

THE ONLY GOOD DOCTORS

by Yudhanjaya
Wijeratne



She was called Malithi. Once, she had liked that name. Now it felt strange to hear those syllables; they had gone the way of childhood friends and sweethearts. Her daughter called her *Ammi* and the neighbour's children called her *Aunty* and the teachers at the PTA called her *Mrs Perera*. *Malithi* had retreated, had become *M*. Just a discreet initial in front of a surname.

It was Wednesday, 1.30 PM, and Malithi was struggling.

It always began with headaches. First came the pain that ebbed and pulsed when she moved. Then the blur. Emails became harder to read. Next would come the not-quite-tremors in her hands and ankles; on some days, she felt as if her entire face was spasming. She ducked into a washroom, waited for it to pass, and spent the rest of the day moving with extraordinary control through her meetings.

And what an extraordinary number of meetings it was. The Chamber wanted to discuss lobbying the government to soften its restrictions on private transport. A particularly cranky and blustering trio of CEOs held forth at length about how productivity was plummeting, how people needed to be in office, how this ban on cars was obscene and insane; although Malithi knew full well that people were enjoying the car-less streets, the quietness that had settled over the city, the way the restaurants and the shops were spreading out now, going to where people were.

After that began the internal meetings. The head of HR wanted a behavioral audit and re-orientation for six underperforming design teams. The VP of Finance was of the opinion that salary cuts and performance bonuses would do. Bizdev wanted to outsource everything to some boutique European design firm they had fallen in love with. Malithi ran the line as fine as she could, negotiated a compromise that left everyone feeling like a mildly unsatisfied winner, and almost collapsed in her home office.

Then it was off for groceries. The bus bulled its way through quiet streets, punctual by dint of having nothing else to share the roads with. The glare of supermarket lights blinded her. Right up until the counter, she wasn't quite sure whether she was pushing the trolley or the trolley was pushing her. She checked her phone while the cashier bagged the rice and meat and mushrooms. Six unread emails.

Her daughter, Indira, was outside when she got home; she sat on the steps, watching her with those too-big eyes, earphones practically glued

to her ears. She had those silly spectacles on, the ones she used for streaming.

"Stop loitering, help me carry this in," Malithi snapped. She had more bags than she could carry comfortably; old habits left over from cars. The #walkingeconomy hated bulk shopping.

Back to the house; back inside that darkness. She blinked and was inside the door, bread tucked under one arm. Blink again. Her hands were pushing the chicken into the freezer, trying to squeeze it between the ice tray and the stacks of sausages that Indira kept buying for 'emergencies'. Where was Indira? There, hauling in the rice, earphones and all.

The living room looked too neat, somehow, as if only Indira lived here. Malithi's presence began and ended at the home office tucked into a corner.

Malithi wobbled a bit.



"We should go to the hospital,"

Indira was saying. "Asiri is just over there—"

She dismissed her daughter, as she so often did. The child didn't understand. Children never did. The mortgage had to be paid; school fees had to be paid; the food that they ate had to be paid for; even the data she wasted streaming meaningless snippets of life . . . to Indira, all of these things came free.

And all these things were paid for with time. Her time. There was never enough to indulge in the endless ritual of general physicians and recommendations and the peculiar hell of finding appointments with specialists and their endless tests. All the advice they gave was to rest, anyway. Rest! As if such a thing existed. To take any kind of leave now was suicide.

"That's what you always say."

"Let's have this discussion later," said Malithi, slipping into that old familiar corporate diction. With the last of her iron control, she went up the stairs to her bedroom, reaching for that blessed darkness.



The next morning saw Malithi move through the machinelike ritual that these last fifteen years had demanded of her. Tea. Breakfast for Indira. Cutting the crusts off sandwiches. The daily hunt for a lunch box. The headache lingered in the corner of her head, but did not intrude. The ironing of the school uniform. Emails checked while waiting for Indira to find her books and dump them in her school bag.

Then the bus. Of all things, there was a perahara out on the streets today. Thousands of men and women in white, waving banners, getting in everyone's way, shuffling behind blocks of dancers in clinking metal, the whole procession crawling like a dying snake through the morning. The bus slowed.

"Will you go to the doctor today?" said Indira brightly.

"I have some meetings," said Malithi.

"Tomorrow?"

"Let's see. This stupid three-wheeler-"

"You could try one of the apps," continued Indira. "If you're so busy. There's a really good one from Elixium, it's free."

"Right."

"Ah?"

"It's free because you report a cold, they diagnose you with cancer, forward you to an expensive doctor, then make money off the consult," said Malithi. "Child, nobody does anything for free. Not in this world. Those apps are a scam. It's just a giant marketing funnel."

"It's not like that -"

Malithi snorted. "You're going to teach me about business models now?"

"The AI is really good, Ammi, it just takes five minutes-"

"This damn perehara," growled Malithi. The headache was creeping back, slowly, an iron

hand gripping on side of her skull. "Look, putha, let's talk about this at home. You're going to be late for school."

By the time the bus had crawled its way to Indira's school, all that remained was a general hatred of religious processions and the memory of two priority emails to get on top of. And the headache, of course.

Malithi closed her eyes against it, briefly. The bus pulled to the left, claiming one of those few effervescent parking spots outside the school, unloading uniformed children and scooting on with haste. A gang of school prefects, managing the traffic, waved them in with that peculiar childish pride derived from a cheap badge and a few words from a school teacher. She bundled Indira off the bus.

"Bag, lunchbox, here. Don't forget. Don't wear those in class," she said, picking the streaming spectacles off Indira's nose, folding them, and handing them back. "If you get caught again-"



"I won't," said Indira.

"I'll see you in the evening," said Malithi. She hugged Indira, watched her vanish beyond the school gates, and waited for the bus home, dreading the day ahead.



That evening, Indira watched her mother stumble briefly in the garage. There was no car there anymore, but all the odds and ends of life had ended up here; sometimes her mother went rummaging through the boxes, looking for old photographs, trophies, whatever caught helped her remember herself.

"H-APP status," Indira said softly.

ELIXIUM H-APP HAS FINISHED PRELIMINARY VIDEO ANALYSIS, said the spectacles' voice in her ear. It was a soft, svelte voice, the same one that whispered *YOU HAVE A NEW SUBSCRIBER!* on occasion. *HEADACHES, POSSIBLE AMNESIA, POSSIBLE LOST OF MOTOR CONTROL. SAY "SEARCH" TO EXAMINE SYMPTOMS OR "EXIT" TO FINISH.*



"Search."

The spectacles cast about for a flat surface, found a bit of wall nearby, and began to sketch a logo.

And beneath that, the results. In her vision, the wall filled with the neat, auto-kerned script, angled as if it had been actually written there.

FIRST PAGE, said the voice. *ONE OF THIRTY.*

"How serious?" 

The paragraphs on the wall skipped down a bit. Subtle severity scores appeared beneath each entry. They were quite low, green: most suggested a variant of a migraine. Except for one entry that stood out in stark contrast, glaring red. She blinked at it and it expanded, crawling all over the wall, spawning disclaimers at her:

WARNING: the following diagnostic matches only 0.02% of a population with these reported symptoms. Please exercise due caution. These results are not a binding medical opinion. Please book a consultation. Instructions available on request. Elixium is the leading provider of pre-diagnostic information services, serving consumers, physicians, and other healthcare professionals.

Indira fumed for a bit on the general stupidity of mothers. Then she went outside and kicked the stump of the tree that had once flowered in their garden. Her glasses automatically slipped into game mode and gave the stump a health

bar and made numbers fly with each kick. The stump, which bore many scuff marks, and had been gamified thousands of times to date, sat patiently in the hot sun and did nothing.

After a while, Indira took the footage she had captured of her mother - H-APP always saved this stuff to a separate folder - and spliced it with the results she had seen on the wall. A few blinks activated the auto-cut algorithm, which spat out a twenty-second video. A few more blinks sent the video to the Despicables.

The Despicables were hard to explain. Any parent, looking in from the outside, would have seen a generic cabal - the youngest daughters of those who lived in Pitapana Gardens. To the children, whose lives were more complex than their parents would admit, it was a rich web of friendships and friendly rivalries, a network that spanned one neighborhood, two schools, and (tangentially) everyone and everything in their lives. The Despicables, at any given point, had enough people to block tables at their school cafeterias, throw an entirely self-sustaining party, and coordinate the complexities of generating ironclad alibis - *ah yes, Auntie, she's coming over to my house today* - whenever someone wanted to slip away for a bit. On good days, they were a hive mind; on bad days, they were an argument.

Today, they rallied around the problem of mothers too stubborn to listen to their children. The footage was reviewed. Various high-risk suggestions were thrown in, as usual. Kidnap her, summon an ambulance, spoof an email address and pretend to be the

company's medical insurance offering a routine checkup. Indira, who in many ways was one of the calmer referees of this excitable horde, rejected the silly ones.

Eventually, better ideas came through. T suggested calling 1919, the medical emergency hotline; Auntie might be mad for a while, but everyone would eventually put it down to a child panicking and forget the incident. Indira turned this carefully in her mind, wondering whether it was worth what would follow - six months, maybe a year of gossip, especially among the other aunties, about the single mother who couldn't take care of herself. Adults often gossiped, and gossiped hard, forgetting that children understood these things; and the tongue, like a sharp knife, often killed without drawing blood. The Despicables agreed that the delicate social lives of the parents must not be disturbed.

G, who worked in subtler ways, pointed out that her mother worked in HR at the same company, and that Friday was everyone's obligatory office day. Nobody really did any work on Friday, from what G's mother said; people just lounged around catching up on all the gossip they missed out from working from home. So perhaps Indira could drop by to arrange a quick chat between the two mothers. The Elyxium H-App results could be passed off as something she'd vaguely heard about.

It was a well-known fact that G's mother had a fondness for a particular comic franchise from the early 2000s; the 'payment' could happen after the results. The adults thought



you couldn't download this stuff anymore, but the Despicables knew that piracy had simply moved on. They knew where to find it.

Operation Perera began that very evening.

"Meetings," said Kanchana. "More bloody meetings."

Malithi, who had slipped into that slow daze of people in elevators, nodded automatically.

"This drama with Finance," Kanchana went on. "It's really too much, honestly. I don't know what the CEO is doing. These two idiots are fighting to make a point and the rest of us have to deal with all these meetings and emails. Even at night, Malithi! I barely sleep these days."

Malithi nodded. Things must be pretty bad if Kanchana was venting to her. As a rule, people in HR never spoke to anyone outside

their own little circle, especially not the Bizdev people like her.

Kanchana peered at her. "Are you all right?"

That threw her. "Just tired," she said. "Why, does it show?"

"My husband said the same thing, you know," said Kanchana. "Just tired all the time, headaches... Then one of those health AI apps on his phone sent me a message saying I should take him to the hospital." She leaned in and whispered, "Autoimmune. They said it was lucky we'd got it checked when we did. A few more months and it might have been brain damage."

Malithi, who had absolutely no idea what 'autoimmune' meant, nodded blankly.


"Don't tell the kids, of course. We couldn't take time off. Had to do everything in a hurry."

"Of course. Is he . . . how is he now?"

Kanchana shrugged. "Under control, they say," she said. "But you know how these things are when you're our age. Not going to get any better." The elevator slowed and dinged. "Ah, right, there's my floor. See you, Malithi."

Malithi hesitated. Then, very carefully, she pressed the button to hold the door open and leaned out. "That health app," she called out into the corridor. "What's it called?"

Kanchana looked vague. "I'll ask him and email you," she said, disappearing into the hallway.



That evening the bus parked at the top of the lane, as it always did. Malithi, getting down, walked to her house, slower than her usual trot; and, as Indira approached, held up her phone.


Indira opened the door, took the phone from her mother's hand, and read it. Then they hugged, a little awkwardly.

"Don't worry," whispered Malithi. "The app says if it's caught early, it'll be okay. We have insurance, I . . . don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you."

Indira, trying very hard not to cry, said, "Did you book an appointment?"

"The app did," said her mother. "Tomorrow."

"I'm coming with you," said Indira.



They took a medicab to the hospital. Malithi and Indira cut straight to the reception desk, and, from there, to the neat queue marked *ELYXIUM PRIORITY PRE-DIAGNOSTICS*. There were other parents there, with other children. On the other side of the ropes was a line for the general physician. Some stared sullenly at the *ELYXIUM* line - those who didn't know, or didn't trust, or couldn't bring themselves to believe that an app that monitored you for the better part of a day could flag issues better than a tired, harried GP who saw you for 10 minutes.

"Two hundred and thirty three," said a soft voice from the phone. "Perera, M. Your consult is now ready."

"That's us," said Indira. They made their way to the desk at the front, where a nurse beckoned to them.

"Mrs. Perera? Neurologist's office, third on the left. If you want to leave your daughter here-"

Malithi felt Indira squeeze her hand, tightly.

"No," she said. "She stays with me."

The doctor was a young man, slouched over in his white coat. Malithi looked at his carefully rumpled hair and thought him far too young to be a neurologist, but he was polite, and not arrogant or dismissive. He asked if the session could be transcribed, and laid his phone down between them. As they spoke, he asked serious questions and nodded wisely when Indira interrupted with more detail.

"The good news is, Mrs. Perera, it looks like we've caught it before it became too serious," he said. "Part of it could be psychosomatic. Or at least the trigger. We'll have to run some tests, of course. Give me a minute."

"Of course," said Malithi.

"You know, you're only my tenth patient from the app," he said. "It's actually better than most general physicians now, but most people have a hard time believing it."

"What does it do, exactly?"



"AI assisted analysis," he said. "On your end, it collects symptoms and suggests specialists. On my end, it merges those with my observations and helps me conduct a differential diagnostic."

I'm going to recommend we start with some tests, and I'm also going to authorize your app to give you a daily routine and record your symptoms through the day. The routine may change suddenly - don't worry, that's just Elixium testing your reactions to different stimuli. But just in case - I know a lot of people don't trust the app - I'm going to give you the names of three other doctors who do things the old way."

"No," said Indira. "Treat her now."

The doctor smiled. Malithi, too, despite herself. The doctor bent over his terminal, the Elyxium logo blinking on it. In their own ways, they both were thinking about the imperiousness of youth, and the ways it had led them here, to this meeting organized by a machine-mind.

"There," said the doctor. "Once these test results are in, we'll look at our options and make a decision. Don't worry. Elixium is quite good at picking these things up."

Malithi found the idea of a doctor reassuring her about an app darkly hilarious. "I used to think that all this internet medicine stuff was stupid," she said. "The only good doctors are human doctors, and all that."

The doctor smiled. "My seniors all thought I was committing career suicide when I signed on, but we're really saving everyone a needless visit or two here. Ah, there we are. Your tests are scheduled. Wednesday. Your app will remind you."

"I might have work."

The doctor gave her a look. "I'll sign for a leave of medical absence," he said. "Mrs Perera . . . not to alarm you, but this is serious, and the chances are very high that it's been triggered by daily stress. Locking yourself away at home isn't doing you any favors. There will certainly be rest involved - there might even be corrective surgery. You may want to think about a will - the chances of success are very high, but -"

He glanced at Indira. The message was clear. High, but not absolute.



He turned his screen to them. "Please type in your name and sign here so we can authorize the data collection."

MRS M. PERERA, said the form.

She signed, almost automatically. Then she stopped, highlighted the name, and typed in *MALITHI PERERA*, and signed again. Indira, peering over the screen, blinked furiously, cutting the video before taking her mother's hand in hers, and tugged her gently away.



They held hands on the bus ride back from the hospital.

When was the last time they had done this? Perhaps before the divorce, when Indira had slipped and sprained her wrist, and Malithi held the other as she argued with doctors and nurses to bully their way to the top of the queue. She had continued to hold her daughter's hand all the way, long after the anaesthetic had kicked in.

Her mind turned to her phone, and to all the emails that sat there, impatiently waiting for her answer. Then it went back to her daughter, holding her hand.

"Did you," she said to Indira, "get Gayani's mother to talk to me at work today?"

"Maybe," said Indira, who was leaning against her. The kid grinned. "Should I get a commission?"

Malithi laughed. "You're already thinking at C-level," she said. And then, quietly,

"Thank you." 

The bus rolled up to the top of the lane, as it always did, and mother and daughter descended, and made their way home.

