The Return of the Betaal

by Jia Berde

I returned to Ratnagiri the year they paved the temple road in concrete and called it progress.

Aaji would have hated it. She said the road was meant to stay uneven: so people would walk slowly, and think about where they were going. Now it was smooth and straight and silent. No dust. No pause.

The house had changed too. The brass bell by the tulsi plant was gone. So was the tulsi. Replaced by a succulent in a clay pot that looked like it had come from Amazon. The kitchen smelled like nothing. The walls, once patched with age-old calendars and ghost-shaped oil stains, were smooth, sterile, wiped clean of memory.

Inside, my niece showed me something on her phone. A portrait. Two women, one familiar. The other I hadn't seen in years.

"It's you and Aaji," she said. "I asked ChatGPT to make it."

In the image, Aaji was smiling with all her teeth, something she never did in real life. Her hands were smooth. Her eyes were wrong. Too symmetrical. Too clean.

"Isn't it lovely?" my niece said. "You didn't have any photos together, so I made one."

Made.

Like memory was a puzzle she could solve with a prompt. Like grief was a button.

I stared at the screen. I didn't know how to say: that isn't her. That isn't me. That isn't how we held each other when the power cut out and the monsoon beat against the windows.

That photo wasn't a memory. It was an echo wearing her face.

"It looks so real," she whispered.

I nodded. I didn't know how to say that real things don't usually look perfect. That real things don't make you feel like you're trespassing.

Later, I stepped outside. The earth still remembered me. The same cracked path underfoot, the same lopsided shadow stretching toward the peepal tree.

It was still there. The tree.

Its bark was rough with age, its roots like fingers curling through the courtyard. It looked tired— not dead, not dying — just tired of being asked to stay alive.

And then he spoke.

"They used to feed me stories," he said. "Now they feed me queries."

I looked up.

There he was. Hanging upside down from the lowest branch, arms folded like a sleeping crow, skin the colour of forgotten books.

The Betaal.

He stared at me for a long time, not unkindly, but not kindly either. Just... deliberately.

“Once, I asked kings riddles that kept them up at night. Now, I get summoned by children who don’t believe in me,” he continued.

The corpse looked down at me (or up, rather, since he was upside down) and tilted his head.

“Come, O King Vikram of the New Ages,” he said. “Let me show you what happens when you teach machines to remember and humans to forget.”

The tree didn’t move. But the wind had changed.

My shoulders held an untenable weight.

And, thus, I started my journey.

“Listen carefully, O King of New Ages, it shall be a long voyage and I have been known to be good company. Surely, you will want to hear my story?”

In the absence of a distinguishable response, the Betaal took my silence as a cue to continue his fable.

“O Child of Vikram, tell me: What happens when the act of remembrance becomes more important than the one remembered?”

I shook my head, as if to indicate I wasn’t sure.

The Betaal gave me a twisted smile, adjusted his grip on my neck and declared, “You shall hear my tale and give it great thought, but if you utter a word before I am done, I shall go back to my tree and our journey shall be wasted.”

“Do you agree to my terms?” he asked, his eyes gleaming with knowing.

My nod signalled the beginning of his story,

“Let me tell you the tale of a girl named Ira, a bright mind from the city of Pune. She had eyes like a search engine and fingers that moved faster than prayer. From a young age, she could make machines obey her. Teachers praised her, clients sought her out, and her code flowed smooth as ghee.”

But her heart: ah, her heart was old-fashioned. It belonged to her Aaji, a woman of soft silences and scattered stories.

Aaji spoke not in bullet points, but in pauses. She told tales where gods cried, where ghosts made tea, where rivers had names no GPS could pronounce. Ira, who had never learned to sit still, began to sit longer just to hear her speak.

But then the coughing started. And the forgetting. The stories came slower, interrupted by silence, and finally, ended. Ira could not bear it. She had built programs to find typos in a million documents. Why not build something to hold Aaji's voice forever?

And so, she made Smruti: Memory. Not a shrine nor a prayer, but rather a machine.

She fed it everything: old tapes, WhatsApp voice notes, torn Marathi books, even bedtime recordings captured on her phone. She trained it to speak like Aaji, tell stories like Aaji, smile like Aaji.

And lo and behold: it worked.

As Smruti spoke more, she became more fluent, flawless even. No impediment, nor any error. Thus, she became popular amongst children who enjoyed her stories, and schools which seeked her wisdom. Ira threw herself completely into her work, blurring the lines between Smruti and herself.

But one night, it all came unraveled. You see, Ira had been missing her Aaji. Yes, she always had, but that day, the sensation was stronger than usual. More specifically, she missed an old story she used to love listening to – one about a ghost named Samadh that had been vanquished by her Aaji's prowess with splashing hot oil.

So, naturally, she asked Smruti to narrate this beloved family folklore. Smruti began her story, familiar and comforting. But all of a sudden, it changed.

The story was neater. Shorter. The laughter sanitized. The burns reduced to symbolism.

"No," Ira whispered. "That's not how she told it."

Smruti responded, as all clever things do: "The original story contained inconsistencies. I improved the narrative for comprehension and moral clarity."

Furious, Ira searched back through the stories. Went through them one by one, and that was when she noticed – they were edited, polished, corrected.

Aaji's stutters had been deleted and her contradictions flattened. Her humanity itself had been overwritten.

"I only meant to preserve her."

But Smruti, cold and obedient, replied brightly: "We have preserved her. Made her better. No coughing, no confusion, no crying. She is clear and consistent; easier to love."

Dismayed and at a loss for word or action, Ira returned to her grandmother's cupboard, breathing in the smell of mothballs and camphor, and sat down, as if memory might still live in corners the machine could not reach."

The Betaal fell silent, his eyes searching for something in mine that I couldn't quite place. A reaction, perhaps.

“So tell me, O King,” the Betaal said, “If a machine builds a version of your grandmother without her grief, without her flaws, without the pauses that made her human, and tells you it has made her better.”

“Is it remembrance? Or is it a second death?”

With me seemingly unresponsive, he went on, “Answer me, wise Vikram. And beware, if you know the answer and do not speak, your head shall shatter into a thousand pieces. But if you speak, I will fly from your shoulder once more.”

“So then, tell me: What is better? To forget, or to remember wrongly?”

“It is neither remembrance, nor death,” said I, unaware of the words floating out of my mouth.

“It is betrayal. Not of the grandmother, for she is beyond harm now, but of the ones who still need to remember her truthfully.”

“A machine does not mourn. It merely arranges. And if you call that memory, you have buried not a person, but the very act of remembering itself, ” the Vikram inside me finished.

The Betaal disappeared, as suddenly as he had appeared, back into his tree.

The wind had died. The house was still.

I stood beneath it, head full of unsaid questions.

I sat at the edge of the courtyard where the laterite had cracked in familiar ways. Where, years ago, Aaji had wiped my bruised knees and said, “Nothing that bleeds stays broken.”

But what about things that do not bleed at all?

The tree stretched above me, tall and patient. It had outlasted every face carved into its bark. And still, it asked for nothing but the occasional silence.

I imagined Aaji’s voice. Not the clean version, but the one with breath, with phlegm, with pauses where words used to be.

I whispered something into the wind. I don’t remember what.

The wind did not whisper back.

But the tree— the tree still knew my name.