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## Mala, Old and Tall

Swapna Narayanan

The pilot switched on the seat belt sign, lavatories were closed, air hostesses were sauntering around scanning every row – aisle to window. With one eye looking out for left-over paper cups, cutlery, newspapers etc. and another for non-straightened seat backs. After a long weary flight of 16 hours, all my co-passengers were tired and were waiting to step out of the aircraft. A large noisy Gujarati family coming back from a holiday in the America with their non-stop chatter, an excited young software engineer coming home to family after a 2 year project in NY, a middle aged man going home to light the funeral pyre of his mother whom he had lost a day back.

All were eager to land, except me.

I was scared. Scared to go out alone, find my luggage, find Shanti and go home. How will I know which belt would the luggage arrive in? Will I be able to heave my big 21 inch suitcase off the conveyor belt? Where would be the Exit gate? And the parking lot? Shanti had asked me to come to the parking lot. What if she had parked far away? I would have to push the trolley for a long distance then. Will I be able to?

Not that I have not travelled before. I have, but not alone. Always chaperoned, taken care of.

I was also scared of the questions I will have to face from friends and family – Why did I come back? Did my children send me back because I was a burden to them? Am I unwell? And the jibes from my friends, Mala, you used to be very loving to your daughter in laws? See, they sent you back after all. And the seemingly mundane – what if the lock of the house is jammed and I am unable to open the door? What if there is no electricity at home? Would they have disconnected the telephone line? Which office should I go to get it repaired? Shanti will be dropping me at home and rushing off for some work.

I was so uncertain. Of everything.

I took a deep breath and looked around.

My co passenger, the recently bereaved son was also lost in his thoughts, like me. Must be going through a roller coaster emotional ride, typical for any son who has lived in America for the last 20 years of his life, I thought. Both his parents were healthy and were doing well, he had said earlier in the day. He had personally taken them for their medical check-up 6 months back, all was well. Why suddenly? What went wrong, he had cried when we had chatted up.

Death does not inform and come, I had told him.

Seeing him in his state of despair, I could picture the scene in his house once he has landed and goes home. Shock, disbelief, pain, hurried completion of the rituals, and then a sleepless night. Till, tomorrow, when the bright Chennai Sun will wake him up to the thought of – what next? First and foremost, how to conduct the 13 day rituals? His wife could not join him as the kids had exams going on. Eventually, how to take care of his father? Where will his father stay? Will he join him in America? His mind will sort all things out, like my sons did. With that innate

ability to plan everything in their lives. Education, career, success, house, kids, parents and the list goes on. But, can mere mortals plan life? Or death?

The airhostess came with a tray full of water, breaking my reverie.

I declined and tightened my seat belt. And also my heart. Come on, take control Mala, you wanted this day and now when it is here, you cannot be afraid. Come on, buck up, I could hear Gana chiding me.

Gana – was why I was here. In this flight, much to the chagrin of my sons and their wives, even their children.

Why Patti? Why do you want to go and live alone? Don't you love us? They had asked again and again, in their innocence. Their beautiful smiles and repeated appeals had tugged my heart, almost broken my resolve, but as always Gana won. His voice beckoned me to come home.

This is home, amma. There is no home in Chennai any more. You cannot live alone. You have never lived alone, my younger son had begged.

Come on amma, do not be childish. We all know you do not like living alone. You hate going to the market. Appa used to do everything. How will you manage the day to day things there? What if something happens to you? Who will take you to hospital? Chennai is so unsafe these days, my elder son had almost scolded.

Amma, do not be carried away by Shanti chitti. She is much younger to you and has been working woman all through her life. She can manage well as she knows. But, not you. You will not be able to manage alone, my elder daughter in law had reasoned.

My second daughter in law did not see the need to talk to me on this.

I had decided to come back home to Chennai after a lot of thought. The first time when the thought came by was the day; I laid my hands on Gana's favourite book of Poetry. I had completely forgotten about its existence and was surprised to see it in my younger son's library. Gana, a retired professor of English Literature from the Loyola College, must have given it to him. I randomly opened the book. And my eyes fell on an Emily Dickenson poem:

*"And if I go, while you are still here,  
Know that I live on, vibrating to a different measure,  
behind a thin veil you cannot see through.  
You will not see me so you must have faith.*

Gana's oft quoted poem, whenever we both thought about our future. Live life to the fullest, was his constant diktat. And when our friends and family, all passing through a similar phase, the last threshold of our lives, discussed our uncertain future, he used to say the same. Live life, enjoy life, count your blessings and bless others around you.

I had felt overwhelmed on reading the poem.

Going through a learning phase in life, adapting to the life in America, adjusting to the food habits of the children, honing my colloquial English skills to converse with my grandchildren, sleeping alone in a large bed, handling surprised look of the onlookers in the park when they saw me in my traditional 6 yards cotton sarees, restricting and measuring my talk with neighbours, have I not done it all?

My emotions had come flooding.

‘Oh, Gana? Why did you have to leave me and go?’ I cried out aloud. ‘You told you to live life to the fullest. And I am living it, Gana. I lived in a cocooned environment with you. Today – I have learnt so many things. I have adjusted myself to our children’s world. It is so difficult to be on your own,’ I raved.

‘But, why am I not happy? Talk to me, Gana. Where are you?’ I broke down.

And then, I realized. Gana cannot hear me here. He will be waiting at home, in Chennai. So, what am I doing here? Why am I not in my house? I know, Gana cannot come back and live with me, but I can live the way I want.

After thinking about it for a long time, I had decided to come and live alone in my house, back home. I did think a lot before I told my sons. How will I manage alone? What if I have a medical emergency? Who will I call if I have a problem? I could find no answers to these questions.

How will you cope, Amma? Both my sons had raved and ranted, on hearing my decision.

I had retorted back to both of them, I will learn. I learned so much to live in your house here. I will learn the same in my house now. I will learn to manage money. I will learn to pay bills. I will learn the bus numbers. I will learn to fight with the auto drivers. Learn, I must, to live now. Let it be in a place, where I am happy.

Will you never come back again Patti, my teary eyed teenaged granddaughter had asked in Tamil. She consciously takes an effort to talk to me in Tamil. Have we treated you badly? Were mom and dad nasty to you?

No, my child, I had answered. They were all very loving. You all love too. But, do understand, I just want to live in my house. I will regularly come to visit you.

Remember, when you used to come to Chennai for long vacations, after a few days you used to start crying, ‘I wanna go home.’ Similarly, I want to go home too, I had added.

She understood.

And promised that she is coming home in December and going to all the Marghazhi concerts with me. Let’s paint the town red, she had remarked in her American style and we both had a hearty laugh.

The pilot announced ‘We are beginning our descent. We should be landing in Chennai in 15 minutes from now.’

I smiled. The aircraft touched the ground. I unfastened my seat belt and my heart.

I looked forward to going home, my home, our home.

I am certain I am going to live well.