



**PORICHA NANJU
(FRIED POISON)**

short story by
Edasseri

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Prologue:

The emotional intonation manifest in the title of this story, the effect that the combination of those two words in the title makes, is significantly lost in a literal translation. Literally, it means, 'Fried Poison.' But the title, 'Poricha Nanju' has an emotional connotation derived from the theme of the story. The reader will experience it at the climax of this story. The reference is to, 'Pazhampori' i.e., a snack item, a native delicacy of Kerala, prepared by deep frying of slices of ripe banana in coconut oil after dipping them in a specially made batter of powdered rice and jiggery. The story tells how and why this delicacy tasted like "Nanju" for the protagonist, a little boy and in the process, brings out the social and economic reality that the middle-class was passing through in the early part of twentieth century.

Edasseri was born in 1906. And the story happens in a period corresponding to his childhood. The setting is a 'Marumakkathaya (Matriarchal) Nair Tharavadu,' in the central region of Kerala.

During 1900s the financial condition of Nair families in Malabar was pitiable. The British land policy put majority of the Malabar population in utter poverty and misery. The landlords were mainly Namboothiris and Nairs whereas the tenants hailed from Mappila and Ezhava community. According to 'Buchanan', in Malabar farmer's share of the income from two acres of good rice land was barely sufficient to provide a slave's diet. The Malabar region, which was economically backward at the beginning of the British colonial rule, remained so till they were to leave the land in the middle of the 20th century.

Now the story.....

Ramakrishnan is my eldest sister's son. Still he used to call me 'ettan', the elder brother. The difference in our age is only six or seven years. Won't I look an elderly person if I am called "uncle"? That is why my sisters, with their logical reasoning made him call me etta. I being the last child of my mother thus got compensated for the absence of a younger brother.

As a toddler, he was more of a plaything to me than a brother. Sitting by his side to bring out those adorable smiles and giggle while he was happily lying on his back, annoyingly persuading my sisters to lift him when he was crying on his belly, fetching flowers and twigs from the garden to make him happy when he started sitting on his own, helping him walk by holding his tender hands, acting as his elephant by walking on my knees - in these ways I was bent upon looking after all aspects concerning him. I was over enthusiastic not only in making him laugh and smile but also in making him angry and cry. When he showed his anger by pinching or scratching me or pulling my hair and biting me with his toothless gum, I was choked giggling. And my enjoyment reached its peak when he started crying, his baby lips twisted, bringing a whole lot of cuteness on his face. Over and above all these, the scolding from my sisters for making him cry gave me an added satisfaction! When he started to walk in the courtyard I got not only a playmate but an admirer as well. As I climbed the low branches of trees and jumped from it, he watched me



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with admiration in his wide open eyes. On those occasions I had the vanity of a gymnast stepping off the trapeze cool as if nothing great was performed to deserve such loud applauses from the excited crowd. We enjoyed our childhood playing and running around in the courtyard, garden, backyard and the fields. He likes me. But when I hear someone say that he likes me more than anyone else, I loved him forgetting myself.

Ramakrishnan grew up really naughty. At times we had slight skirmish with each other. And as time passed by, I had to make him cry on two grounds. When we quarrelled on silly grounds and when I had to scold him to establish my authority as an elder brother. And on each such occasion my mother used to give me befitting punishments for making him cry. On certain other occasions even if he was not hurt much, he cried aloud only to get me punished by mother. He compensated for his defeats in games by his success in getting me punished. In addition to mother's punishments, he gave me his share also by scratching or hitting me. To top it all, I got severe reproach from my eldest sister for mercilessly hurting the baby.

My eldest sister was like that. She always complained that no one loves her son. Due to some family feuds, Ramakrishnan's mother was estranged from her husband. This was common in Nair families of those days because of the then existing social set up. Sometimes couples, while they continue loving each other would have to behave like strangers and children who were born to these aristocratic parents to live as orphans!

However, my second sister found out that in this joint venture between me and Ramakrishnan, I was the one who always got hurt. No fraud could escape her keen eyes. So during subsequent quarrels, she used to interfere and save me from mother's punishments.

But the result was not at all promising. It should have been better for me to suffer those punishments and accept allegations of my eldest sister like 'cruel', 'thief' etc. But now only I can think this way. Rather, I realise it only now that even the worst of her reproach had only one meaning: "Give me some peace!"

That day, we were engaged in an entertaining game. After having congee (rice gruel) for breakfast we entered the courtyard spread with sand which was still moist from last night's rain. The wild jasmine vine which had crawled up the Koovalla tree (aegle marmelos) in abundance had fully blossomed. Both of us reached below the tree - Ramakrishnan with a big coconut shell to make mud pancake and I with a long plantain thread for making a garland of jasmine flowers.

That day, my sisters were also very enthusiastic. That year's harvest of sesame crop was over. Mother had extracted maximum oil from the seeds collected. Second sister could gather the sesame spilled in the yard and with utmost difficulty had also reaped what remained on the plants after harvesting. They were trying to make the typical sweet cake. They had sent me to the shop the other day itself to buy jaggery. Mother too had given her permission, which was not very easy to get. "Where did you get the sesame seeds from?" That was the question. "You must have stolen it" mother said.

"My god, I had toiled two days to collect it from the seepage and remove soil" vouched my elder sister.

Since there was truth in both and due to prick of conscience whether denial would invite curse, mother gave her consent. Even then she did not forget to warn "don't take any coconut". I jumped with joy; so did Ramakrishnan. I knew that coconut was already arranged. After having morning congee, they will start working on it. The seeds are to be crushed along with jaggery and coconut to make the cake. It is called 'Putt Idikkal'. We, the villagers have only a few snacks like that. If it is



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only rice and coconut, it is "Kozhukkatta", if jaggery is also available then "kumbalappam", if it is a little elaborated then "Ada" and if seeds like sesame are available then "putt idikkal to make the sweet cake". That morning we went out to play thinking of the forthcoming sweetness we would enjoy.

"Should not send Ramakrishnan here" eldest sister had said "he would eat the sesame seeds". So it was necessary to prolong the game for the maximum period of time without entering into any quarrel.

The sand in the courtyard which was compacted with the new rain was cleaner and softer. Floating and pulsating fragrance of Jasmine was spreading from the fully blossomed white jasmine in the morning sun and the flowers could be collected easily. A group of cheery-sounding chickadee birds were making a lot of noise in the garden. Mother was walking around in the yard with watchful eyes and was covering the new buds of tapioca with dried leaves. Grandma had come stooping to the veranda after having congee and was looking for her small wooden grinder for grinding betel leaf and areca nut.

"Children, where did you throw the small grinder?" she called out.

Grandma's wooden grinder and our toy car were one and the same and as such we used to exchange it as needed. Since there were lot of flowers and I was busy plucking them to make the garland, I was not inclined to go inside and search for it in the attic or the store room. "Why grandma can't stop chewing betel leaf for some time"? I muttered.

"I shall fetch it" Ramakrishnan started to go in. Eldest sister had warned me against sending him in. Once inside the house in search of the grinder and he sees the preparations in the kitchen then grandma will not get the grinder nor will he return. And I will get the scolding again. "You sit there, grandma will take it" I yelled at him.

"Please fetch it for me" grandma started again.

Seeing grandma's vacant gum chewing without betel leaf, the sagging muscles with wrinkles on her neck and her eyes pleading helplessness due to old age, I could not but oblige. Hanging the garland which I started to make on the branch of the tree, I jumped off the cement platform of the Koovalla tree. At that very moment, Ramakrishnan started bawling at the top of his voice. I had stepped over one of the mud pancakes which he had made and damaged it. He was crying and rolling in the mud.

"Oh! Don't worry. Can't this be made again?" I asked him. But he would not listen nor stop crying.

"Then I will repair it"

I took the coconut shell and started repairing the damage using the scattered mud. That made him angrier. He started to roll on the mud again and cried loudly.

I threw the coconut shell down. I was also very angry. "GET UP!" I shouted and forcefully pulled him up. There was sand on his head, face and abdomen. I dusted the sand particles. While doing so, the sand stuck on a lock of his long and curly black hair dangling on the forehead got in to his eyes. And crying reached its crescendo.

"What happened?" Mother called out from the field. Both sisters came running. "Nothing untoward happened. They were playing" Grandma said, but nobody heard that.

"Ettan put sand in my eyes" he said still sobbing.

I was shocked. I could only say in a fretful voice "No.... No". But there was sand in his eyes. Eldest sister scolded me.



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"Show some sympathy, man. Don't be this cruel to babies!"

Turning to her son she scolded him as well. "How many times have I told you not to play with him? He does not have any scruples."

My elder sister took Ramakrishnan, opened his eyes slowly with her fingers and blew into it. Then she made him open his eyes very slowly and with the iron ring from her finger, took out a small particle of sand from the corner of his eye. She kept on consoling him.

"Okay, now stop crying and go and play" she closed the issue.

"Ah, Playing! Don't play with him" my eldest sister retorted.

"What is it with you? Will he intentionally put sand in his eyes?" my elder sister asked.

I was a little pacified. At least there was somebody to say that I did not have any bad intentions.

"Then, did Ramakrishnan put sand in his own eyes? Eldest sister shouted.

"Okay. Then keep your son safely in a box!"

Eldest sister was furious, but she did not say anything. She held the boy by hand and said "come along"

It should have ended like that. By that time mother reached the spot. While coming she had cut a twig from the Thechi shrub (forest flame) stooping down with heavy red flowers in dense rounded clusters. She asked me "what did you do to him?"

I was expecting a few beatings and threats. But nothing happened. Grandma said "he did not do anything, 'Kalyani'. When I called him, he jumped off the platform. Then the boy's pancake got damaged or some sand spilled in to his eyes, I don't know what exactly happened. Other than that he did not do anything."

Grandma was an eyewitness. So mother does not have any right to beat me. Mother scolded Ramakrishnan.

"And for that you are screaming like this, silly boy"

Eldest sister's face darkened. She pulled her son's hands. But by this time his anger had subsided. He wanted to make mud pancakes again and continue playing with me. He hung to his mother's arms without moving. That made her angrier. She took the stick from the ground where mother had left it and beat her child mercilessly.

"You should die; then only my misfortune will end. You are a creature nobody wants to see. Why did you take birth! Only to shatter my peace of mind ...?" She babbled, while continuing to beat her child. The child was writhing in pain. Second sister had already left the scene. Finally, when the beating did not stop, mother grabbed the stick and threw it away. Then she lifted him and walked back to the garden whispering. Poor boy stopped writhing but continued sobbing pressing his face, turned red from crying, firmly on to mother's shoulder. Eldest sister went inside the house with heavy footsteps. While going in also, she continued with her loud reproach!

"This is not good." Grandma said, not to anyone in particular. Again she looked around, for the wooden grinder. Then she called out to me, "fetch that small grinder for me, son."

I went inside. Eldest sister was lying weeping in a room in the south end. Second sister was preparing lunch in the kitchen as if nothing had happened. I looked through the corner of my eye. There was no trace of sesame or jaggery in the kitchen. I knew that the prospects of getting the sweet snacks have vanished! But I did not have the courage to ask. Situation was so tensed up that it was as if the house would catch fire even if one breathes heavily. I searched hither and thither



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and found grandma's grinder and slowly went to her with it. I sat by her side putting back the small pieces of areca nut and betel leaf that jumped out of the grinder while crushing. There was solace there! From early childhood I have realised that. As I lie sobbing with grief, face down on her lap and that wrinkled hand moves slowly over my back, all sorrows would leave me.

I kept on lingering near her. Understanding my discomfort, she started telling me once again the old story of the monkey which used to entertain me the most when I was a kid. When lighter moments in the story came, she herself would start laughing like kids showing the toothless gum and would prompt me to laugh. Ramakrishnan came when the story was about to end. Now, he too wanted to hear that story from the beginning. Grandma was tired, so she said "If story is told during day time, your legs will break; shall tell you at night."

"Ettan's legs did not break" that rationalist questioned.

"I shall tell you." I felt pity on him.

He got excited and said "I shall tell you the story and etta, you say 'hmm' only."

"Okay, you tell."

He started telling the story. He knows only a couple of sentences. After finishing that he will start asking "Then what happened?"

I accepted the role. Rest of the story was told by me little by little, the very same sentences repeated by him and me saying 'hmm' for both ...it went on like that. During the entire story telling time grandma was caressing the marks on the bony thigh where Ramakrishnan got the lashes with the stick. Her eyes were wet.

It seems that eldest sister did not eat anything that noon. She lay there with great grief. Also, both sisters did not talk to each other. Second sister went for bath in the evening all alone. Eldest sister took Ramakrishnan along with her when she went. That was quite unusual. Even after coming back, she was strolling at the gate carrying him. Usually he will have to be summoned at least ten times from the kitchen to say evening prayers. That day there was no quarrel in the kitchen. Eldest sister did not send Ramakrishnan for the prayers. She was caressing him more than usual as a penance for beating the child without any reason.

Later, while returning from gate she was consoling him "Tomorrow father will definitely bring it. Okay. Now don't cry son."

I understood. At times, Ramakrishnan's father used to bring him something to eat. The family did not act that cruelly as to ban even such acts. Eldest sister must have asked him to bring something for tomorrow.

Finally Ramakrishnan came and sat beside me for the evening prayers. I started reciting the prayer to him, "Namah Sivaya!" "Tomorrow father will bring banana fritters." That was how he responded. When sound of scraping the coconut was heard, he ran to the kitchen.

Next day Ramakrishna's father came very early. Eldest sister was at the front of the house. He placed a small packet in sister's hands, lightly patted the cheeks of the kid who went running to him and left through the gate without waiting further. He must be going to the office.

Sister went inside. Ramakrishnan followed her. Thinking of that banana fritters with the fragrance of heated coconut oil and its heavenly taste, I lingered on the veranda for some more time. Pride did not allow me to go inside and eat my share. I am elder to him. I should not be gluttonous. Eldest sister herself had taught me a thousand ethical lessons. Important one among them was to pretend not to have seen any eatables even if you have actually seen it. Each time when I acted against those etiquettes, she had scolded me. But sweet banana fritters! Only once have I tasted it. Even after eating it, that melting sweet taste lingered in my mouth for a



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very long time. Its fragrance also surrounded me for quite some time. It was not enough!

I was not called in. Why don't I go inside? Oh no! But to the kitchen....what to take from there? I have to take my copy book from the south room. Then I will not stay there; instead will come straight back and start writing in the copy book. Right; went to the south room; no one was there. Took the book, oh... no! Can't write copy book now. Since no one had seen me, I could return without taking the book. I returned to the veranda. I will be called inside. But it is bad to wait like this. I will go near the platform of the tree. Yesterday, I had only half finished the garland. Those flowers must have withered. I will make a new one. In the meanwhile, I will be called in. I went to the courtyard.

But suppose there was only one banana fritters, then it will not be enough even for Ramakrishnan. Yesterday he was beaten up for no reason. Poor guy! Let him have it. Am I not grown up? I took previous day's garland and started plucking the withered flowers from it.

"There is more than one in that packet" my mind was murmuring. And with that, I felt the fragrance of heated coconut oil reaching my nostrils through the air. I swallowed the saliva that flooded my mouth.

After plucking flowers from the thread, I was about to add new flowers when I saw a dragon fly sitting still on the jasmine climber. I put a noose on the thread. It is a big fly. Should not catch it with bare hand, it will bite. "We should not catch dragon flies, it's a sin" is the advice from my eldest sister. But second sister was unmindful of this and at times joined us to catch flies even when she was grown up. She will make the fly hold pebbles with their tender limbs. A long thread will be tied to the tail of those who refuses to take the pebbles and will be left free with the thread on. Let me not catch it. Will tie this thread on its tail and see it flying. I cautiously approached the fly with the knotted thread in my hand. It was still; enjoying the evening sun and dozing off. Occasionally its long wings like the wings of a plane would go up and down a little. That's all. Carefully I put the noose around its tail. Now I need to just tighten it slowly, very slowly.

"Etta, did you eat the fritters, Etta?"

I looked back in a jiffy. It was Ramakrishnan who had come running to enquire without even wiping the oil from his lips.

The dragon fly flew off!

"No. Did mother ask for me?" I asked hopefully.

"Etta, it is very tasty. Mother gave me two"

He did not tell me whether I was called in or not. My ego was terribly hurt. And then slowly, my mind drifted away from the taste of the banana fritters.

"Etta, you go and get it now" Ramakrishnan urged. He was still lip-smacking. Poor boy, he will be happy only if I too enjoy that tasty food. Alright, I will go inside, but will not ask for it.

"Then you be here, Ettan will go in and be back in a jiffy."

He started to fill with sand the coconut shell lying there from last night. A fly sat on his lips. I wiped his face with my dhoti and went inside. Eldest sister was standing there, but she did not say anything. I went to the kitchen.

"What is it that you want" second sister asked.

"Nothing" I walked away.

Will Ramakrishnan ask me again whether I had eaten the banana fritters? I went to the gooseberry tree at the northern side of the court yard and collected the few gooseberries that were lying scattered on the ground. I simply kept it on the



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east veranda and returned to the front courtyard without going inside the house. My eyes started welling up.

At the east of the courtyard grandma, all covered up with her woollen shawl, was plucking grass. She looked at me.

"Son, why are you always crying?" It was that affectionate question that made me cry. My throat choked when I said "I am not crying". I walked away from that place. But, I had this gut feeling that second sister was watching me through the window, when she heard grandma's question.

That day, nobody quarrelled in that house. Even then both sisters did not go for their evening bath together. And unusually, they did not talk to each other. Mother's face was gloomy with grief due to reasons not clear to me. At dusk mother recited hymns to me and Ramakrishnan for much longer time than usual. Only grandma did not betray any change in emotion. After supper, we went to her. When Ramakrishnan got inside her blanket and I sat nestling close by her, she started telling us stories. There were signs of impending rain. Outside, strong wind was blowing incessantly. Thinking of the rain and about its music that would take the sky and earth into a slumber; I don't know when I dozed off..

In the morning, when second sister's husband was going out, I was asked to accompany him. I did not know where to. After walking through the paddy field and an alley, we reached the market place. He was entering a tea shop. "I have had my breakfast, brother." He just nodded.

I waited outside. He gave me a small packet and said, "Give this to your sister." I knew it. It was banana fritters. Not one, but two!

I returned home with great enthusiasm. Definitely I will be given one full banana fritters. Only the second one will be shared between Ramakrishnan and grandma, I thought. It also came to my mind that elder sister must have known about what happened yesterday and that she must have told her husband about it. I felt a little ashamed.

Grandma was sitting in the veranda. Ramakrishnan was making a toy car out of the soft shoot from the plantain. When I was passing by, grandma asked immediately "what is it?"

"I think its banana fritters, grandma. Brother bought it"

"Give me a little", she said with her toothless gum still grinding.

I was in a quandary. If I don't give this packet as such to my second sister, the consequences would be alarmingly bad. There is absolutely no proof to believe that those are meant for me. But when grandma extended her wrinkled hands for it, what am I to do? I handed over the packet to grandma saying "Brother asked me to give this to second sister" thus expressing my dissent in grandma opening the packet. But she opened it. With trembling fingers, she almost pinched off a bit from one end of it. At that point a voice roared from inside the house. "Where is the packet that was given to you? I tell you, keep it there itself."

It seemed as if the naalukettu (old 'Nair family' house) quivered. And I trembled. Grandma looked towards the door and seeing second sister she handed back that packet to me leaving there itself the almost cut piece and muttered "Give it to her". Poor thing! She was frightened of quarrels more than me.

I gave that packet to second sister. The expression on her face was terrible. "Come" she walked in front and after reaching the north room, opened the packet. On hearing footsteps outside, she closed the door.

She gave me one banana fritters, sweet with the fragrance of heated coconut oil. My mouth was already watering. When I was chewing that fritters slowly and deliciously, sister stroked my back tenderly. I looked at her face. Tears that had



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flooded her eyes were flowing down her cheeks. There appeared on her lips an ocean of a smile of gratification. "Appu, you eat it" she said.

"Now you eat a piece" I held a piece to her. She did not take it. "Appu, you eat it; to your satisfaction".

After finishing one, I wiped by lips. But she gave me the second one also. I did not take it. "This is enough for me".

"No, eat this too"

"Are we not to give it to Ramakrishnan and grandma?" I asked with a little prick of conscience.

"This is not to be shared. I bought this just for you only. You should eat it; that also right now, in front of me"

That was her resolve. Her love was intense and at the same time dreadful. That was tough love with a vengeance.

I was not satisfied with just one fritters. I had only just started enjoying it. It's tempting fragrance and heavenly taste were watering my mouth continually. "Eat!" she insisted.

I looked at that small piece which grandma was about to pinch out with her trembling fingers with extreme desire.

"Eat my son," She has never called me son. I melted wholly in that tantalizing love. I could not say no to that loving voice. I put one more piece in my mouth. While that piece was going down my throat I felt my nerves having a strange ecstasy beyond any words could describe. One more piece and my jaws were continuously working and my tongue enjoying that sweetness. One more piece. Then I looked up at sister's face. My mind did not allow me to eat fully without sharing it with grandma sitting on the veranda who with extreme desire wanted to eat a small piece a little while ago, but had to return even before tasting. And there is that affectionate child who jumps up and down just hearing the word "sweets" and who after getting his share insists his ettan to get a portion. How can I eat it fully without giving even a small piece to that boy?

"Eat ... fast"

"A piece for for grandma?" I pleaded.

"No, no" she refused with a nod. "I told you, this is bought for you only. This shall not be shared with anyone else. We cannot have that practice in this house any more. Everyone has money with them. They can buy and eat what they wish. This, I bought for my son. You should eat it full." She herself pushed the balance piece into my mouth.

Being the last piece, it was sweeter and tastier; but when it was chewed between my teeth, I had this miserable pain in my throat the way one feels while crying with great grief. My eyes also were welling up. Sister opened the door and went out with a sigh of relief. Her face was calm!

When the door was opened, Ramakrishnan came running inside. He stood looking at me. "Etta, what are you eating?" he enquired.

I did not say anything. In fact I did not feel like saying anything. I felt that special feast thickening in my stomach as if it was poison.

"Etta, give me a small piece" He stood there with open hands.

I could not help myself from crying. I lost all my control and cried out loud.

Mother came and asked, "What happened to you?"

I cried more... and more.

"Why don't you tell me the reason?"

Eldest sister had also reached there. She looked at me first and then at her own



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child. He went to his mother and said. "Sweet fritters, give me also the sweet fritters"

"I don't have any sweet or anything with me" Angrily she pushed him away with force.

The boy held on to her dress.

"What is this all about?" Mom asked not understanding anything clearly.

"Want to know what happened?" Eldest sister roared. "This is revenge; revenge taken against this little boy. He should die. That's all." She pulled her son near and beat him hard on his thigh.

Bawling high with pain, the kid held on to his grandma.

Unable to withstand any more of hurt, I went out. Was that grief or a never ending shame that engulfed me at that time, I don't know. Grandma was sitting on the veranda hearing all this but remaining quiet. Having lost all my strength I sat at her feet. I could hear Ramakrishnan's heart-rending cry and sobs. Quarrel was reaching its peak inside. Grandma said a little loud;

"No, no, this is not good".

But, who's there to listen!

This story must have been written around year 1926. We do not have the periodical in which this story was published first. If anyone has got a copy of the same, please send a scanned copy to e.harikumar.novelist@gmail.com or emadhavan_rbi@yahoo.com
Translated from Malayalam by Edasseri Trust Team
