

GREAT-AUNT KAATHAMMA

We always called her 'Thakazhy Amayi' to differentiate her from Thakazhy Ammumma, my paternal grandmother. When we were very small, there was scope for confusion, I suppose, because we met a whole host of Ammummas when we accompanied our parents on holiday to Kerala from Delhi, where we lived. And in Thakazhy there were two Ammummas, both seemingly equally pleased to receive us as we arrived all tired and sweaty from our long journey from Cochin airport. The one we invariably saw first was Thakazhy Amayi, my grandmother's sister-in-law and wife to the famous author in our family. It was in the compound of her house that we parked our car before getting into the boats that would take us down the kaayal to Aareepuram, the house where my grandparents lived and we always stopped off for an hour with Amavan and Amayi before finishing the last leg of our marathon journey.

While my father – who admired his writer uncle enormously – would eagerly settle down with him in the front verandah of the house to discuss politics and the state of the world, we (my mother, brother and I) would go around to the back where Thakazhy Amayi would greet us with warm smiles and chakka varattiyathu and sweet tea that had a peculiar smoky flavour on the palates of city kids like us. Even as a child, I think I recognized that, while Amavan was the important person, the heart of the house lay with Amayi in her kitchen.

When I myself became a writer, getting a publishing contract with Penguin UK for my first novel, 'Ancient Promises' (Janmaanthara Vaadaanangal), I knew the first thing I had to do was go to Kerala and seek some important blessings. Sadly, Thakazhy Amavan had passed away just a few months before – and both my paternal grandparents were long gone – but my mother and I hired a taxi to go to Guruvayur and took a detour to see Amayi in Thakazhy. My mother had been reading a copy of my manuscript in the car and we took it out to show it to Amayi while giving her my news.

She smiled that familiar kind smile of hers and took the sheaf of A4 pages in her hands for a few minutes. I thought of the number of times she must have held her husband's masterpieces in her hands, perhaps while helping him in his daily routine work or while neatening his table. And I could not help hoping that – even though Amavan was not there to personally bless my budding career – her touch would be enough to transfer some of his grace on to me.