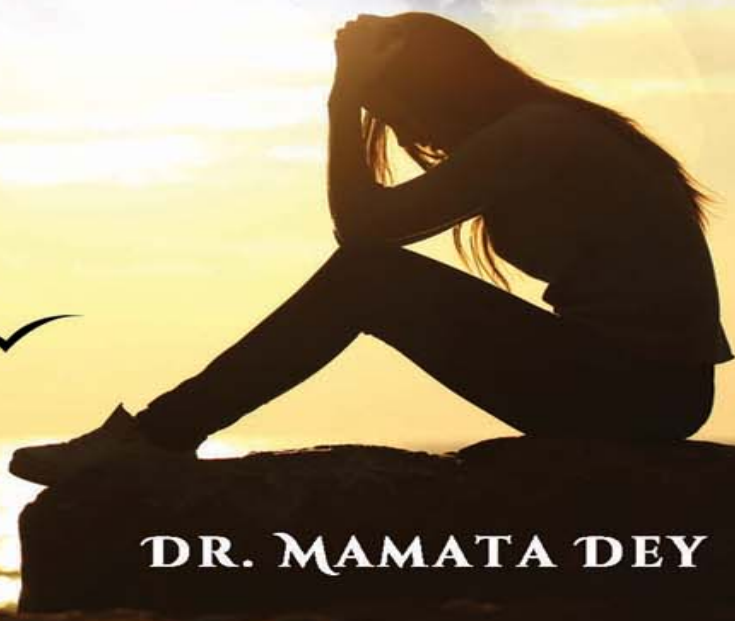


# GOD IS THERE, AFTER ALL



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# 1

The supposedly haunted house stood large and looming in the distance, silhouetted against the pale moonlight. Facing the narrow road that led to the only high school in the village, the house, atop a hill, orcharded trees bearing flowers and fruits that withered up on the branches, being untouched by human hands for many years. The boundary wall was not too high, but no school boy ever dared to jump over it and enter the grounds for fear of ghosts. It was rumoured that a tramp who had slept in the verandah one stormy night was found dead the next morning with blood oozing out of his tightly closed lips. Fruit trees of almost every variety was there in the garden and while mangoes, jackfruits and litchis hung lusciously from the branches in summer, red and yellow berries in winter tantalized way-farers. If anyone made bold to scale the wall and enter, others dissuaded him with such vehemence that he had to drop the idea. The poor Indian peasants who comprised almost three fourths of the inhabitants of the village, imagined all sorts of strange noises and voices emanating from the house not only at night but also in the day time. Nearby there was not any other house and even if there had been one, the inmates must have shifted long back.

Originally, the house had belonged to a wealthy zamindar who had settled in the city and rarely visited his ancestral home which was being looked after by his servants. His only son had settled and obtained an American citizenship and was perhaps too busy earning and spending money to claim ownership of the house. The Zamindar's lone sister had been widowed at an early age and had no issue. After the death of the Zamindar some twenty years ago, she had stayed in the house with a middle-aged man-servant to help her with her domestic chores. God knows what happened but one stormy morning the villagers found them dead in each others' arm on the verandah of the house. It was a clear case of amour that ended in suicide. That was ten years back and after that the people said that they had seen the ghosts of the lady and the servant strolling hand in hand in the verandah of the upper storey. Perhaps they

imagined it, but over the years the house came to acquire the name of a haunted house.

The village which we are talking about is in one of the South-Eastern coastal districts of India where innumerable little tributaries of rivers meander their way into the Bay of Bengal. Located on the banks of one such river, the village boasted of a pretty little Shiva temple at the top of a hill on one side, and a high school on the other. There were hardly any Government Offices and the few Government employees who stayed in the village, used to commute to the town by bus. The town was a good twenty five kilometers away. Beyond the river there was a thick wood of eucalyptus trees and beyond this small forest, one could glimpse a part of the Bay of Bengal in all its grand and shimmering beauty, nature laughing in full glory unspoiled by human touch, the wave lapping up the shores, like a little baby playing happily in his mother's arms. Such beautiful places are easily detected by adventurous, inquisitive interfering human beings who soon change them into crowded noisy picnic spots. But thanks to the insignificance of the village, this place had remained undiscovered by outsiders for a long time and the natural charm of the village continued to remain virgin and unspoilt.

That day the whole village was bursting with the latest sensational news; an office-goer to the town had just heard that the house had been sold and the news had spread among the five thousand inhabitants of the village like wildfire. Who could have bought it ?, they wondered ! The American based son of the Zamindar had negotiated the deal with a not-so-old man, who had bought the house at a very low price. And it was heard that he was also going to stay there permanently. Well, well, this was news indeed ! In the market place speculations were rife as to whether the owner would be rid of the ghosts, or the ghosts would be rid of him.

“Do you know he is coming today?” The Gram Panchayat asked the headman on a fine morning as they were returning from a bath in the river after the completion of their morning ablutions. The headman who was a Brahmin did not reply but just kept on muttering some mantras, holding his sacred thread. After they had walked on for some time, he seemed to ponder over the matter, and replied “Yea, and we must welcome him with

at least a garland of flowers. You see it's just a form of courtesy. After all he'll soon be like our family member for I hear he is staying here permanently. At least, we must be there at the bus stop to receive him”.

It was an insignificant stop by the road side. Usually few other people, other than the office-goers boarded or alighted the bus, which halted there just for minute or so. On that particular day, the villagers were already assembled there long before the bus arrived at half-past two. A not-so-very-thick garland had been woven and along with the headman of the village a few half-clothed children had also gathered there, their eyes wide with curiosity. On seeing the approaching bus. they stopped their animated conversation and waited for the bus to halt. A man alighted and the villagers held their breath in admiration, for he was strikingly handsome, dressed in milky spotless white dhoti and kameez. He could be of any age, between twenty six and forty five; they kept on guessing. Behind him stood an old man of about fifty five years of age, who looked around here and there to catch sight of any vehicle that could carry his master's belongings to the house. The luggage comprised of a cot, a table, a sack containing few utensils a suitcase and a trunk .“Namaskar”, the headman greeted the stranger with folded hands and the others followed suit. The man reciprocated with a similar gesture, a smile lighting up his face. “We have gathered here to welcome you,” some one said “After all, now you are like a member of our own family. Your joys are our joys, your sorrows are our sorrows. Anyway, where are the other members of your family, your parents?” he queried.

“ He has none and he's not yet married”. The old man replied curtly, as he and the man got up on a rickshaw, while the puller picked up his belongings, and away they rode up to the house, leaving the villagers gaping behind them.

“A very disagreeable pair”, one of them broke the silence, “I daresay, typical city manners”.

“Of course not”! The headman retorted angrily, “my aunt and uncle live in the city and I'm sure there is not a more well-mannered, friendly and agreeable couple”.

The crowd dispersed, rather disappointed. The villagers had hoped that the man and his servant would consult them and seek their advice in doing some sort of a 'puja' before entering the house, but nothing of that sort happened. As the man opened the gate of the house, it made a terrible creaking sound, for the gate had not been opened for years and rust had gathered on it. Master and servant immediately set about cleaning the house. The water of the well looked black and dirty, but it would do for washing the floor. After a hard labour of three hours of washing and mopping water off from floor, the rooms looked quite clean.

“Aren't you feeling hungry, Sir”?, asked Prasad “I'm famished,” Baba said laughing, as a row of sparkling white teeth flashed out. “But first, I must sit down for meditation”.

He went away to an inner apartment while the servant hurried off to buy some grocery from a nearby shop. “No ghosts there ?” The shopkeeper asked, “Not at all, we don't believe in ghosts and that is why we bought the house,” Prasadda said in a matter- of- fact manner. When he reached home, his master was still in meditation. The sun was setting and a strange calm had descended on the village. He lit the gas stove and within half an hour, a meal of rice, dal and boiled potatoes had been pressure cooked. Baba's meditation was over and both of them sat down to eat. Since both of them were awfully hungry, the meal though consisting of only mixture, or “Khicddi” of three items, tasted like ambrosia. And soon the beds were made, and both of them retired to a sound sleep.

In the morning, a local youth called upon them. “Namaskar”, he said most reverentially, with folded hands, “we are staging a 'jatra' today, and we want some donation”.

Anand Babu (Baba), as the gentleman was called, handed him a twenty rupee note. The lanky youth lingered on to have some more friendly conversation.

“You must come to the 'jatra', tonight, if not we'll mind it”. He said exuberantly,

“Our master doesn’t go any where”, Prasadda said as Baba went indoors.

“Can’t he speak?” the youth studied Prasadda. “Are you his spokesman? Well, I’m sure if he retains his disagreeable nature, he cannot remain for long in this village”. He walked away angrily.

Soon word spread around the village that Anand Babu was a proud man, a very disagreeable person. For almost a week he was the topic of discussion in every home and shop. “What does he do for a living?” “Doesn’t he ever talk or come out of his house?” “No, he was seen going to the town by bus today.” “Is he dumb?” What sort of prayer does he do for hours”, “from where does he get money?” “is he himself a ghost ?” These were some of the questions which bothered the villagers, providing food for gossip. And just as waves which come and go giving place to fresh waves gossip about this man gradually died down giving place to newer discussions.

## 2

Every day, as Maya walked to and fro from school, she watched a pair of eyes watching her intently from the verandah of the haunted house. She had just stepped into her twelfth year and the upsurge of romantic thought and feelings had not yet invaded and flooded her mind. Why should that man stare at me like this? She kept wondering. ‘She did not consider herself beautiful for her friends never told her so. In fact, she was just fair and plain-looking. with straight, black hair upto her shoulders.

It was a day in the month of April. Though the day had started with bright sunshine, all of a sudden, dark, menacing clouds began to hover in the sky from nowhere. But then, rain like death, is unpredictable. It may come any moment.

“Hurry up !” The school girls shouted to each other, for it was time to return home. Most of them did not like to get wet in the rain, but some, like Maya, loved to play in small puddles of water, splashing water around with their legs. Maya loved to feel the rain water trickling down her face, and added to that there would be an extra, mother-made, steaming hot cup of tea which was a treat in such rare occasions.

“I’ll go later”, she said. After some time it drizzled, and clutching her school bag tightly under her arm, she walked home. The pace of the shower was increasing rapidly and soon it began to rain in sheets. The raindrops pricked her skin like needles, and when she was near the haunted house, she felt frightened. Soon the heavy rain walled before her and her vision was completely blurred. Impulsively, she turned towards the gate of the haunted house and ran to the verandah. She was almost near to tears. She regretted not having gone home earlier with her friends. Oh, how she longed to be at home and feel the warm, comforting embrace of her mother! Suddenly, the door swung open from behind and a voice spoke to her. “O, it’s you; come in come in !” For a moment she was taken aback, but when she turned around she was greeted with the most, affectionate

smile she had ever seen. “Do come in. You are trembling with cold, and this hot cup of tea will do you good”.

Maya went in, hesitatingly and the man beckoned to her to sit in a chair, He offered her a cup of tea “No, I don’t drink tea at all” ,she lied for courtesy’s sake.

“You really don’t? I think little children love tea, particularly in this weather”. He smiled knowingly. By now, Maya could no longer resist her desire to drink tea. She took it from his hands and started sipping it. He also brought some biscuits and a little mixture in a plate and said. “Eat it. Maya, you must be hungry”. Maya was surprised that he knew her name.

“How did you know my name, Sir ?”

“I’ve heard your friends calling you sometimes while passing by my house. And by the way, don’t call me Sir. Please, I’m not your teacher. I’m just your friend” he said laughing.

“My friend! How can you be my friend? You are so much older to me.” Maya was in peals of laughter, she had already overcome her shyness and fears. “Any way, what shall I call you then ?”

“Er.....Call me Baba, if you like.”

Again she laughed “But you are not my father. I used to address my father as ‘Baba’, but now a days I call him “Papa”.

“Well, my name is “Baba” and didn’t I tell you, we are friends. And it’s natural that, one must call one’s friend by name”.

Maya found the logic quite reasonable but she still could not understand how one so much older to her could be her friend. Suddenly, she realized she had to go home, and looking out, she saw that the shower had slowed down to a mere drizzle. “Here’s an umbrella. Take it.” Baba held out an umbrella and opened it. “But.....” .Maya faltered.

“You can give it back to me while going to school tomorrow, I won’t need it today.” Again he smiled affectionately and within that moment, she felt as if she had known him for years.

When Maya reached home, she saw her mother waiting anxiously near the door, for it was already beginning to get dark. On seeing Maya, her face lighted up with relief, “Gosh Maya! You’re fully wet, I was beginning to get worried.” Please dear, take off your muddy shoes on the door step or, you’ll make the whole place dirty”. She said as she went indoors to lay out Maya’s supper.

“Mama, I won’t eat anything”

“But why? Aren’t you hungry?”

“I have just had some tea and mixture in Baba’s house”.

“Baba? who’s Baba,” her mother looked surprised.

Maya smiled “Mama, he’s the owner of that haunted house. And he’s such a nice man, too”.

“Don’t you go being friendly with strange people.” Her mother warned. “He seems to be proud and rather odd. I hear”. Maya was in a mood to narrate the details of the wonderful encounter, but her mother had no time or inclination to listen to the friendly babble of a school girl, There were several household chores left undone, like cleaning the utensils and sweeping the floor. She would then have a bath just before the evening prayers and prepare the night meal. These thoughts preoccupied her mind and very often, she wished there had been a maid servant to help her. And therefore the happenings in her little daughter’s life did not interest her at all.

That evening, Maya could not concentrate on her lessons. The strange and unusual meeting with Baba kept flashing in her mind’s eye repeatedly, and try as hard as she could, she just could not memorize the summary of the poem. Her eyes were glued to her notes, but her thoughts kept reverting to Baba’s affectionate smile. Till then, no man had ever looked at

her twice, though she had heard her attractive and beautiful friends say that this or that person was staring at them. This beautiful experience gave her a strange thrill, and she could not discard it easily from her mind.

The next morning her friends called her at the gate, while going to school. Every day, they walked in groups, chatting away merrily, so that the one and half kilometers they traversed seemed to them a little more than two or three yards. Maya gulped down her brunch hurriedly at ten O'clock and joined them. She realized that strangely enough, thoughts about Baba no longer disturbed her.

While walking home from school at half past four, she looked across the gate of the house and saw Baba weeding out some plants from his garden. He looked up and his eyes fell on her, 'O Maya; do come in', he called.

Maya stood still for a moment, while her friends walked on. Then she went in. Apprehending that Baba would ask about the umbrella, she said apologetically. "Baba, I'm sorry, that I did not bring your umbrella today. Actually, I completely forgot about it. I'll bring it tomorrow".

"O never mind that. I did not call you to ask about the umbrella. In fact, I've kept something nice for you."

Maya's face lit up "What's it?" She asked excitedly.

"Just a sweet bar of Cadbury chocolate, my dear." Baba said and laughed.

"O' how nice." And then immediately Maya's face fell. "But I'm not supposed to take things from you".

"But why?"

"My parents say I must not take things from strangers."

"But I'm not really a stranger to you, am I? Have'nt we already become friends since yesterday?" And then he smiled. And the smile was

so full of affection and friendliness that all her apprehensions vanished.

Maya took the packet from his hand, and opening it started nibbling it right away. A Cadbury chocolate was a rare treat in the sixties, for it was too expensive for her parents to afford. After she had finished it, she said, “Baba, I’m going” and got up.

“Won’t you stay a bit longer ?”

“Why, Baba ?”

“Just like that, I mean, to give me company”, He said spontaneously.

“But my friends will be waiting for me to play with them. You see Baba, I love to play”.

“You love to play, but don’t you love me ?” Baba asked, like a true friend .

‘Of course, I like you’. Maya was too young to differentiate between ‘like’ and ‘love’: “Anyway Baba, I’ll come tomorrow”, she said, and ran out, her school bag hanging from her left shoulder. Baba looked at her receding figure for a long time till her figure became smaller and smaller, and then his eyes brimmed over with tears and he went indoors, trying to suppress his emotions. She was a living image of his little sister whom he had tended and nursed since she was a baby, and who was no longer alive in this world.

After their play time was over, Maya ran home, washed her hands and feet, sang her evening prayers, drank a glass of milk, and retired to the single room upstairs to study. Her half-yearly exams were near at hand and she realized she had to study hard to retain her position as one of the toppers in the class. Usually, the room was shared by her only brother, who was older to her, but these days, he was busy cycling from one tutor to another, attending tuition classes, for his matriculation exams was round the corner. While trying to memorize some of the answers, Maya’s mind wandered away to Baba’s affectionate words, quite against her wishes. She realized that while playing not even once did she think of Baba, but while

studying, thoughts about Baba flooded her mind and she could not suppress them. She wondered why amongst all her classmates and other girls, she had been singled out by Baba as his friend. Soon, tiredness and sleep overcame her and she fell fast asleep in that sitting posture, with one hand on the table, and the other arm, across it.

Usually while studying, Maya ran down occasionally for peanuts to munch or a biscuit to nibble. But for the last two days, her mother noticed that the hurried patter of her feet down the stairs was missing. All the better, she thought, must be studying hard for her exams. Maya's father returned home late from the office as usual, but on that day, he was in a light-hearted mood to chat with his little daughter. He loved his little daughter a lot but regretted the fact that he had not enough time or money to spare for her. Being a lower division clerk in the board office, his salary was meagre and since he was honest, he never accepted bribe for any small favors done to anyone. He had to commute daily to the town and this took up most of his time. From morning eight to evening eight O'clock, he was out, and when he came back, at times even at half past eight, he'd be too tired to spend time with his daughter, much as he would like to.

As he trudged up stairs to call Maya to dinner, love spurted out of his heart as he saw her lying so helplessly with her hand resting on the table. He didn't have the heart to disturb her sleep, nevertheless, she was to have her dinner. Meanwhile, his wife was shouting at the top of her voice. "Maya, Maya, do come down at once to eat."

He shook Maya gently. She woke up with a start. "O Papa, it's you"! and then she responded to her mother's calls. "Okay, Mama I'm coming down".

"You must not study so hard, my dear, you'll only make yourself sick", her father said .-

"But Papa, my exams are approaching". She replied, as both of them came down the stairs.

"Never mind the exams, first health and then everything else, right". Her father was in a jocular mood that night and both of them laughed.

Then they sat down to have their paltry dinner consisting of steaming hot rice and a vegetable stew laid out on two platters.

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