

## Under the Allspice Tree

Lakshmi Krishnakumar

I think of a memory from long ago, on a day when the afternoon clouded over the village. As aunts and uncles drifted to different rooms in the stupor of a post-lunch delirium, the sounds of the insects from the thickets surrounded the house, as if singing lullabies for a collective siesta. I stepped out for a walk in the sun, and ran into my grandfather standing under a tree in the backyard. The chorus of various insect life reached its peak and continued for a while. *Ammachan* was rubbing a crushed leaf between his fingers. When I walked over to him, he stretched it out to me and silently indicated that I smell it. It smelled like my mother's spice box. He nodded at nothing in particular, and in his quiet way, explained to me that this was an allspice tree, and that though the seeds were used in cooking usually, the leaves themselves smelled of various spices.

We stood there in silence for a while longer and slowly walked back to the house. Everybody else was still asleep, so *Ammachan* decided to continue exploring different trees in the yard. I picked up a book but instead of reading, dozed off to sleep on the cool red oxide floor of the sitting room.

*Ammachan* worked in the agricultural department of the state government. As a young man, he had moved to the city but travelled the Kerala countryside, estimating produce and advising farmers on fertilisers. In his off-work hours, he was involved in the local branch of the socialist party, and I often sensed that these two realms of him merged in his personality.

After his death in 2018, we explored the books he had locked in his glass bookcase. Political treatises, books on Soviet experiments with collective farming, and magazines from the 1970s were arranged in a tumultuous mix.

On top of the book shelf we found a handmade fan, a spread-out palm leaf tied with metal wires to a bamboo stick. To prevent the edges of the leaf from fraying, a piece of fabric was stitched over the edges. *Ammachan* had a way with making things from coconut fronds and palm leaves. We would sit on the parapet around the well at dusk, foliage scattered around us on the ground. He weaved baskets and balls from coconut fronds as my cousins and I waited impatiently. We played with *machingas*, baby coconuts, many of which had fallen around the yard. If we struck a *machinga* against a rock, the little palm-sized thing would break open, revealing its fibrous white interior and emit a strong scent that I could only characterise as 'green'. My grandfather's hands smelled 'green' too when he was done making tiny baskets for us to put our toys in.

When he was diagnosed with cancer in the stomach, I told myself I would learn from him the skill of making these baskets and balls. But he was left weakened by his chemotherapy, and I was left complacent in youth's foolish belief that there was all the time in the world. I did not learn how to make baskets from coconut fronds.

*Ammachan* liked to pickle fruits and vegetables. Every summer, in anticipation of the arrival of his grandchildren, he would embark on his annual pickling. Raw papayas, beets, carrots, and mangoes were chopped up and put, along with green chillies, in glass bottles or clay jars filled with brine. The windowsills were lined with these bottles, which caught the sunlight and glinted in the dark kitchen. The children would dig into the bottles after lunch or during teatime and take out the sliced mango pieces, and the tart and faintly spicy flavour would explode in our mouths.

We continue this tradition. My mother and I pickle mangoes and papayas each summer and store the bottles in a fridge. When we bite into the raw papayas, the salt, the spice, and the pungency of fermentation brings to me the image of my grandfather sitting by the kitchen counter, slicing fruits, measuring out salt, and making slits on the bird's eye chillies.

It's been four years since my grandfather died. I try to fight the temptation to glorify the dead. He was human after all, and he could not be bothered to take part in domestic affairs. He wasn't what one would call a 'progressive'. But on his passing, I remembered simple things about our shared times together. In his illustrated books, I learned that our simple *konnapoovu* was called laburnum in English. I learned how to read Malayalam as I would watch his fingers trace the lines he was reading to me. I learned how he was insistent that his land be sold only to a person who would use it as farmland and nothing else.

I learned about the allspice tree.

The allspice tree still stands there. It has grown taller than it was when *Ammachan* and I had stood under it last. I can still see him, in his crisp white *mundu*, crushing the leaves between his fingers. Now when I pluck out a leaf and crush it in my hand and inhale the fragrance, I recall *Amma's* spice box and *Ammachan's* afternoon lessons.

Now, inside the house, laughter and chatter die down as everyone once again drifts into dark nooks for their siestas. I drop the crushed leaf on the ground and continue walking towards the dense foliage in the corner of the front yard, trying to recollect names from my grandfather's books.