop like trapeze artists. We listen to the throb of life in the embrace of darkness.

Our life is rich in rural comforts and poor in some others. We must go without electricity for days, letters must be collected from the post office in town, the roads are cratered and pocked with stones, and when the rains get heavy we are cut off from the town due to fallen trees or damaged electric poles. Inside the house the floors seep moisture and the tiled roof leaks in



places. A colorful parade of buckets and trays is marched strategically around the rooms. Imprisoned by leaden skies, we live out the weeks in a drama of mopping, drying, wringing out. Three shows a day, or five, or six when the rains refuse to take a break. Similar scenes are enacted in most homes.

Like the good girl that (I think) I am, I compartmentalize my days. Leisure toward the end of the day, every day. An evening walk, some television, balcony time, and reading. On my walk I meet Yashoda, the village tailor-cum-entrepreneur, schoolgirls on their way home, women carrying subsidized rice in sacks half their weight, or one of the landed gentry, such as our neighbor and coffee planter, Willie, in his lumbering, once-white classic Contessa. I sidestep little kids practicing on adult bicycles, gossip briefly with the women at the water tap filling their pitchers, or stop by at Yusuf's. Yusuf's is the local sanctuary for a small glass of tea, a friendly bidi, banter, or a murmured togetherness. Tribal women, evening tipplers on their way home, kids eyeing candies in glass bottles, a retired army captain in urgent need of a smoke, Vijay, and others like to sit in the neat little porch fronting the shop that snugly stands between the homes of Yusuf's two sons. I think he and his wife have living privileges in both. Yusuf shares a warm yet formal friendship with me. We sometimes exchange small gifts like a few bananas, coffee powder, toffees, a glass of tea. On my way back home I stop at Chaya and Maimoona's home to collect the still-warm milk of their cow that has the sweetness I love.

A few times every week I see Mara, his unmistakable loping steps recognizable from afar. He is a wisp of a man, bare of feet, in trousers that can hold two of him tied with a string around his waist. His shirt is ripped over one shoulder. Mara is always on the lookout for some bird, fruit, dried wood, or an empty bottle that may come in handy. He challenges my professional knowledge by explaining the medicinal values of the plants that he tries to sell me with engaging sincerity. The other day he came home with a bunch of greens in his hand. "For your sugar-patients, Avva." Like most of the tribals, he addresses me as Avva, mother, or Akka, sister, and I far prefer these to the recently fashionable Aunty. I look at the small crescent-shaped, crinkle-bordered leaves. "Rat-ear leaf," he explains. "To be chewed raw or cooked."

I have learned remedies from Mara and others like him who nurture the age-old wisdom about health. The older generation of tribals is familiar with herbal medicines that can be used in stomach infections, fevers, jaundice, and skin ailments. And there is the popularly used "medicine leaf" with which the locals make a signature dish every year in the month of Kakkada (mid-July to mid-August). For a mere fortnight, this ordinary-looking hedge plant renders the goodness of eighteen different ingredients that rejuvenate and boost immunity. We boil the leaves in water until it turns a rich maroon, and with this liquid we make a steamed rice flavored with cardamom and grated coconut. It is slightly bitter and eaten with ghee and honey. We loved it, even as children, not just because of its unique color and taste but the fact that it makes the urine a purple-red. Boys made a sport of it and competed with their vivid micturary arcs.

There are many tribals, like Mara, who are other than Kodava, in our area. Their houses are on a narrow path next to the school. It is called Seetha Colony. Most of Seetha's residents are Yeravas and Betta-Kurubas (the so-called hill people), and like many of the poorer tribes of this district, their future is grim, mainly because they lack aspiration, in the modern sense of the term. Moreover, their absolute preference for the outdoors and the wild has meant that they have



largely side-stepped education and then been ignored by it. The richer landowners find it convenient to use them for manual labor and so the cycle of poverty continues.

Kali, a Yerava woman, lives in a thatched, mud-walled home in Seetha Colony along with her own daughter and seven grandchildren. Her sisters Kethi and Chomi live next door. Kali has worked in our home for six months, three days a week. The flowered green fragment of an underskirt wrapped like a scarf around her frizzy hair frames a small face that was once pretty. Her brown eyes lie deep in their sockets; her lips are forever reddened with the juice of areca nut and betel. She works slowly and meticulously—sweeping floors, washing clothes, cutting vegetables, and cleaning the fish we buy at the weekly market. Kali does not approve of needless chatter, and even if I try it, she will rebuff me with a grunt. When she is paid—she insists on being paid every day—she gives me a ragamuffin grin, grabs the note, and is off. It is rare for her to become voluble, but when she does she talks about family, grandchildren, and her two daughters and a son who have all died. At least once or twice a month she skips work, without notice. Sometimes she bunks an entire week.

It is frustrating, though when I confront her she comes up with a reason. She has much weighing on her—one or the other of her grandchildren needed books, a distant relative has died, there was a wedding to go to. Sadly, Kali is also a regular tippler and she saves up for a binge every now and then. The reason, she said, was that she had lost two daughters to “illness” and the son to an accident. The grandchildren must be cared for and her grief must be submerged in country arrack. Four of her grandchildren we know. In the early days of our moving to this village, they came in twos and threes to our house and rang the brass bell that Vijay has hung on our porch with a length of green string. It is more reliable than an electric call bell. Two of the girls win prizes in school every year. Three of the older boys dropped out of school in the sixth standard. No amount of beating, berating, or pleading can get them to go. Now they work in the fields and in the evenings loiter, aiming their catapults at sparrows. Kali knows that going to school is part of the process of improving one’s earning power. She does not know why. The eldest of her grandsons has taken to drinking. Not with the disciplined compulsion of his grandmother but in furious binges that leave him senseless. Each time, Kali nurses him back to health and it means skipping work for days together.

Thirty-year-old Yashoda makes up for the shyness and taciturnity of other young women of the village. She pedals away on her sewing machine and turns out clothes for many of the local children and women. I, too, am beholden, for she not only sews new clothes but mends the old. Yashoda prepares and sells powdered spices and heads a small sub-center of a microfinancing cooperative for women. She has motivated them to save and invest in small profit-making ventures. It has transformed shy, disheveled women into neatly-turned-out young ladies who have discovered self-reliance and dignity. Their monthly meetings are held in the small front yard of Yashoda’s house. I hear their laughing voices as I go by, and their leader’s assertive answers to their questions. Yashoda herself adopted a child twenty years ago. He is now in college. She has dreams of sending him abroad. Her love for him borders on the excessive.

Family is very much a part of my own identity. Halligattu is just fifteen kilometers from the childhood sanctuary of the home where I grew up. For me, it is still the most restful place to be. It brings back memories, real and imagined, my own and those of my ancestors who lived there for over a century and a half. Here my father’s mother gave birth to her thirteen children;



here during the India's struggle for freedom from the British my father typed revolutionary pamphlets for circulation. The police came with a search warrant but found no evidence the typewriter being safely hidden in the embers of the fireplace. Subsequently he was arrested when hoisting a national flag in the village and spent three years in prison.

We Kodavas believe completely in our rights. Kodagu is our land. It belongs to us, and to the smaller sister tribes that have always lived here. We tolerated the "outsider" as a boss or as a menial worker. For centuries the straight-backed, big-shouldered Kodavas lived as though (gun in hand, or spear or sword) we had nothing to fear. Besides other wild beasts, tigers were killed during hunting expeditions and the victorious hunter was "married" to the dead tiger in a real ceremony, with the groom seated next to the spread-eagled carcass of the beast. A man who had killed a tiger was allowed to grow the *galle meese*, the heavy, curling mustache that blends with the sideburns. Many families including mine have photographs of fathers, uncles, or some near relative being wedded to a tiger. Fortunately for the hunter, this did not prevent his marrying a female of his own species.

Throughout history, Kodavas retained a certain exclusivity and importance in Kodagu, largely because we owned much of the land, which might be why other tribes were denied many rights. The Haleri kings and then the British found it convenient to focus their attention on the Kodavas and ignore the rest. We landed government jobs. We learned that growing coffee would yield good returns and converted vast areas of paddy into coffee plantations. The British were suitably impressed. As we moved up the economic and social ladders we looked upward but never down. It was better to keep on climbing. That is the general drift of humankind.

In the last few decades we have had to accept the fact that others, too, have similar aspirations as ours. They, too, can climb and reach what was once beyond their reach. They can buy property and settle in Kodagu where they were once migrant workers, in search of a livelihood. We resent this invasion of our dominance; we resist it with grumblings, protests, and petitions to the authorities. Our little district is only a miniature of the whole – where it was once people for people, it is now people versus people. Every race perceives the other as a threat, and we are no different, pulling, pushing, driving out, wiping off, all in order to retain what we believe is our identity and our right to power.

I look down and see my claws.

Ashamed, I resist this drift. I resist with all my being this selfish driving out of others. Much as I love our isolation, I want to be connected. Not through the vaporous zones of invisible friendships but through heard voices, visible faces, human touch, and that friendliest gesture in the world, eye contact – all the more precious for those of us who do not have smartphones and such. If there is one thing I dearly want in life, it is to be able to sit talking to another person (one person, two, or three, but preferably one) over tea, coffee, or nothing. Talking. Not talking.

The primitive desire to nestle for warmth and love is persistent, untiring. The home nurtures personal dignity. Yet there are many whose only home is in the inside of their skulls. I have the privilege and choice to remain here, or move elsewhere. Not many have the advantage. Some have much less, no place to call their own. I grieve for the things I have not done, the rent I have not paid to earth for its generosity. I cannot think of any other place I would rather be than this, a village in my beloved Kodagu. I have the security of a home, closeness to nature, the trust and love of my people. But a question gnaws at my happiness: If all of this is mine, why is it



so? My good fortune troubles me as much as it fulfills. Why should my husband and I have complete authority over a piece of land while millions in my own country are homeless?

What belongs? Nothing really. We grabbed this land with the tinsel hoarded through the years while people like Kali, like Yashoda, Yusuf, and Mara live in hardship. I remember the day we moved into our new home when our families and friends came bearing gifts that would make our home more comfortable and beautiful. Later that evening, sitting in our new balcony for the first time, we were pleased, very pleased. Now I look back and wonder why we were not at all worried for the people who walked the streets of the city through the night because they lacked the tanner that would help them rest their buckling knees.