

# Empty Nest



**Saroja Varghese**

The roar of the December winter wind is growing louder. In this silent hour, when all living creatures are in deep slumber, I am awake, wandering through a world of diverse thoughts. I rose from bed and looked out through the window. The continuous snowfall has completely covered the earth. In the glow of the streetlights, the bare tree branches look magnificent. The front veranda and the walkway must be covered by now. I remember how quickly Daddy and our son used to clear the driveway and walkways on snowy days like this. Now, we must rely on someone else for everything. With thoughts weighing on my mind, I returned to bed, yet sleep eludes me. My beloved husband is sleeping peacefully. In the dim light of the night lamp, I watched his face. The youthful glow of the strong, handsome man who tied the thali (wedding thread) around my neck forty-five years ago has faded. Life with him, a man who only knows how to love, was always full of happy days. Relatives and friends used to take pride in us, calling us a blessed couple who truly cared for one another.

The sky continued to shed snow softly, as if trying not to wake the sleeping Earth. Someone has stolen my sleep to pull me back into the world of memories. My childhood, my adolescence, the beautiful village I left behind, and the ancestral home (tharavadu) that stood there with pride—all of them peek into my mind now.

My ancestral home, where the nalukettu (traditional four-block structure) and the chavadipura (guest house) still remain like historical truths, was in a lush, beautiful village

near the city that wasn't very crowded. It was a village synonymous with purity. Drawing the charming picture of that village-with its paddy fields and lily ponds-gives me a sense of cooling comfort.

From the main road, a small path paved with red earth ends at the gatehouse of our ancestral home. The yard, filled with fruit trees like coconut, areca nut, and jackfruit, seemed like a stage for the Goddess of Prosperity. Once inside, there is a wide walkway covered in white sand, lined on both sides with flowering trees and plants. The path ends at a spacious courtyard.

Around the courtyard, roses, jasmine, and various other plants are attractively grown. In the center of the courtyard is a Thulasi (basil) platform. On the eastern boundary, plants like Ixora (thetti), butterfly pea (shankupusham), and hibiscus grow lushly. In the middle of this garden, the souls of the deceased are enshrined. My mother's image, lighting the lamp at the kuryala (shrine) every evening, remains an unfading memory within me. During her final days of illness, I stayed at the ancestral home for a few months to care for her. Back then, Mother said: "When children grow up and start their own lives, parents become orphaned." "It feels like arriving at a lonely shore, away from the hustle and bustle of life. A state where silence looms everywhere." She said that becoming like "exhausted horses huddled in a corner" is the inevitability of old age. "But this silence and emptiness frighten the mind more than the aging body."

Hearing Mother say that this ancestral home was "a nest from which the birds have flown away," I sat with her on her swinging cot, but I couldn't fully grasp the terror of that situation then. I simply tried to comfort her by saying she had us with her.

How true it is that history repeats itself. The person who comforted her mother then is now, along with her husband, in the stage of old age. On this snowy night, my husband and I are alone in this house. Like my mother's swinging cot, my mind is swaying. A frightening silence surrounds us. On the walls, pictures of our children look at me with smiles.

There are photos from birthday celebrations. Pictures of little mischief-makers running around the house, throwing snowballs at each other in winter. How quickly they grew up. There are proud, smiling photos in graduation gowns and caps. Then wedding photos. And finally, the charming pictures of grandchildren. These are reflections of the good days of life. Sometimes it is hard to believe they have all grown up and live separately with their own families. They love their father and mother and call regularly on the

phone. But frequent visits are difficult for them, living in distant cities. It was at their insistence that we moved to this small house. Large houses with gardens and sprawling lawns in the back are difficult for elderly people to maintain. It was very hard for their Pappa to sell that big house and leave. While I was interested in growing summer vegetables, he wasn't as enthusiastic. However, the grapevine he had planted there had just begun to spread and flourish. Leaving it behind was painful for him. Even after moving here, he would always say, "Let's go and see if the grapevine has sprouted."

It will take about five months for this winter to pass. This is a season that greatly troubles the elderly. This is when illnesses surface and refuse to leave. One is forced to spend time indoors, unable to go out. It seems this is when all memories wake up and shake themselves awake. I remember the English songs flowing from the children's rooms during holidays. The sound of the musical instruments they practiced-sometimes deafening. I used to scold them then. Now, I long to hear such sounds from their rooms. Now, we are the ones waiting for special occasions. Christmas, celebrated in this cold season, is as much a blessing to us as the birth of Christ itself. On that occasion, gathering with children and grandchildren heals all pain. The memory of grandchildren going out in woolen clothes to make a snowman and bringing it to their Vallammachi (Grandmother) is as sweet as the snow itself. When they place it in my hand-hands that cannot bear the cold due to aggravated rheumatism-it is not the cold I feel, but the gentle warmth of affection.

When the children snack on the cookies I make with the sweetness of love, they sometimes quarrel and break the cookie jars, creating a commotion in the kitchen. Instead of anger, my affection for them only grows. That's when my children ask, "If we had destroyed anything when we were young, you wouldn't have let us go without a beating. Where has that fire gone now?".

What can I say to them? Can the love in a grandmother's heart for her children and grandchildren even be measured? From the birth of a child until they are grown, and even after, the strength and measure of a parent's love only increases; it never decreases. There are no bounds to the dreams parents have for their children. Perhaps that is why it is so painful when they are not heard as we age. How can one describe the loneliness and emptiness felt when evening turns to night?

I hear the sound of a plane passing by. All the passengers on that plane are traveling with an eagerness to see their loved ones. As far as I am concerned, life itself is a journey.

Many believe the goal of life is death. To me, it is about performing the roles we are given in life beautifully. There just needs to be sincerity in the acting.

I had unpacked and spread out a large bag of memories. Meanwhile, my beloved opened his eyes. It is quite late in the morning. I caught myself wishing for a hot cup of coffee... but for that, I must go to the kitchen myself. In America, on Mother's Day, the children are usually enthusiastic about making coffee for Pappa and Mummy. But with a mother's heart, I don't allow it, they say, "If she could, this Mummy would even be ready to sleep in the kitchen." The children firmly believed that Mother's Day and Father's Day were meant to express their love and respect for Mummy and Pappa. Knowing Mummy's excessive love for flowers and plants, the children would gift attractive flowers early that morning, along with sweet, innocent kisses of love. Even after growing up, they tried not to break that habit. But gradually, those expressions of love began to shrink into beautiful words written by someone else on attractive cards. Because I had been awake early, I felt the fatigue of lack of sleep. Just then, someone rang the doorbell. When I wondered who it could be at this early hour, my beloved said, "Look at the clock, it's past eight." I slowly got up and opened the door to find a FedEx delivery person had left a large package. Since I didn't have the strength to lift it, I slowly dragged it inside. It was sent by our son. Opening it with great joy, I found gifts for us.

Usually, he brings the Christmas gifts when he visits. While wondering what happened this year, my hand brushed against a letter. It was from him. He, his wife, and children are going on a trip somewhere for the Christmas holidays, along with our daughter and her family. They are not coming this year.

The crystal jar of many, many dreams I had gathered a moment ago shattered into pieces. Thoughts began to flow back to the good days of the past. Christmas seasons had always gifted us days of joy. Neither caste nor religion ever set boundaries for those auspicious days. From the beginning of November, both children would prepare long lists of items to be bought as gifts. Weekends were spent shopping with those lists. By mid-December, a room in the house would be filled with gift boxes-not just for them, but for their friends and cousins according to their interests. How enthusiastic they both were about decorating the Christmas tree inside the house! Lights all around the house. Those good days of peace and happiness have disappeared somewhere. Seeing my distress, my husband said, "Aren't they young? Let them enjoy. Like children, let's wait for Santa Claus to come this year." Saying that, he quickly went to the bathroom. Before the door closed, I heard a sob.

The end