

SHORT STORY

# The Loving Son

T. Janakiraman

Translated from Tamil by Viswanathan and Renuka

At ten o'clock at night the crone lying on the verandah cried out for water. It was a couple of hours after sunset. When the hooting of the night owl dies down and darkness descends, it's time for townsmen to drift off to sleep. They respect the ancient belief that one should not eat at twilight and as soon as stars are sighted in the sky, they eat up the leftovers from lunch and lie down to slumber. Only the wooden swing next door creaked gently as if rocking someone to rest. It was at this untimely hour that the crone screamed out for water. Her daughter-in-law came up with a *lota* of lukewarm water and left it beside her. Swallowing it, the old woman gave a sigh of relief.

The head of the household, her son, patted his mattress free of dust and closed the lower shutter of the bedroom. The daughter-in-law put the hot water vessel back on the kitchen shelf, replaced the latch on the door and went away. An hour passed.

"Could you get me some water please?"

There was no reply.

"Bhagoo, Bhagoo, please bring me some warm water."

In response, the clock next door measured out time like grains of sand on a river bed.

"Bhagoo, Bhagoo."

The crone could even hear a match strike four doors away. Yet she did not make out the whispers emanating from the bedroom nearby.

"Please let me go, dear. Amma wants water."

"Just pretend you're asleep."

"I've already answered her call."

"Let her be thirsty. Can't you give it to her later?"

"Bhagoo, Bhagoo, are you asleep?"

"Let me go. Why are you so childish? This is a fine thing to do!"

"All right. Will you rush back at

once after giving it to her?"

"Mmm - mmm"

"You must come back at once."

"I'll return at once; let me go!"

Giving him her word, she pulled back her saree, straightened it and got up. Picking up the bedroom lamp from its hook, she took warm water from the kettle on the scrubbed hearth and came out into the passage. She averted her eyes from the uncouth manner in which the crone lay outspread in her tattered saree. The son's love peeped out of every rent in the old woman's clothes!

"Take this; I'm afraid the water's cooled down."

"What does it matter if it's cooled down? I only want to wet my mouth.

Mmm.. that feels good; that's enough."

"Should I bring you some more water?"

"No, that's enough, go back to bed".

"Shall I massage your legs?"

"No, that's not necessary, go back to sleep."

The daughter-in-law restored the lamp to its hook, reduced the flame and re-entered the bedroom, keeping her promise to her husband. The man had risen from the bed and was waiting for her. He rushed forward and startled her with a sudden embrace.

The crone peered sharply at the darkness that poured into the corridor like rain. She was unhappy that she could not live out her last days as she had wished. "I should have died when my body was still strong," she philosophised looking back on her past. "It's misery to hold on endlessly to life like an eagle, with fatigued flesh and a muddled mind, seeking another's helping hand for everything."

She was justified in thinking so. After all, even the two-and-a-half acres of landed property of the family had been brought in by her. The man she had married had not an inch of land. She had been an only daughter. Because of her father's boundless affection for the landless boy, he had



given his daughter to him, willed two-and-a-half acres in the name of the son-in-law, put aside Rs.1000/- separately for the daughter and breathed his last. The crone was now 65. At 45 she had lost her sole support: her husband. Now, stuck with her son and daughter-in-law, she suffered. Her unfulfilled and frustrated dreams cried out one by one.

“If the property had been in my name, would the youngsters have been so negligent? They would have fallen at my feet crying out, ‘Amma! Amma!’ Couldn’t my father have left me the money? Although I don’t know how to sign my name, I could have managed it with a scrawl. It’s because the land is in his name that my son thinks he’s earned the money. Both my sarees look as if Rama’s arrows have pierced them. For how many months have I been telling him to buy me a saree? Has he heard me?”

“At home there’s his lovely wife whose beauty glows like a flame. But he goes to the whore across the road and flings cartloads of paddy before her. And believes that no one notices what he does! The whole town is agog. Yes, people commit sins and think that no one will learn about them.

“They have had seven children — born and buried between three and six months. And four miscarriages. Only this is decreed for that sinner. Nothing that he touches will succeed. There can be no dawn where he lives. Does this house look like a home? It’s desolate like a cemetery. It doesn’t at all feel like a place to live in.”

The crone reviewed her earlier hopes with a parched and hungry tongue. She had not lacked children. After the eldest boy, there were three daughters and two sons; and later still, two more daughters. They had all



been married off and had their own children.

The marriages had been duly conducted. She sighed. “Doesn’t he want to bring his sisters back to the house for even a day? A confinement, a child-bearing ceremony in their natal home - didn’t they deserve this much? The two eldest daughters had delivered their children here. My husband was kingly and looked after everything. Later, no daughter has shown her face here. They went away to their husbands’ houses. Now, I don’t even know if they’re dead or alive. Last year, the youngest sent a letter saying that she was not well and would come over for a month to recuperate. Did her brother care to send her a reply -- the sinner? How can he behave like this? What can such a house be but desolate?”

The crone shed silent tears. The other two sons were good boys. They were capable of feeling affection for their mother. She wanted to go away and live with them.

The second son had been in a bank at Kumbakonam for two years. His wife was not a nice woman. A foot taller than her husband and two rounds plumper, she kept him well under her thumb. The crone’s body like a sack of manure, her elephantiasis and her country talk evoked anger and amusement in her daughter-in-law. So

her son’s love for his mother did not show itself in action.

The third son’s wife was also not a kind person. On the wedding night, she’s said to have sat on a corner of the bed, moping and threatening her husband: “Don’t touch me if you’re a man. I’ll scream if you touch me.”

They tried to mend her by letting her go her own way. The boy gave himself a smart haircut, started using talcum powder and dressed up like a dandy. He brought her Tamil novels, but all his efforts left her unmoved. After six months, she took him away to Chidambaram, saying, “Live with me in my parent’s house.” He was now working as a cashier in his father-in-law’s coffee house.

The crone wiped her eyes at the way her sons had turned out. When she had moved to her in-laws’ house, she had treated them like gods. Her mother-in-law never ill treated or starved her. She hadn’t resented her daughter-in-law for bringing in two-and-a-half acres of land.

The crone’s oldest daughter-in-law — the one who had brought her the warm water — was prepared to tend her. She was a simple girl. *He* was the one who wouldn’t let her do this. He always wanted pleasure and had no thought of time or place. He seemed to believe that his wife was not human.

She had produced seven children like stones, and had known four miscarriages too. But she got along without displeasing her husband. The old woman wondered at his rare goodness.

The crone lay on the tattered mat, her mind full of sorrow. She wanted to sob loudly, but had no strength for it. She was running a high fever. For ten days she had eaten nothing. Warm water was her food and her medicine, everything. Unattached like a *rishi*, her son moved around without the will to call in a doctor.

“Bhagoo, Bhagoo” The crone called out in a feeble tone. Again thirst and sinking eyes.

“Bhagoo, Bhagoo, eh Bhagoo, please bring me some water.”

The clock measured out the time.

“Bhagoo, Bhagoo.”

A lizard chirped somewhere in the darkness.

“Bhagoo, Bhagoo.”

After satisfying her husband in the bedroom, the tired Bhagoo had drifted off into a dreamless sleep. He had drowsed off before her.

The servant maid who came in to sprinkle cowdung water at dawn, called out to the crone “Amma, get up and move aside. I must clean the place.” The old woman did not move.

“Amma, get up, won’t you?” As she came near the old woman, she was assailed by doubt. The crone’s face did not seem normal; the pupils of her eyes could not be seen. The maid put her hand before the old woman’s nose. Her hands and legs were cold to the touch.

Vadivu, the maid, ran to the bedroom screaming “Amma! Amma!” Getting no reply, she called out louder.

“What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter ! Come out quickly. How can you sleep so soundly?”

The shocked Bhagoo pushed away her husband’s hand from her body and came up running.

“Look at Amma”

Her husband, still half asleep on the bed, was annoyed. He started cursing.

“Oh! Oh ! Amma ! Vadivu, wake up your master. Amma! Amma, you’ve left us,” the daughter-in-law wailed, shaking her husband and trying to wake him up. His mind was drowsy and confused. Jumping up in agitation, he kicked the bedsheet off and came running.

Leaning on the corpse, Bhagoo started sobbing. Her husband stood still, arms akimbo, without blinking an eyelid, like a watch that had stopped with a jerk. His brain was bemused. He looked at his mother’s face, her eyes, her bent head and her swollen, pale legs. Breaking out of the spell, he came closer. Biting his lips and suppressing his tears he cried out, “Amma !” The hoarse male voice broke into a whimper. Tears welled up in his eyes. He shook her thigh, crying “Amma,! Amma, where has my mother gone ?”

All of a sudden, the neighbourhood women came in through the front door, clung to the daughter-in-law and broke into the death wail. Five minutes passed. The crowd grew. At last, the passage couldn’t hold them all. Women assembled, sat down and started wailing. One or two voices, without mingling with the rest, took on their own music and played up the sorrow in a cacophonous parody.

He could not bear it. An old woman sitting beside him composed her own poem.

“Bearing ten children,  
Seating them on silken mats,  
You looked on with delight —

Did you only get a tattered mat  
To lie down and die?”  
She sobbed out her anger at him  
in rhyme and rhythm.

“Auntie, auntie, I’ve been fooled,  
auntie. I didn’t think she would go  
suddenly like this. It happened as  
you’ve pointed out, “ sobbed  
Narayanaswami, the son.

“Narayanaswami, you’ve got what  
you deserve. Buy the corpse a good  
shroud at least. Get up and come out;  
it’s late. You’ve to inform your  
brothers and sisters. Things have to  
be bought for the funeral”. The  
village elder hustled him along  
mocking him all the time.

A man ran to Kudavaasal to send  
a telegram to the youngest son at  
Chidambaram. Another offered to go  
to Kumbakonam to inform the second  
son and buy what was needed. He  
left on his bicycle as soon as the list  
of things to be purchased was ready.

As the bicycle turned the street  
corner, Narayanaswami was reminded  
of something. He rushed to the  
opposite house, crossed the back yard,  
jumped over the drain and climbed on  
to the street just as the cycle came up.

“Friend, when my brother arrives,  
tell him to bring along a  
photographer. Ask him to bring him  
along without fail”. His voice choked  
as he said this.

“Why, Sir?”

He couldn’t reply. Collecting  
himself he insisted briefly “Just tell  
him what I said.”

An hour later, a crowd landed up  
in a special bus and got down in the  
blazing sun. The eldest daughter  
living in Kumbakonam, her husband  
and five grandchildren; the third  
daughter and her family; the old  
woman’s son and daughter-in-law;  
and last of all, a photographer with

his apparatus — all of them descended from the vehicle. A crowd of urchins collected to look at the bus which was quite a novelty on the street. Women stood on doorsteps and peered out curiously. They marvelled, “This is the crone who died on a tattered mat! The crowd of relatives from Kumbakonam fill a whole carriage!”

They lifted the corpse and seated it on a chair. The heavy body made the head tilt as soon as it was placed on the chair. The limbs had stiffened and it did not look right at all. The old woman’s sons came down and tried to make the corpse lean against the wall. It was of no use. The photographer put on a sour look.

“Sir, none of these poses is good. I can’t take the photo,” he said.

“Why?”

“The body cannot assume an attractive pose. Something could have been done two hours earlier. But not now”.

“Please take the photograph anyway.”

“How’s that possible? I’ve done everything I can, but it can’t be done. If I don’t take a good picture it won’t satisfy me. I don’t do this just for money, you know”.

“Can you give up just because of this? Didn’t we bring you along with such hope because we wanted the photograph so much?”

“I understand your feelings but I can’t do this. You must accept that this was not meant to be”

“Why not take the picture with her



lying down?”

“I won’t take it like that”. The photographer had begun to hate the idea of taking a photo of the old woman with her elephantiasis affected legs, fat body and damaged and fallen teeth — she was only a bundle of flesh to him. He didn’t himself know why he disliked this so much. The determination not to take her picture had firmed up in his mind almost as soon as he had seen the corpse.

The sons, daughters and sons-in-law pleaded with him as much as they could; but he became more stubborn.

“Forgive me, Sir! Pick up my

things, boy”. The photographer walked away calling out to his assistant.

Narayanaswami was disappointed. His anger boiled over. “The photographer says that we must just think that it was not meant to be. Leave it alone. Attend to your work and proceed with the cremation. The village children are starving” counselled the village elder.

Narayanaswami’s disappointment pierced him like a shaft driven into a wound.

“Wasn’t I destined to do even this, Uncle?” he wailed. ◻