

SACRIFICE

I drove along the winding road up the slope and as I passed through the familiar sights a wave of nostalgia mingled with painful memories swept through me opening up wounds that I found had not healed in twenty long years! Time, they say is a great healer but there are some wounds which are so deep that even a life-time is not enough to heal.

The beautiful drive-way lined with trees led to a clearing and there spread out before me was this vast graveyard with innumerable Cypress trees and patches of greenery and marble tombstones in perfect uniformity dotting the entire place, designed exactly as I wanted. I stepped out of the car and stood there in a daze. The place looked eerie, dismal and yet awesome and the silence was benumbing, more potent than the most deafening noise. Memories began flooding my mind and I felt like there were hundred hammers pounding at my temples. How could I ever forget this place where my home once stood! How could I come to terms with a malicious Fate that dealt this terrible tragedy on me! With one devastating blow it had wiped out the house along with my parents and my little eight year old brother two years my junior and now, they lay buried deep under a debris of huge boulders, splinters and rotting trees, their 'remains' cold and unrecognizable as the very wreckage that shrouded them and so were the bodies of some of those who lost their lives in that catastrophe.

I stood there wishing that it was just a horrible dream from which I would wake up and find my beautiful world still intact. I saw once again my house nestling at the foot of these very same mountains as its backdrop, its exquisite architecture with its gleaming white walls, the slanting glass-topped roof above the living room displaying a magnificent view of the snow-capped mountains, its peaks glistening in the sunlight in fair weather. On a clear night we could see the stars peeping through the glass roof and sometimes it was the moonlight streaming into the room. The front porch was in white marble and running along its entire length were steps in white marble and on the porch stood marble pillars with carvings on either side. The bay windows of the upper floor looked beautiful with their sills lined with troughs of geraniums and the large French windows of the drawing room overlooked the beautifully manicured plush green lawns, terraced gardens, trees and bushes of rare quality dotting the lawns and a cascading fountain. The entire setting had an ambience of enchanting beauty.

The architect of this amazing piece of workmanship was my father and my mother was the soul of the house. Her excellent taste was evident throughout the house and her charm and grace livened up the entire place. She was a great entertainer and our home was always open to guests and close friends and they loved attending our parties and barbecues.

I can recollect the excitement and thrill that filled our childhood days, the cycle rides with our friends down the muddy slopes and the cool, crisp air blowing against our faces, the splashes in the stream below, its water so clean and crystal clear as it flowed down straight from the mountains above. Then there was this secret hide-out, the pond, where we would hang out. It was our private pleasure ground where we would sit munching fruits or sandwiches and chips and pelting stones at the frogs. The highest scorer who could hit without missing was universally accepted as the leader and invariably I used to be the winner. It was a cruel and mindless sport but we were driven by some sort of sadistic urge to inflict pain and derive pleasure out of it. It was perhaps this same sadistic streak that drove us to be unkind to the woman who would pass us by almost every day on her shopping errands with her shopping bag and a pink shawl wrapped round her. She lived alone in the poorer section of the neighborhood and she always looked sad and lonely perhaps because she was either generally ignored or mocked at. She aroused our ire because we considered her an intrusion to our privacy though we could boast of no such rights. She tried befriending us but all her attempts were rejected. Once when she realized what we were doing to the frogs she tried to admonish us that it was cruel to hurt the frogs and dumb animals. We had scoffed at her and booed her and called her a toad.

One day we collected a couple of frogs and threw them at her jeering and calling out, "Hey Toad keep them." Childish as it was but spoiling our fun was not acceptable. 'Serves her right,' we would say, 'she should mind her own business.' After that she would just walk past us enduring our taunts without a murmur. The very sight of her spurred us on to torment her more and unfortunately for her she could not change her pathway because it was the shortest route to the shops below the slope and if at times she changed her timings to avoid us there were occasions when she could not. We secretly feared that she might one day spill the beans to our parents.

Then the day dawned – it was like any other day, sunny and cool. Our mid-day meal over, my parents had retired for their siesta, my little brother exhausted after the morning activities was snoozing in his room, the working staff their duties over had all retired to their quarters and the house was in repose. For some reason I was feeling restless and wished to be out in the open, so I quietly stole out of the house and went sprinting down the slope in the hope that I might meet some of my friends. Hardly had I reached our meeting place, the pond, when I felt the earth under my feet shaking violently and in a split second huge boulders were hurtling down the mountains and crashing on the houses splitting them asunder and burying them, gaping cracks were appearing in the earth and trees were

being uprooted and dashed to the ground, panic stricken people were rushing out of their houses and their screams, rumbling sounds and dogs barking and howling rent the air. There was utter chaos. Terrified I tried to run back to the house but I was blinded by the flying debris and fell flat on my face. Helpless and unable to move I resigned to my fate thinking that the end had come and that the earth was going to swallow me up. It was then that I felt someone tugging at my arm, I couldn't see who it was because I couldn't open my eyes and my face was badly bruised. I felt I was being moved to safer grounds and felt a soft cloth against my bruised face. The next minute I felt someone's body pressing gently against my back as if to protect me from the onslaught of the flying rocks, after that I passed out.

Later I was told by my rescuers that I was found lying unconscious with a woman's body on my back, her head crushed by a huge rock which could have crushed me to death had she not taken the blow on herself. They showed me a pink shawl which she had used to cover my bruised face. I was dumb-stricken, I knew who the woman was, she was 'Toad' the victim of our mockery! Shattered in spirit at the loss of my family coupled with this new revelation, I broke down and shed bitter tears.

During my growing up years I was in the care of my uncle and aunt who were chosen

to be the Custodians of a Trust made in favour of my brother and me by my parents much before the mishap. I was lucky to be in good hands who cared for me well and gave me a good education. When I came of age and was in control of my inheritance, the first thing I did was to make a grant of the land that belonged to me to build a graveyard in its place.

As I stood there I could not, but be struck by the irony of it all; however this was the least I could do for my loved ones. Slowly coming out of my reverie, my eyes welling up, I stumbled towards the gravestones of my parents and my little brother (their tombstones were easy to locate because they stood exactly where the house had stood once). I knelt down, laid three bouquets of white lilies beside their graves and said a prayer for their souls. Then I staggered to my feet and walked towards the next gravestone which had markings of the person's name obviously because the body could be identified. I knelt beside the gravestone, placed a bouquet of pink lilies, said a prayer and then drew out from my backpack a glossy black plaque with gold letterings and nailed it on the tombstone. The Inscription read: **"NO SACRIFICE OR LOVE CAN BE GREATER THAN THIS, THAT, ONE LAYS DOWN ONE'S LIFE FOR ANOTHER."** **HERE LIES A BEAUTIFUL SOUL WHO LAID DOWN HER LIFE TO SAVE THE LIFE OF A WORTHLESS TOAD."**

(By Shama Vijayan)

