

## BONSAI LIFE

What excites me most when I return home from work is noticing letters in my mail box. It makes me feel as if someone close to my heart was greeting me on my arrival and easing my weariness from office slog. What a relief to avoid going straight to the kitchen and, instead, humming to myself and making some coffee! The thrill and excitement are even greater when the handwriting looks familiar – scribbled on a inland cover or a card; then, I would feel as if I was about to wolf down a plateful of *bajjis* or *pakor*s! I am averse to write letters but always look forward to receiving them - every day.

There was one I hadn't expected; there must be something special if my sister, always slow to put pen to paper, has written one. I was a little apprehensive as I opened it: what if it carried some bad news? Well, I told myself, nobody ever writes a letter to convey something dreadful.

The letter read:

*My dear Ammalu:*

*I know this letter will surprise you. You will be surprised even more if I informed you that your brother-in-law and I will be soon visiting you. We have been planning for a long time to go to*

*Benares and Haridwar, now, finally we got that opportunity. I hope our visit will not pose any inconvenience to you.*

I was so excited I informed my husband: "My sister and her husband are visiting us."

"Is that so? Let me see," he said and took the letter away from my hand. I went to the kitchen to serve him coffee and snacks.

This is the first time my sister and her husband are visiting us after our marriage. This was something I have been hoping for many years, but the couple never stirred out of their village. There's always some pretext: children, land cultivation or harvest time. And now, finally, they are coming.

Sister had no formal education like I do, the reason being my father withdrew her from school after the fifth standard. Those were the days when parents routinely questioned why a girl needed any education at all. By the time I was born – a decade later – there was no such controversy. Fortunately, my father too had a change of heart and didn't hesitate to encourage me to go to college. No woman with a college education will be inclined to confine herself to a role of a housewife taking care of her home only; she wants to use her credentials and make a name for herself as an independent woman. That was exactly what I wanted to do. My husband has a decent job, but I too wanted a career of my own.

Because of her lack of education my sister wound up with a husband from a village. My brother-in-law is educated but he

chose to follow his family tradition and took to farming. Eventually Sister too got used to the village life.

She brought us from her village cucumbers, *gonguura*, drum sticks, *pappads*, pickles and coconut balls. "I am not sure if you will like these," she said in an apologetic tone. "Like *Kuchela* - I could afford only these."

"What are you saying?" I countered her. "You have brought us exactly what we needed; we rarely get any of these vegetables here. My husband is extremely fond of *gonguura*, the cucumber dish and drumstick soup. I am so busy with my work that I have neither the time nor patience to roll *pappads* at home. You know exactly how I feel. Don't you?"

"I know you must be dead tired by the time you come home from work," my sister said. "How can you find time to make *dosas* or *idlis*? I am really amazed how you are able to run your family as well as handle a job."

"That's true. Once in a while I too feel frustrated and think if I should give up my job; it is too much for someone to be a home maker and a professional woman," I said echoing my personal experience.

"*Ammalu*, don't say that" Sister said. "You are really lucky. You are well educated, decently employed and living on an equal footing with your husband; you don't have to depend on others for

anything. You are financially independent and can survive on your own."

'The grass is always greener on the other side,' I thought. I changed the tone of conversation, and asked, "What's your daughter doing?"

"She is in high school – it's her final year," Sister answered, and continued in a passionate voice: "I am hoping, by God's grace, she will be able to go to college. My husband is against the idea of her staying in a hostel in another town and studying. I hate the idea of her locked up at home with no schooling. Haven't I suffered enough? Nowadays a Bachelors degree is a must – even for a woman; otherwise she has no future; she has to squirm like a scorpion under a man's foot."

I knew Sister was always interested in studies, but Father refused to send her to school. I remember he once asked her to do some math calculation mentally and, when she couldn't, he said, "How could she learn anything?" So he put an end to her studies and concentrated on our brother's education. Mother has been smarting ever since that it was Sister's lack of education that forced her, after marriage, to a monotonous life in a village where her duties, as a housewife, mainly consisted of routine chores like, dairy farming, drawing water from well, cleaning the kitchen oven and other boring tasks. I didn't want Sister to chew

over her past and feel depressed. “Let’s go out, “I said and took her to the terrace.

There, on the balcony, Sister began examining the flower pots; she said the vegetables she had brought for me were grown in her backyard. I asked her to send me some *gonguura* seeds when someone comes along this way.

“What’s this?” she suddenly asked. “You have put this pomegranate plant in a small pot, see how it has grown like a pygmy? Shouldn’t you let it grow in your backyard? How do you expect it to grow in a flower pot?”

I laughed; Sister’s face turned pale.

“I have purposely planted it in a flower pot,” I told her. “It’s a special technique. The Japanese call it *Bonsai*. You can grow even a banyan tree in a flower pot; you can cut and make the roots coming down the tree short. The same thing happens in the case of pomegranate plant; you can chop the branches and, now and then, transplant it in different pots while adjusting the height. The little tree bearing fruits will be a great sight to behold! *Bonsai* is an art and it demands hard work.”

Sister didn’t seem to appreciate my enthusiasm. She sighed and said, again: “Why should you lock up a tall and majestic tree in a small pot?”

I slumped down in my chair a little disappointed that Sister didn’t admire my *Bonsai*; everything I had worked for my *Bonsai* seemed to have gone down the drain.

Then, suddenly, there was a dust storm and in no time we felt our faces assaulted by sand blinding our eyes. I grabbed Sister’s hand and pulled her inside the room. We quickly shut down all the room windows.

Sister was flabbergasted by what happened in a matter of a few seconds.

“What happened? Everything seemed normal; where did this storm come all of a sudden? Is it happening everywhere, even on the tar roads over there?”

“Well, this is an inevitable act in our life here,” I said. “You can never tell when the storm will gather sand from Rajasthan desert and toss it on our faces.” I didn’t finish talking when I heard the sound of rain drops falling on the balcony. I opened the door and dragged the *Bonsai* and other flower pots into the room. Sister opened a window and looked out to get a taste of the weather in the national capital.

“*Ammalu*, look there!” she said and I sensed a new excitement in her voice. I looked down the street and noticed nothing. I riveted my eyes on her and asked, “What’s it?”

“Look at that tall tree where so many people found a shelter,” she said as if conveying to me something new. I didn’t see anything special about that sight. She must have sensed that I didn’t grasp what’s on her mind. She spoke, again.

“See that banyan tree – how big it had grown because it is enjoying freedom in a vast landscape. No storm can ever shake it; besides it serves as a refuge to so many. I wonder how many are seeking its shade in the day time!”

“So . . . what’s the big surprise?” I asked.

“I am not talking about anything extraordinary. Look over that *Bonsai* plant you had so fondly tended and nourished! It looks great like a privileged family woman. It is tender and you have to care for it with thousand eyes; it can’t withstand a storm. It is so dependent on others that it can hardly lend its shade to others. It is only because of the way a boy and a girl are brought up in a family that the girl ends up with a *Bonsai* life. Don’t you agree?”

I understood what she meant. I desperately wanted to free my *Bonsai* plants from their pots – just like letting out a parrot from its cage.

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