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## The Lone Survivor of Three Generations

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On an invitation from my friend, Harsha I went to Visakhapattanam to be his guest for a fortnight. We were classmates at MA level four decades ago and surprisingly to the world we have maintained our cordial relationship uninterruptedly without any friction of misunderstanding. It was a wonderful relationship.

Arriving at the Railway Station, I took an auto and reached his house in Vinayaka Nagar on the outskirts facing the majestic Bay of Bengal surrounded by guarding Dolphin hills. The marine drive along the sea coast studded with skyscrapers is a pleasant hospitable sight.

My friend Harsha is a retired government servant, and has well settled at Visakhapattanam, the home town of his wife. Tall, bespectacled and ever smiling he has two sons – one is a doctor in New Delhi and another practicing lawyer in Hyderabad. His wife's ancestral village Mosiapet is located about thirty kilometers from Visakhapattanam. Harsha took me to this village for a quiet spending of time for a week.

It was at Mosiapet I came across an old man with a walking stick in his hand on a plain ground barely surrounded by trees, where he would stand long hours every day and return to his small house. Nothing could be seen on the ground except six dark patches. I noticed him on the first day of my visit to the village in my long walks. At my first encounter I ignored him though I noticed. I mistook him for a shepherd or cowboy. The next day and the following day and the following day I noticed him at the same spot standing for long hours unmindful of the scorching sun with his eyes transfixed.

It kindled my interest and unhesitatingly I stopped and stood a few minutes watching the old man. The curiosity in me further drove me towards him; and I stood aside waiting for his attention. But, he was unaware of my presence. Whether knowingly or unknowingly he did I realized something exotic in the old man's behaviour. In order to draw his attention I made a few steps forward moving towards him and stood aside. Nevertheless he stood there like a forest man in Thailand of whom I read fifty years ago when I was pretty boy in an English daily. He did not stir. I didn't know if he had really noticed me. For a few minutes I stood aside and waited for him to respond. Nothing happened. He transfixed his eyes on the ground. I looked at the ground and nothing was noticed except six dark patches. What he was looking at I could not understand.

As there was no response, I raised my right hand and passed it over his back. Even at my touch he did not stir. When I tapped his back even then he did not budge. I called him

using the typical village folk language and shook his body. At this, now, he turned his head like a doll in a showroom towards me and looked at me in void. There was an element of sadness which I discerned clearly in his eyes. His eyes were sunk deeply; his cheeks had wrinkles and depressions in the middle and had his white thinly unshaven beard on his brown skin. He wore a white smudged dhoti and a slack on it. His appearance looked as though he were forlorn. Some deep tragedy must have struck his life, I sensed.

“I see you every day standing here gazing.” I blurted and stopped a while surveying his form. “Your appearance gives me an impression and understanding that something serious must have stuck your life.” At my utterance, he didn’t respond. He gazed at the ground. Nevertheless I waited and resumed. “Speak. Is there no one for you? Don’t you have relations?”

At this tears dribbled and rolled down his sunken brown cheeks. He was speechless for some time. At last he broke his silence and said sobbing, “I have none in my family. Twenty three members of my family, including nine women and seven children died in an accident. They include my brother, his wife, three sons, their wives and their four children, my three sons, their wives and their children all perished in the accident that happened in the wee hours. They were all travelling in a van that crashed through the railings of a road bridge.” He had no energy to cry. May be he had been crying since his relations died. He was old, must be more than seventy five, weak and stooping on his stick.

It was shocking that he had lost everyone in his family; it had moved my heart profoundly. A while after I was dumbfounded, I resumed, “Don’t you have any one in the family?”

“I have none. Three generations have perished. I am the only survivor. If I had accompanied them on their pilgrimage tour I too would have died along with them. When I insisted that I would also go with them my brother said no to me and told me that he would take me in the next trip. He left me only to witness the tragedy. Perhaps it was God’s will that I should survive to weep for them as there was no one to cry. I am destined. Now I have no energy in my body to weep and cry. There is no one in the village to cry. I have become old and senile, I am over seventy five. What should I cry? If I cry, can I get them back?”

“But, why are you standing here?”

“Here,” pointing at the dark patches on the ground with his walking stick he said, “All the twenty three members were cremated here. I cannot go back. Hence I complain to my brother’s spirit – why have you left me alone? You could have taken me with you. For whose sake should I live? I am useless to the society because I am old. There is none to give me water, none to cook food for me, none to take me to hospital, none to enquire and talk with me, none to take care of me at this hour of my life. Who will come and help me? What sin have I done to you? I don’t know, what sin I had committed in my previous life that warranted me to reap its consequences in this life. It is my *prarabdha karma*.” His tragic narration moved my heart and a thin film of tears bathed my eyes that blurred my vision partially.

“Don’t you have a house of your own to live in?” I asked in sheer pity.

He mumbled shell-choked, “I have a big house. We were all living together in that house.” He showed the house lifting the stick and pointing it in the eastern direction towards village. I could see the house surrounded by a few small houses and tall coconut and papaya trees. “Now there is no one in that house. What is the use of that house? No one is there. Everyone has gone to the other world. Now it has become a haunting house. If I go there I am haunted by past memories. So, I don’t go to the house. I don’t want that house. I may live for a few days, or a few months or a few more years if I have energy. After my death, to whom I should bequeath.” He lamented profusely.

“You must have a place to live in. Where do you sleep?”

“I wander here there aimlessly. I sit under the trees and sleep. People know me well as the incident was published in all dailies. They whisper when I keep walking and crossing the road. They look at me strangely, of course, with pity.”

“Your food?”

“I go and stand before hotels. Since the proprietors know my tragedy, out of mercy they give me some food.”

“How about people in the village? Don’t they talk to you? Don’t they feed you? Haven’t they ever invited you to their houses?”

“Who will talk to this dying old man? I am utterly useless to them. Everyone thinks that I have lost my mental balance; I have become insane, mentally deranged due to the shocking incident. I don’t talk. They pity me. But their pity will not bring back my three generations. What is the use of talking? It will not bring back my brother, his wife, their children and grandchildren. No religion, no philosophy, no Vedanta, no temple can restore my kin.”

“Come with me and I will take you.” I offered my hand.

At this suggestion, he turned his head towards me and looked at me scornfully.

“Why do you want to share my tragedy? Let it go with me. You are young and you have enormous life. Why do you want to cut short your life by sharing my tragedy?”

“I will put you in an old age home. You can live happily with the other inmates by sharing your sorrow. It may relieve you from the pain.”

“I cannot live there. Let me live like this and die.” After uttering these painful words he fell silent. He didn’t speak. He became gloomy, fell down and sat on the ground. I was helpless. Defeated I walked off in silence. He barely looked at me.

I returned to Visakapattanam with heavy heart. The old man constantly figured in my memories, rooted in my consciousness from which I could not escape and which I could not

erase. For long I pondered over life and death. Nothing substantial I learnt from my pondering and I lived with his image in my heart. I could not understand the strange ironies of life and death, and the tragedy that had wiped off the three generations of one single family.

A year had passed and out of curiosity to know what had happened to the old man, I revisited Visakapattanam. This time I did not inform my friend Harsha and I went there on my own. After reaching Visakapattanam I straight went to the village in utter anxiety to see the old man. I went round, visited every house, met everyman, but much to my dismay, no one had given me the correct version of his whereabouts. Every one simply admitted the ignorance.

I went to his house. An eerie silence enveloped the simple unwhitewashed house, located two hundred meters from the bus stop where I boarded off from the bus. It was locked. There was no one wailing simply because there was no one left to wail.

I made my quick steps to the place where he used to stand in utter enigmatic silence. Much to my disbelief, I could not trace the ground, the dark patches. Green grass and wild and thick thorny bushes had grown all around. From there I walked across the city roads, the usual places and trees where he used to wander, lie and sleep. He was not found. I visited the hotels where he used to beg for food. The hotel proprietors told me he had disappeared.

The image of the old man with disheveled white hair, unshaved grey stubble, sunken eyes and cheeks with unwashed smudged white shirt, its sleeves rolled up to elbows, a faded blue towel on his right shoulder and a discoloured stick in his right hand appeared before my eyes. No one was left to wail for him. Only his simple locked house stood in enigmatic silence.