



The Welling Sea

Ravikumar

Translated by Prabha Sridevan

That night I woke up from my sleep because of a nightmare. *Dead sparrows kept falling from the sky like rain. My mother walked along moving them away with a stick. She carried a child at her waist, the child looked like me.* My sleep ended. I could not bear it any more.

I came out of the house and looked around. A cloud was devouring the moon. I shook the neem tree hoping to be washed by the dew drops; snakes fell down and crept towards the front of the house. A dog ran along the street wailing like a wheezing old man. It was very stifling as if someone had rolled up the wind and carried it away. I stared at the stars. They started falling down on me. In a hurry I ran towards the house. There was no one inside to ask me why I was rushing back like this.

To look at a room where there is no one is like looking at an empty fish tank... a sorrow. I tried to gather all the human imprints in the room and give it a form. The blood splotches seen here and there on the wall were marks of mosquito blood. My eyes scrouged around to see if there was a single line or a pencil drawing. None. There was not even the stain of an oily head that had rested on it. The room was barren and free of human smell. The room looked as if it had been washed clean so that it could be rented out. Everyone had actually lived and breathed in this house, in this room. But now there was no one. Why was I alone here? Had I driven them all away? Or had they all abandoned me? It was now certain that I would not be able to sleep and so I started pulling out my memory of the day gone by like one pulls out a roll of film.

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It was definitely a good morning. I awoke when the early morning breeze was still moist. I felt an intimacy with that house as if I was used to it, even though it was not mine. In a week's time, even the squirrels which ran up the drumstick tree had become my friends. There was an unused well



on the rear. Dropped balls and plastic objects floated on the surface of the well-water which had almost congealed like black tar. Thenauseating smell which floated up if one leaned down, stood guard over the water. When I asked why it was not used, I was told the story of a woman who had jumped down the well and died. So it was their custom to close and latch the rear door every evening. The first two three days after I had come there, I spoke to no one. It was my friend's little daughter who broke my silence. It was impossible to be silent with a child like her close by. After that I became her play doll, her horse and her friend. They too were happy that they had got a reliable person to look after her when they went out to work.

Only this evening my friend went out of town, with his family, leaving me behind all alone. They had to go in a hurry... a relative had died. My friend said that they were taking the child along with them since they were not likely to return that night.

“Please come back even if it is very late.”

But my words dispersed in the wind before they reached my friend's ears. I could not bear to think that I had to spend the night alone. They had locked all the rooms except the room where I was staying. They trusted me. They must have done so by way of abundant caution. I was restless ever since they left, and I kept pacing the room. I went out and stood at the door looking at the street. I felt as if all those who passed by looked at me curiously.

“Who is this fellow?” was the question that burst out from those glances.

It was unbearable. It was better to remain inside.

I was not sure I could stay with my friend when I had come with him to his house. He was my friend. Even that term was one of formality. We had been classmates for just two years. After completing the 10th standard I went to his school for Plus one. I was in his class. But we were not very close. Actually I never had close friends. My only friend was my “aloneness”. I could not even enjoy the jokes that my classmates shared. The teachers too would avoid me during question time. The truth was I was slightly different. I did not deliberately behave like that. When I left home, my “aloneness” came along with me. That was why I was different.



When I was a child, I did not see my father very often. I never knew when he would come. Sometimes he would never come for months. Even if he did, he would not stay with us. He said that his business was like that. But Amma would say that he was not doing anything useful and that he was just idling away. Amma also told me that he lived with another woman. Amma's voice would turn loud as soon as Appa came.

"If you are a man, redeem my jewels and return them",

"Please give me the title deeds of the property that my father settled on me."

Appa never lost his temper at these words.

"You are mad about jewels, mad about property" He would laugh, and these words were said in a tone as if he was pacifying a crying child. The more he did that, the more my Amma got angry. Appa would then leave just like that, without being in the least perturbed. It was impossible to guess when he would come again. Slowly his visits grew less frequent and then he stopped coming home. Now I can only remember his voice when I think of Appa. I cannot remember his face.

It was just Amma and me at home. Some days Amma was happy. Some days she would just lie down all curled up like a patient. Whether she was happy or not it did not matter, I could not enter her world at my will. I could do so only if Amma chose to let me in. As soon as I returned home from school, I would pull out my school books from my bag, and bury myself in them. Amma would sit there, looking at me. I felt that she was spinning her wordless silence around me like a spider weaving her web. I was unable to free myself out of this cage. I just folded inside. Amma had the ability to control me with just a look as if she was a magic wizard.

"Come to eat" A look.

"Go to the store." A look.

"Time to sleep." A look.

I translated what her eyes said into words. She seldom talked to me. In fact, she did not speak to anyone. I behaved like her at school. My class mates learned to read my eyes. I often thought I was turning into Amma's clone.



It was my friend who first recognized me at the bus stop and spoke to me. I did not remember him at once. When he narrated many incidents from our school days my lips slowly unfolded in a smile. He sighed with relief that I had finally remembered him. Until that moment I never thought that I would meet someone like him. That evening would have been my last. I don't know who figured that out. But he appeared there. I do not believe in God. Amma was my God. So she must have sent him. Otherwise why would I meet someone I had not seen in a long time? Why should he speak to me? Why should he compel me to go with him? So she must have sent him. That was how I answered all the "whys" of this meeting.

When I had finished school I wanted to join the college in the same town, but Amma was adamant that I should join a college in Chennai and sent me there. My town was 12hours' travel from Chennai. I was very worried about my mother being all alone. But Amma was adamant. It was clear that she wanted me to be away from her. I had no option and I had never had the strength to contradict her. My high marks secured for me a seat in a reputed college in Chennai. It was certain that I would get a good placement once I got an engineering degree. Amma must have known that, and that is why she had sent me away.

Four years just flew by. At the end of the last semester a multinational company chose me. I showed the appointment order to Amma. Not a ripple of emotion on her face. But I saw a change in the eyes that indicated a loosening of the tight bond that bound me to her. They granted permission that now I could go anywhere.

When I returned home after my finals, Amma had done something totally unexpected. Another family was living there; I was told she had vacated the house three months before. I could not believe it. Even in my wildest imagination I did not think that Amma would go away without telling me. No one could tell me of her whereabouts. Soon I had to report for my new job, the date was drawing near. But I was roaming around for my mother like an abandoned child. And that is how I reached this town. Mine was a meaningless search. Amma had carefully executed her plan, I felt. Why should I live when the only person in my life had gone? I decided to die. At that thought, the sea spread deep and wide in my mind.



“If it becomes impossible for me to continue, I will push you into the sea and then kill myself.” These were Amma’s words whenever she was distraught. As I lay on her lap Amma’s tears would fall on my cheeks and roll down. My mouth tasted the saltiness, it was as if I had rinsed my mouth in the sea.

For Amma, a journey meant only a trip to the Velankanni temple. There stood a tall spire and in total contrast a tiny figure of the Matha. Amma would never sit in the temple for long. Once she entered the church, she would move almost mechanically. Not once had she asked me to pray to the Matha. She would light the candle, offer the garland, sprinkle some Holy Water on the head, kneel down for a while and then walk quickly towards the sea. I was terrified. Every time my heart would beat with terror that she would push me into the waters.

There were tightly packed shops on either side of the path to the sea. I would not even look at them as I followed her. I was never drawn by the horses which trotted carrying children, or the small merry-go-rounds or even the ice-cream carts. Once she reached the sea, Amma would sit down in a lonely spot, mumbling softly as if she was talking to the sea. I would sit there watching her.

It is indeed absorbing to keep watching the sea. It looked like my mother. I imagined I was the fish swimming in the sea. They do not leave the mother. If they do, death was certain. Won’t the sea feel tired of talking to the land incessantly? Did the sea learn from the humans the habit of moving away and coming near? Or did we learn that lesson from the sea? Is the fish a gift from the sea to the land? Whenever I sat on the beach, my eyes would seek out for the sea birds. The birds, which flew tirelessly to find their reflection in the calm wave-less sea shimmering like a glass sheet, do not approach the land. Where do they sit? Where do they take rest?

I was scared of this world without Amma. Was I afraid because I had always been under her care and protection, or was I afraid that my only bond ceased to exist? I did not know. At that moment, death seemed to be the only protection. Death called me with warmth like Amma’s soft saree which covered me. The threatening thought of death now turned comforting; it was as if I was just going to



sleep. Once I decided that I should die, my ears were slowly filled with the sound of the rolling waves. It was then, when I was waiting for the bus going to the seaside that my friend hailed me. The night had turned cold. I knew I was not inside for the wind rushed past me. I steadied myself, I was in the backyard in front of the abandoned well. A soft voice beckoned me from the well. It resembled my mother's voice. My friend's daughter seemed to run in front of me, while I play with her pretending I am a puppy.

Now Amma's voice sounded clearer.

I peered into the well. Waves were dashing around as if it was the sea.

They draw me closer stretching out like hands.

Note:

The original title of the story is "Kadal Kinaru", taken from the collection of short stories, namely, *Kadal Kinaru* by Ravikumar, Manarkeni publications April 2014

About the Author and Translator

Ravikumar (1961-) is a well-known Dalit intellectual, poet, short story writer, and translator. He was a key figure in the formation of the little magazine, *Nirapirikai*, which inspired several new writers in the 1990s. He is the author of more than thirty books in Tamil. He was the editor of *Dalit* – a bi-monthly which served as the platform for Dalit Literature and has published *Bodhi* – a quarterly exclusively for Dalit history. Now he is the editor of *Manarkeni* – a research bi-monthly in Tamil. A collection of his writings appeared in English as *Venomous Touch* (Samya: Calcutta, 2009). Along with R. Azhagarasan, Ravikumar co-edited *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012). Ravikumar has also served as a Member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (2006-2011). Now he is the General Secretary of ViduthalaiCiruthaikalKatchi (VCK).

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