



WHAT WE CHOOSE TO KEEP

The notice appeared on a Tuesday morning.

At first, hardly anyone paid attention to it.

It was pinned to the notice board outside the administrative office, between a circular about internal marks and a notice about a missing identity card. Students walked past it on their way to class. Someone stood in front of it for a few seconds, read it, and moved on.

By ten o'clock, half the college knew.

By ten-fifteen, the Botany Department was talking about nothing else.

NOTICE

The existing Botanical Garden has been identified as the site for the proposed new academic block.

The area will be cleared as per the approved plan.

That was all.

No explanation. No discussion. No mention of what would happen to the plants.

Just a few lines on a sheet of paper.

Vijitha stood in front of it for a long time.

Vicky came running down the corridor.

“What happened?”

She pointed to the notice.

He read it once.

Then again.

He looked at her.

“They can't be serious.”

“They are.”

“The whole garden?”

“Yes.”

“When?”



“Soon.”

Vicky looked through the window.

The Botanical Garden was visible from the corridor. It was not the kind of garden that appeared in glossy brochures. Parts of it were a little untidy. Some paths were uneven. Leaves collected in the corners, and during summer a few plants struggled.

But it was full of life.

There were medicinal plants near the entrance, flowering shrubs along the path, ferns under the shade, palms at the far end and several native species collected by students over the years.

Generations of Botany students had worked there.

They had learned to identify plants there. They had drawn leaves there, measured flowers there, compared species there and, occasionally, escaped there from the noise of the canteen.

For some students, the garden was part of their classroom.

For others, it was simply the quietest place on campus.

Vicky pointed at the notice.

“Who approved this?”

“The college administration.”

“Who is the administration?”

Vijitha looked at him.

“Principal Raman.”

Vicky took a deep breath.

“Then we should meet him.”

“You should.”

“Why me?”

“Because you have been elected by nobody as the spokesperson for everything.”

He smiled.

“Finally, someone recognises my talent.”

Professor Gowri, Head of the Botany Department, was already in the Principal's office.



Principal Raman sat behind his desk. The campus development plan was spread out in front of him.

Gowri stood near the window.

From there, the garden looked almost peaceful.

“Sir,” she said, “I understand that the college needs a new academic block.”

Raman nodded.

“We are running short of classrooms. Some departments are sharing laboratories. The government has sanctioned funds for the new block. We cannot keep postponing it.”

“I understand.”

“Then you understand why this site was selected.”

“I understand the reason.”

“But you don't agree with the decision.”

Gowri turned from the window.

“No, sir.”

Raman leaned back.

“What do you suggest?”

She looked towards the garden again.

“Look at it once more.”

Raman frowned.

“I have looked at that garden many times.”

“Not as a vacant piece of land.”

He looked at her.

“As what?”

“As part of the college.”

Before he could reply, there was a knock.

Vicky entered with Vijitha.

“Sir, may we come in?”



Raman looked at Gowri.

“You have trained them well.”

Gowri smiled faintly.

“I didn't train Vicky.”

Vicky nodded.

“I am self-trained, sir.”

Raman gestured towards the chairs.

“Sit.”

Vicky sat immediately.

Vijitha remained standing.

“Sir, we are not against the new building.”

“Good.”

“We are against destroying the Botanical Garden to build it.”

Raman nodded.

“I expected that.”

Vicky leaned forward.

“Sir, is it possible to move the building?”

“It is possible.”

Vicky smiled.

Raman continued.

“But this is a government college. The building project has been sanctioned after a long process. The funds are allocated. Changing the site means changing the plan, getting fresh approvals and probably spending more.”

“How much more?” Vicky asked.

Raman looked at him.

“Enough for people to ask whether a garden is worth that kind of money.”



Vijitha spoke quietly.

“Sir, perhaps the question should be whether the building is worth losing the garden.”

Raman looked at her for a moment.

“That is exactly the kind of question that makes administration difficult.”

She smiled.

“We are students, sir. We are not trying to make administration easy.”

For the first time that morning, Raman laughed.

“Fine. Show me why I should reconsider.”

The Botany students began their work that afternoon.

They did not call it a protest.

They called it a survey.

Vijitha wrote a question at the top of a notebook:

WHAT WILL WE LOSE IF THE GARDEN GOES?

They divided themselves into small groups.

One group started listing the plants.

Another checked old department records.

A few students searched through practical notebooks and photographs.

Some spoke to retired teachers.

Others simply walked through the garden and tried to remember what they had learned there.

Vicky and Vijitha decided to collect stories.

Their first interview was with Muthu, the gardener.

He had worked in the college for more than thirty years.

“Sir, when was the garden started?” Vijitha asked.

Muthu scratched his head.

“I don't remember the exact year.”



“Who planted the first plant?”

He pointed towards an old flowering tree.

“That one was already here when I joined.”

Vicky looked at the tree.

“You mean it is older than you?”

Muthu laughed.

“Much older.”

Vicky nodded seriously.

“Then we should interview the tree.”

Muthu laughed again.

“Ask it yourself.”

“I don't speak tree language.”

“Then learn Botany properly.”

Vijitha burst out laughing.

Vicky looked offended.

“I know Botany.”

Muthu gave him a look.

“Your classmates told me that you once called a weed a medicinal plant.”

“That was a misunderstanding.”

“What misunderstanding?”

“I misunderstood the plant.”

Muthu laughed so loudly that a couple of students turned around.

Even Professor Gowri, who was walking past, stopped for a moment.

The students found more than they expected.

There were old practical records.



Photographs from department functions.

Handwritten notes about flowering seasons.

Lists of plants collected from nearby villages.

A broken wooden board carrying the names of former Botany teachers.

And then, one afternoon, Vijitha found an old register inside a cupboard.

It was covered in dust.

She carried it to Gowri.

“Madam, look at this.”

Gowri opened it carefully.

The pages were yellow with age.

There were records of plants brought from different places. There were notes about when particular species flowered. There were names of students who had maintained different sections of the garden.

Near the back, Vijitha stopped.

There was a handwritten entry.

She read it aloud.

“This garden must remain open to students. A plant cannot teach if nobody comes close enough to see it.”

There was a name below it.

Professor Krishnamurthy.

And a date from decades earlier.

Vijitha looked up.

“Madam, who was he?”

“One of the teachers who helped develop the garden.”

“Was he the founder?”

“Not exactly. But he cared about it very much.”

Vicky took the register from her.



He read the sentence again.

“Madam, this is important.”

“Yes.”

“Very important.”

“Yes, Vicky.”

“We should show this to the Principal.”

“We will.”

The students prepared a presentation.

They kept it simple.

There were photographs of practical classes.

Students identifying flowers.

Students studying leaves.

Students preparing herbarium specimens.

They documented plants that were still being used for teaching.

They showed the old register.

They also prepared a rough map of the garden and marked the plants that would be lost if the site was cleared.

Then they added something the original proposal had not considered.

The garden was not just a collection of plants.

It was an outdoor laboratory.

It was being used.

And if the college was going to spend government money to improve education, destroying one of its existing teaching resources did not make much sense without considering alternatives.

Vicky stood before Principal Raman.

“Sir, we are not saying the new building is unnecessary.”

Raman nodded.

“I know.”



“We are asking you to look at another possibility.”

He spread the campus map on the table.

“There is space on the eastern side.”

Raman pointed at it.

“That portion has drainage problems.”

“We know.”

“It will need additional work.”

“We know.”

“It will cost more.”

Vicky nodded.

“We know that too.”

Raman looked at him.

“Then what exactly are you suggesting?”

Vicky grinned.

“That you spend the money wisely, sir.”

Gowri closed her eyes.

Raman laughed.

“You students are very confident with government funds.”

Vijitha stepped in.

“Sir, that is why we are not asking you to simply cancel the project. We are asking you to compare the options carefully.”

Raman stopped smiling.

He looked at the photographs again.

Then at the campus map.

For the first time, he seemed to be considering the matter differently.

Two days later, the students faced their first serious problem.



Someone—or something—had entered the garden at night.

Several young plants were damaged.

A few pots were broken.

The students were furious.

“Someone has done this deliberately,” Vicky said.

“We don't know that,” Vijitha replied.

“Then what happened?”

“Let's find out first.”

They checked the garden carefully.

Near the back fence, they found footprints.

Vicky stared at them.

They were not human.

They were hoof marks.

He followed the trail towards the fence.

A cow was standing there, happily chewing on a plant.

Vicky stared at it.

The cow stared back.

“You?”

The cow continued eating.

“You know how long it took us to grow that?”

The cow showed no interest in the argument.

Vijitha started laughing.

“What?”

“You are arguing with a cow.”

“It started this.”



By then Gowri had arrived.

“What happened?”

Vicky pointed towards the cow.

“Madam, we found the culprit.”

Gowri looked at the cow.

Then at Vicky.

“Good.”

She paused.

“File a complaint.”

Everyone laughed.

The cow continued eating.

The students eventually repaired the damaged plants and strengthened the fence.

It was a small incident.

But it reminded them of something important.

Saving the garden was not only about stopping a construction project.

It also meant looking after the garden while they still had it.

The final decision came sooner than expected.

The alternative site was considered expensive.

The original plan was recommended for approval.

The government-funded project could proceed without delay if the garden site was used.

The students were devastated.

Vicky stopped making jokes.

Vijitha stopped arguing.

Even students from other departments, who had initially stayed away from the issue, began asking what would happen to the garden.

On Friday afternoon, Gowri called the students together.



“I have a bad news.”

Nobody asked what it was.

They already knew.

“The order has been signed.”

There was silence.

Vicky looked towards the garden.

“What do we do now?”

Gowri looked at the students.

“Whatever you think is right.”

That evening, they began collecting seeds and cuttings.

They labelled them carefully.

They photographed important plants.

They recorded where each plant had grown.

They made copies of old records.

Nobody spoke much.

It felt strangely like preparing for the loss of someone they knew.

Later, Vijitha sat alone near the centre of the garden.

Vicky came and sat beside her.

“Do you remember your first day here?”

“Yes.”

“You were lost.”

“I was not lost.”

“You asked me where the Botany Department was.”

“That doesn't mean I was lost.”

“You were standing outside the Chemistry Department.”



She smiled.

“Fine.”

They sat quietly for a while.

Then Vijitha said,

“I hate goodbyes.”

Vicky looked at the plants.

“Maybe this isn't one.”

She shook her head.

“The order is signed.”

“Yes.”

“The machines are coming.”

“Yes.”

“Then what?”

Vicky had no answer.

Monday morning came.

At 8:40, the students were already in the garden.

At 8:50, a few teachers arrived.

At 8:55, more students joined them.

At 9:00, there was no machine.

At 9:05, still nothing.

Vicky checked his watch.

“Maybe the bulldozer got lost.”

“Don't joke,” Vijitha said.

“I'm trying not to panic.”

At 9:15, Principal Raman walked into the garden.



Everyone became silent.

He was carrying a file.

He stopped near the old flowering tree.

For a moment, he said nothing.

Then he opened the file.

“I have received the revised proposal.”

Vicky swallowed.

Raman looked at Gowri.

“Professor Gowri.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You were right.”

She looked at him.

“About the garden?”

“About looking at it as part of the college.”

Nobody moved.

Raman continued.

“I met the architect again. I spoke to the college committee. We went through the alternatives once more.”

Vijitha looked at the file in his hand.

“And?”

“The building will not come here.”

For a few seconds, nobody reacted.

Perhaps they were not sure they had heard correctly.

Then Vicky said,

“Sir... seriously?”

Raman smiled.



“Seriously.”

A cheer went up.

Students started clapping.

Someone shouted, “Thank you, sir!”

Gowri remained still.

Her eyes had filled with tears.

Raman looked at the old register she was holding.

“There was something else.”

He pointed towards it.

“I read it yesterday.”

“The register?”

“Yes. The entire thing.”

He smiled.

“And I found my own name.”

The students looked at one another.

Vicky stared at him.

“Sir, you were a Botany student?”

“No.”

Raman laughed.

“I was a first-year student who couldn't identify a plant correctly.”

Vijitha smiled.

“What happened?”

“I was asked to spend two afternoons in the garden with the Botany students.”

Vicky laughed.

“So you were punished with Botany?”



“Yes.”

“Did it work?”

Raman looked around the garden.

“Apparently.”

The students laughed again.

Then Raman became serious.

“I had forgotten about those afternoons.”

He looked at the old tree.

“Sometimes institutions forget the things that made them what they are.”

He closed the file.

“The building will be shifted.”

There was another round of applause.

This time Gowri smiled.

The new academic block was eventually constructed on another part of the campus.

It took longer.

It cost more.

There were additional approvals, meetings and arguments.

Some people complained about the delay.

Some questioned the extra expenditure.

But the project went ahead.

And the Botanical Garden remained.

The college did not preserve it as a museum.

That would have defeated the purpose.

Instead, the Botany Department developed it further.

More plants were added.



Sections were properly labelled.

Students began maintaining digital and written records.

Other departments started using the space.

The garden became part of regular academic activities.

Years passed.

Students graduated.

Teachers retired.

New batches arrived.

One afternoon, Vicky and Vijitha returned to the college as former students.

They walked into the garden.

A group of Botany students were conducting a practical class.

One student was holding a plant and looking completely confused.

He turned to his friend.

“What is this?”

His friend shrugged.

“Ask the teacher.”

Vicky smiled.

“Nothing has changed.”

Vijitha looked around.

“No.”

She smiled.

“Something has.”

They walked towards the old tree.

A small board had been placed beneath it.

It carried one sentence:



“We almost lost what had already grown here because we were thinking only about what we wanted to build.”

Vicky read it quietly.

“Who wrote that?”

Vijitha pointed towards the Botany Department building.

“Madam Gowri.”

They stood there for a while.

Then Vijitha said,

“Do you remember the last morning?”

“Yes.”

“We thought we were coming to say goodbye.”

Vicky looked at the students working nearby.

“But we were actually waiting to see whether anybody cared.”

“Who cared?”

He looked around the garden.

“Everybody, eventually.”

A breeze moved through the branches.

A few leaves fell onto the path.

Vijitha picked one up and turned it over in her hand.

“We came here to learn the name of a plant,” she said.

Vicky looked at her.

“And stayed long enough to learn its story.”

She smiled.

“We came to save a garden.”

“And?”

She looked around.



“Perhaps the garden reminded us what was worth saving.”

Vicky nodded.

“You know what I learned?”

“What?”

“Plants are very stubborn.”

She laughed.

“Why?”

“They refused to leave.”

“No,” Vijitha said. “People refused to let them.”

They began walking back.

Behind them, the Botany students continued their practical class.

A teacher was explaining something.

A bird moved between the branches.

Near the fence, there was a familiar sound.

Vicky stopped.

“Wait.”

Vijitha turned.

A cow was standing outside the fence.

He pointed at it.

“The old enemy.”

Vijitha laughed.

“Maybe it still thinks this is its garden.”

Vicky shook his head.

“After everything we went through, we still haven't solved the cow problem.”

They walked away laughing.

The garden remained behind them.



It was not perfect.

It was not silent.

It was not frozen in the past.

It was alive.

And perhaps that was the real victory.

The garden had not been saved so that nobody could touch it.

It had been saved so that another generation could enter it, make mistakes there, study there, laugh there, discover plants there and, perhaps, learn to care for something that had existed before them.

Because progress is necessary.

Colleges must grow.

Buildings must be built.

Plans must change.

But progress does not always mean beginning with an empty piece of land.

Sometimes, progress means looking carefully at what is already there.

Sometimes it means asking whether the old and the new can exist together.

And sometimes, before the first brick is laid, we simply need to stop for a moment and ask:

What are we about to lose?

Because what we choose to keep says as much about an institution as what we choose to build.

Bionote:

Viji is an emerging author and educator with a curious mind, a strong work ethic, and a passion for continuous learning. She is a keen listener, detail-oriented, and self-motivated, approaching both life and her career with positivity and dedication. In her leisure time, she enjoys listening to music, reading, drawing, and exploring engaging content on Instagram and YouTube.