

I thought I would never get to Nilgiri until one day I received a grant from the Arts Council of Finland to document life in Nilgiri.

I flew to the city of Bangalore, in southern India, and from there I had a twelve-hour bus ride to the Nilgiri Hills. During the long trip, I recalled the story of an Indian friend. It was about black magic, which is said to be powerful in southern India. According to the story, a young woman had married a man, whom her mother did not like at all. So, she decided to do something about it. Just after the wedding night the young bride began to sprout hair all over her body, and soon she was as ugly as a desert donkey. She had tantrums and she physically assaulted her husband. My friend went to the catholic church to find the exorcist. However, this evil spirit was too strong for him. Finally, they found a Kerala exorcist, who was competent enough to banish the evil spirit and the young woman recovered.

From the bus I could see how the land rose before us, soon after leaving Mysore. I saw the wild life park with elephants, tigers, monkeys and buffaloes. The conductor gave us vomit bags as we travelled along the twisting road. Two passengers at once began vomiting.

At last, the bus reaches Ooty. It has been raining heavily and the yard is rust brown. I am waiting at the station, wondering if there will be anyone to pick me up. It is getting dark when, suddenly, a friendly-looking, fifty-year-old badagaman approaches me. His name is Nallan, he is one of the village nurses, whose assistance will be needed later.

It is already dark when we finally get to a small village near Kotagiri, where I will spend the first night. The house is colored brown and yellow, and in the bedroom there is a rifle in the corner. To keep off the roaming beasts, I am told. A dog has recently been killed by a tiger. There is still one more surprise expecting me: a palm-sized black furry spider on the toilet wall.

The day after I move into a pretty, white, two store building. We drive to Kotagiri to buy a new stove. It is a beautifully embroidered hob, which comes with a free kettle. The stove has many complex functions which are useless, according to the seller. Hot pot stir fry milk soup water. Another even bigger spider crosses the toilet wall.

After having decorated the house I start to write Nilgiri Stories.

NARRATOR:

“When I was young, I read the stories about the mysterious Toda tribe, far away in Nilgiri Hills in southern India, I read about the wild roses, violets and lilies, the size of a tea saucer. Everything in Nilgiri was much bigger than elsewhere.

A visitor arriving sees the misty Blue Mountains towering at the distance. Nilam means blue and giri means a hill in Sanskrit. Nilgiri is the place closest to paradise on the earth. This is the home of the graceful Toda people.

Todas are much taller than average people and they walk upright – straight like a ramrod. Their men are hairy and their black hair hangs in long curls. They wear white linen cloaks, which they call putkulis.

The Toda language does not include a word for lying. Todas are not interested in money. The only thing they value, is the buffalo.”