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HOMECOMING

Amrita had that bored supercilious look she tended to adopt of late..specially with all things Indian. She pushed the tray of food served by the smiling Air India hostess wrinkling up her nose "Don't they have some unsmelly food?"

Vikram beckoned the hostess."My daughter prefers continental "he said apologetically.

Meanwhile Krish was tucking into the curry rice spilling rice grains all around over the table and on his lap... Vikram had a sinking feeling inside.This was their first trip home in over five years. Amrita had been nine then a lot more malleable and Krish was seven. Everything about home had fascinated them and Amrita had spent house gazing at the cow in the back yard and running after panicked chickens. Krish had clapped joyously from the verandah. It was a good time. His own mother had been alive then and tearfully happy to see them.She had lavished kisses on the kids and had even been pleasant to Mini Smothered in her ample bosom that still smelt of camphor balls Vikram had fought his own tears.Why had he stayed away for so long? Why had he let his children grow up without the unconditional love that only grandparents could lavish on in them? Without the infusions of tradition and culture that only grandparents gave effortlessly to children. Children of immigrants like him who were growing up on alien soil trying to contend with a different culture within and another outside the house.

Even as their parents fought a losing battle to preserve and shore their own identities.

Thinking of the letters that had stopped two years ago when his mother died of kidney failure, Vikram's mind turned to the unread ones he had piled up at the back of his desk and finally read one night after the call came at 4 am from Vijayawada. And cried like a child at the unabashed outpouring of love implicit in every sentence. Guilt squirmed like a trapped snake....he had not even found the time to read the letters his semi literate mother had so painstakingly drafted in her shaky English with much scratching out of words. Mostly about how he should eat well and not neglect himself and how much her eyes pined to set upon his dear face. Was ever a love as pure as a mothers for her child?.

Then Mini left. Suddenly with no notice. Just a wind flapped letter on the bureau and her wardrobe cleaned out. Took all but some old dresses and shoes. Maybe it had been coming but he hadn't seen it.Or chose not to pay attention to their growing distance and the silences that insulated them from each other. Conditioned as he was to marriages that lasted a lifetime. But the communication between them had dwindled to what was for dinner..which more often than not, Vikram came home from the hospital and made for the children and himself. Mini kept long hours in her physiotherapy clinic. Now with hindsight he realised, not without a stab of pain that spread over his chest like an oil spill..maybe she had not been in the clinic at all but with this man...this Adam Allanby who had inspired a love so compelling that she could forsake her teenaged daughter and young son for him.Not to mention a sixteen year old marriage with all its ups and downs, upheavals and good times....

The children looked subdued and not interested as he wheeled out the three bags and came out of the crowded terminus into the heat and humidity of Vijaywada pulling off his worn pullover and Krish's. Amrita meanwhile had taken off her sweater and was down to some vastly unsuitable shoulder less top

on her jeans. Vikram held his peace. Her disgruntled look told him that she was here under duress ,wishing she was anywhere but going to meet an ailing grandfather who might not live out the year.

He broke out in a smile when he saw his brother Jairaj and wife Punita beyond the fencing. The children squirmed in their prolonged hugs and wet kisses and he shook his head to see Amrita wiping away Punita's kiss with a disgusted look on her face. Vikram felt again the sense of unadequacy.How on earth was he to manage this rebellious sulky teenager without a wife?

The old house in the farm looked a lot more decrepit and smaller than he recalled.His father was in his chair on the verandah and stood up shakily to hug the children and shake hands with him.
"So big, so tall". his father muttered. "Ammu you look just like your Grandmother"

Amrita who did not like being called Ammu looked around the old fashioned living room with its Victorian sofas , glass cabinet and fading black and white photographs on the wall.After a dinner which Vikram relished but the children found too spicy and settled ungraciously for bread and butter. Amrita sulked while Krish gamely tackled the chicken and sambhar rice ending up whooshing like a locomotive and drinking glasses of water. Punita promised to make less spicy fare from the morrow and jet lag claimed their senses.Yawning widely they trooped upstairs to the two bedrooms allotted to them. Vikram and Krish in one and Amrita in another.

"I have lined up a car and driver to take the children to the zoo Vikki bhaiyya " Punita said as she turned down the bed sheets and put out fresh towels for them.Vikram kept his glance away from Amrita's disgruntled face."I am sure Krish will be happy to go"

"Oh Dad can I just watch TV instead? " pleaded Krish.Vikram smiled apologetically at his brothe's wife who was making a huge effort to welcome them despite the looming question of the division of the property between the brothers.

Sure enough Jairaj cornered him later when the jetlagged and heavy eyed children had gone to bed."When do you want to meet the lawyer?" His father rocked on his chair and said nothing.

"Like I told you I want an equal division so why do we need a lawyer" said Vikram and turned away from the hardness settling like a bird of prey on Jairaj's handsome if now running to jowls.So like his own.

"But Bhai you have so much in Chicago.I will have only this farm to run .If it is cut into half you know it will never be profitable."

Vikram shrugged. "Its my children's heritage" he said and out of the corner of his eye saw the childless Punita blanch."Anyway what is the hurry.Papa is here and I am sure he will want to continue living in his home."

His father passed a tongue over dry cracking lips and the fan whirled noisily overhead."I want to settle it in my lifetime Beta." His voice quavered making Vikram wonder how much he'd been brain washed to comply.

Krish clattered noisily down the stairs".Dad I want the bathroom..there is no bathroom here.And there is a lizard going chuck chuck on the wall"

Vikram glad to leave the tense atmosphere in the living room took his son to the set of toilets at the back of the house.

"Dad when can we go home?" asked Krish plaintively looking at the festoon of cobwebs in the tiled passage that led to the outhouse bathrooms with rickety half doors.. "Oooh I can't stand this smell." he had his nose pinched between his fingers. "Its so hot Dad. How do people live here? There is no aircon here"

"Alright son, just do your job by that wall." A cow mooed in the shed at the back, an owl hooted hollowly. There was no light in Amrita's room which faced the back.... maybe she had fallen asleep. Vikram took Krish back to the room they shared and tucked him into the four poster that he himself had slept in while growing up in this house. It brought memories ... though all his things including the Mohammed Ali posters had been removed and the room smelled of a recent whitewash and white paint speckled the mosaic floor.

His feet felt leaden at the confrontation that awaited him he walked down to the front room. His father had gone to bed helped along by the equally old Ambi Chacha who had been cook, cleaner, gardener and general factotum as long as Vikram could remember. Time he was retired thought Vikram Maybe he could send him a small pension every month. But then what would his Father do if Amrita went back to his own village?

His brother and wife sat together on the rexone sofa their tension forging an impenetrable bond between them. Not for the first time Vikram wondered at this totally inappropriate marriage between this highly educated rich girl and his relatively uneducated farmer brother with his calloused hands. His thoughts went to Mini and the promise his own marriage had held out for years of bliss and happy compatibility.. but then Adam Allenby had come along brandishing his sex appeal or whatever it was that had lured Mini away from home and hearth.

"You have to decide tonight Bhai and tomorrow I will get the Lawyer Venkatram to draw up the papers. Amma would have wanted you to give me the farm because you have no intention of ever coming back to this little town... do you?" The underlying hostility pierced the warm fluid sense of homecoming that had taken Vikram over.

"Look Jai its late and I am tired... can we discuss this tomorrow?" Jai shrugged and exchanged a telling glance with Punita. Vikram wished that he had not come at all.... except that he would not have been able to see his Father. As he trudged up the stairs he heard a shriek from Amrita's room...

"Dad there is a lizard in my room." Suddenly she was the little girl who clung to him trembling when Mini left. Amrita had been the one to find the cold unemotional farewell letter that did not even mention the children and had torn the family apart. She had locked herself in her room for the night and the next day. Opening the door tearfully only when Vikram threatened to break it down. Then collapsing in his arms forcing him into a bravado that he did not feel. "It's alright Baby. Your mother just needed a break from us. She will be back you will see".

Now he led his shivering daughter to his own room from where the lizard seemed to have disappeared behind a framed picture of a lurid sunset on some unknown beach but cockroaches scuttled in corners.

"They are harmless baby... they eat up all the insects" "Nooooo," she was ashen with fear. Vikram pushed the sleeping Krish who had tossed his sheet aside and taken off his pyjama top in the middle. He made room for Amrita on the bed and went back to the basin

outside the toilets to brush his teeth. When he came back Amrita was still awake clutching a sheet to her chin

'What is that sound Daddy?'

It was long time since she had called him Daddy..or called him anything for that matter.

"Owls Sweepea....they are hooting to each other."

"It's all so horrible.When can we go back? How do these people survive in this heat anyway?"

Vikram did not answer as he lay on his side and tried to sleep at the very edge of the bed. The old creaky ceiling fan did its best to agitate the fug of humidity hanging like a damp towel in the room. Suddenly all that excitement of coming home seeped out.It left a depressed hollow in the region of his heart.This silent glum house with his silent Father no doubt disapproving of him and thinking his children were badly brought up American brats. The small talk and forced cheerfulness of his brother's wife.His brother eyeing him speculatively. The children... were making no effort to hide their misery. And the zoo....Krish was too old to enjoy a trip to the zoo.He will have to be diplomatic to dissuade Punita from that planned zoo trip in this blazing heat.

Tomorrow would be another confrontation with his brother and wife.Even now they must be whispering to each other about the best way to tackle him. But his Father...what did he want done ? For the first time he thought of what he would loose if he were to renounce his share of the property for his brother. Outside the owl hooted hollowly, reminding him of a simpler time when his brother and he had shared this very room and fought over practically everything.But had also kept each other's escapades secret from their Father who tended to wield a cane when he had had a drink too many with his bridge playing cronies on the verandah.

This was his home too. A place where he breathed deeply, normally, and felt the loosening of that constant constriction in his chest. Even the unaccustomed -to heat and humidity welcomed him like old friends that his body remembered and responded to with a deepening gladness at the very cell level. To give this up? Perhaps never be able to come home again once his father died? Never expose his children to what his untrammled childhood was like in the fields behind where he shot partridge with his shotgun and brought them to his mother to cook..

Fair ...unfair. Just words he told himself. Life was seldom played by the rules.He thought of all the gifts that were still buried untidily in his suit case. The hardest person to get a gift for was his Father ..who wanted nothing. Amrita had gone to the Mall and got a shawl for him which in Vijayawada's sultry climate would be of no use.

Tomorrow he would check on the return flights . They could not last the month he had planned.Two weeks...was time enough to bid a farewell to his non communicative father .And to sign away his birth right to his brother. Irrelevantly he wondered what Mini would have said to his decision to avoid discord.Was it cowardly of him? Children's heritage, he had told himself when the letter came with his brother's handwriting on the cover and the Indian stamps.But in all fairness could he visualise Amrita and Krish ever living here?It had taken him all his patience and persuasive powers to even get Amrita to come for a visit.Only for two weeks he had promised though he booked the return tickets a monthlater.

"I hate India and I hate Vijayawarra its sooo primitive!"

With an American mother and a childhood as unlike his own as possible, were his children even Indian ?
So what would he lose if he signed away his share...their heritage... to his brother ?
Amrita muttered in her sleep and the owl hooted to its mate outside and the old blue moon washed
curtains shuffled restlessly in a stray gust of wind that carried the smell of cow dung. From its lair behind
the picture of the sunset the lizard chuck chuckled.
Vikram decided to save his brother and wife the embarrassment of asking him again.
His children would never even begin to belong .Like he still did.