



THE TREE THAT KEPT GROWING

An old tree stood beside a broken compound wall at the end of our street. Nobody knew who had planted it, and I had never seen anyone water it. Perhaps a bird had carried the seed, or perhaps the wind had brought it from somewhere beyond the houses. Somehow, it had found a little space between the stones and taken root. Its trunk was uneven, some branches had been damaged over the years, and its roots had begun to lift parts of the pavement. Yet it had survived many summers and monsoons. During the hottest afternoons, people stood beneath its shade, children played around its roots, and birds found shelter among its branches. The tree gave what it had without asking who deserved it.

I began to notice the tree at a time when I had started to question myself. I had reached a point in life when I could no longer blame all my mistakes on other people. I knew I had faults. I could be impatient, and there were times when I had spoken harshly and regretted it later. Sometimes I remained silent when I should have spoken, and sometimes I spoke because my pride would not allow me to remain quiet. I had helped people and expected them to remember it, and I had refused help because I did not want anyone to know that I was struggling. I was not a bad person, but I could not honestly call myself a good one either. The more honestly I looked at myself, the clearer the difference became between the person I was and the person I wanted to be.

So I decided to change, though I did not make any grand promise to become perfect. I only wanted to be more patient, more honest and less eager to judge others. I thought people would appreciate the effort, but I soon discovered that people are not always comfortable when someone they know begins to change. When I stopped joining conversations in which someone was being mocked, I was called proud. When I refused to laugh at another person's weakness, someone said I was pretending to be kind. If I helped someone without mentioning it, another person would suggest that I wanted praise. At first, I tried to explain myself, believing that people would understand if they knew what I was trying to do. Eventually, I stopped explaining. I realised that a person who has already decided what to think about you may not be looking for an explanation at all.

There were also people who seemed to support me. They came with friendly words and offered advice whenever I needed it. They told me that they wanted me to succeed, and I believed some of them because I wanted to believe that their friendship was genuine. Slowly, however, I noticed things that made me careful. Something I had said privately would appear in another conversation. Advice given to me seriously would later become a joke. A person who encouraged me to take a particular decision would later criticise me for taking it. I began to understand that not every hand extended towards you is meant to lift you. Some people reach out simply to discover where you are standing.

Whenever I became tired of thinking about people, I walked to the old tree. I would sit beneath it and watch whatever happened around me. After the rain, new leaves appeared, and birds built nests among the branches. Squirrels moved quickly through the foliage, disappearing whenever someone approached. An old woman sometimes rested there while waiting for her granddaughter, and a fruit seller kept his basket beneath it when the afternoon became too hot. The tree made no distinction between them. It gave its shade to whoever happened to need it, and nobody seemed to think much about where that shade came from. Perhaps that was what I liked about it. It never asked to be thanked.

One morning, I noticed that one of its branches had been broken. I did not know how it had happened. Perhaps a child had pulled it down, or someone had broken it carelessly while passing. I



stood looking at it and felt strangely sad. It seemed unfair that a tree which had sheltered so many people could be damaged without anyone caring. For several days, the broken branch remained hanging there. Then, beneath the wound, I noticed a tiny green shoot. It was so small that I might easily have missed it. The tree had not repaired the broken branch. It had simply begun to grow again.

That little shoot stayed in my mind. I had spent too much time thinking about people who had hurt me. I wanted them to understand me, apologise to me or admit that they had been unfair. I wanted those who mocked my efforts to change to know that I was sincere. I wanted those who had pretended to help me to know that I had understood them. The tree wanted none of these things. It did not wait for an apology or ask who had broken its branch. It simply grew near the wound. For the first time, I wondered whether I was wasting my own strength trying to repair things that could never be repaired in the way I wanted.

As the months passed, the tree grew wider. Its branches reached beyond the wall, and its roots slowly pushed against the pavement. People began to notice it more. The same people who had enjoyed its shade now complained that it occupied too much space. One man said the roots were damaging the pavement. Another complained about the fallen leaves. Someone else said that the birds brought dirt. I listened to them and found something familiar in their complaints. The tree had been appreciated when it was small and convenient. Now that it had grown, its existence had become a problem.

I began to see the connection with my own life. People had praised me when I was helpful and agreeable. They liked me when I said yes, solved their problems and made things easier. But when I began to say no, when I stopped doing things simply to please them and started making decisions according to what I believed was right, some of the praise disappeared. I was suddenly called difficult. Someone who had once described me as kind began calling me stubborn. I had indeed changed, but not in the way they thought. I was not trying to become worse. I was trying to become more honest about what I could give and what I could no longer accept.

One afternoon, a man who knew me well told me that I had become too soft. He had seen me refuse to answer an insult and thought my silence was weakness. "You cannot continue like this," he said. "People will take advantage of you." I told him that perhaps they would. He looked at me with surprise and asked why I continued, then. After thinking for a moment, I said, "Because I don't want other people's behaviour to decide what kind of person I become." He laughed, as though I had said something childish. Perhaps there was some truth in his warning. I had learned that kindness without judgment could become foolishness, and forgiveness did not mean allowing someone to hurt you repeatedly. But I also knew that becoming cruel simply because others had been cruel was not strength. Some people displayed power only because they were afraid of losing it, and the more powerless they felt inside, the more they tried to make others feel small.

The tree showed me another kind of strength. Its roots held it firmly, but they did not announce themselves. Its branches moved with the wind without becoming weak. When one branch broke, another began to grow. It did not fight the rain, but neither did it surrender to it. It simply remained where it was and continued. I began to think that perhaps strength did not always need to be loud. Sometimes it was only the quiet decision not to become something ugly because someone else had treated you badly.

The complaints about the tree eventually became serious. One evening, I heard several people discussing whether it should be removed. They spoke about the roots, the pavement and the leaves.



Nobody mentioned the shade. Nobody spoke about the birds that had nested in its branches or the people who had rested beneath it during the hottest part of the day. The discussion was entirely about inconvenience. I stood at a distance and listened, thinking about how quickly we forget what something has given us when we begin to dislike what it has become.

That evening, I sat beneath the tree until the light began to fade. Birds were returning to their nests, and the evening wind moved gently through the leaves. The same man who had called me too soft came and stood beside me. He looked up at the branches and said that the tree would probably be removed. I told him that I had heard the same thing. He said I seemed upset, and I admitted that I was. He looked at the tree and shrugged. "It is only a tree." I smiled and reminded him that he had said that before. He laughed and told me that I became attached to strange things. I did not answer. Perhaps some things do not have to be important to everyone in order to be important to you.

A few days later, a notice appeared on the wall announcing that the tree would be removed. I stood there reading it more than once. I felt angry and wanted to argue with someone. I wanted to tell them that the tree had been there for years and had given more to the street than most of the people complaining about it. Then I remembered the broken branch and the little shoot that had appeared beneath it. The tree had never argued with anyone. It had simply continued.

That morning, I understood something about my own life. Trying to become a good person did not mean allowing everyone to hurt me. It did not mean believing every smiling face or accepting every offer of help. It did not mean remaining silent whenever someone was cruel. But becoming strong did not require becoming cruel either. I wanted to be able to stand firmly without having to push someone else down. Perhaps that was a kind of strength worth having.

The tree was cut down the following week. The men arrived early in the morning, and by afternoon most of the branches had disappeared. Birds flew away when the cutting began. When the last piece of wood was carried away, the wall looked strangely bare. The pavement seemed wider, and there was more sunlight, but somehow the street felt hotter. I stood there watching the workmen leave. Nobody spoke about the years the tree had stood there. Nobody remembered the shade it had given or the birds it had sheltered. The people who had complained about it were satisfied because the problem was gone.

For several days, life continued as usual. The fruit seller found another place for his basket, the children played somewhere else, and the birds moved to another tree. People forgot about the old tree surprisingly quickly. That was what troubled me most. Something that had stood there for years had disappeared, and the world had not stopped for even a moment. We notice things when we need them, complain when they become inconvenient and often forget them when they are gone.

When I finally returned to the old wall, there was only a patch of disturbed soil where the tree had been. I stood there thinking about myself. There had been moments when I wanted to stop trying. I thought it would be easier to become indifferent. If I stopped caring, nobody could accuse me of pretending. If I stopped helping, nobody could use my kindness against me. If I stopped trusting people, nobody could disappoint me. For a while, becoming hard seemed easier than continuing to try.

Then I saw something green beside the wall. At first I thought it was a weed, but when I looked closely, I recognised the leaves. It was another shoot from the tree. I did not know whether it had grown from a root left beneath the soil or from a seed that had fallen before the tree was removed. I



never found out. Nature has its own ways of beginning again, and it does not always explain them to us.

The new tree was small and fragile. There was no shade beneath it yet, no bird had built a nest in its branches, and nobody stopped to admire it. It was exposed to the same sun, dust and careless feet as before. Yet it was alive. It had begun without waiting for anyone to promise that it would be protected.

I thought about myself. I was still not the person I wanted to be. I still made mistakes, lost my patience and sometimes trusted people I should not have trusted. There were days when I was no better than those I criticised. I could not honestly say that I had become a good person. I could only say that I was trying to become one. For the first time, I was not ashamed to admit it.

I had spent too much time wanting people to approve of my efforts. I wanted those who mocked me to understand me and those who had disappointed me to regret what they had done. The tree made me see that I did not need any of this. It had never asked anyone to approve of its existence. It had given shade without demanding gratitude and sheltered birds without asking whether they deserved a place. It had grown roots without apologising for the space they occupied.

Perhaps goodness was not a finished condition. Perhaps it was a direction. A person could fail and still begin again. He could be hurt without becoming cruel. He could discover that some helping hands were false and still choose to help someone else. He could be mocked for trying to change and still continue. The world might not reward him for it, but that did not make the effort meaningless.

The little tree continued to grow. A few more leaves appeared after the rain, and its stem became stronger. One morning, I saw a bird land briefly on one of its branches. It stayed only for a moment before flying away, but I felt strangely pleased. The tree was beginning again, quietly and without anyone noticing.

I began to do the same. I stopped trying to prove myself to people who had already made up their minds. I listened when someone criticised me, but I no longer accepted every criticism as truth. I became more careful about whom I trusted, but I did not stop trusting everyone. I learned to say no without feeling guilty and to accept genuine help without feeling ashamed. Most importantly, I learned that being good did not mean being available to everyone all the time. It meant knowing what kind of person I wanted to remain, even when others made that difficult.

One evening, I stood beside the little tree while the sun was setting behind the houses. Its branches were still thin, but they were beginning to spread. I placed my hand against the young trunk and thought about the old tree that had once stood there. It had been praised for its shade and criticised for its roots. It had been useful when people needed it and inconvenient when it grew beyond the space they had allowed. It had been broken, removed and forgotten, yet something of it had remained beneath the ground.

I realised that I was not so different. I could not control who praised me, who mocked me or who pretended to help me. I could not force people to understand my intentions. What I could decide was what their behaviour would make of me. I did not want to become bitter because someone had been cruel, dishonest because someone had deceived me, or uncaring because someone had taken advantage of my kindness. I wanted to learn from what happened without losing the better part of myself.

The little tree did not know what the future would bring. Perhaps it would become large enough to give shade again. Perhaps its roots would one day disturb the pavement and someone would complain about it. Perhaps it would be cut down just as the old tree had been. There were no guarantees. But none of that seemed to matter. It was alive, and it was growing.

I smiled and walked home. I knew that I was still imperfect and that I would make mistakes again. I knew that some people would misunderstand me, some would praise me without truly knowing me, and some would pretend to help while quietly hoping that I failed. I could not change all of that. Perhaps I did not need to. I only needed to continue becoming the person I wanted to be.

The next morning, when I passed the old wall, the little tree was still there. No one was praising it or watching it. It simply stood in the morning light, holding its few leaves towards the sky. I stopped for a moment and looked at it before continuing on my way. I finally understood that goodness was not about proving to everyone that you were good. It was about continuing to grow, even when nobody believed that you were trying.

Bio–Note:

Dr. A. Arun Daves is a highly accomplished scholar and educator holding a Ph.D. in English from Annamalai University and an M.Phil. in English from PRIST University. His academic journey includes an M.A. in English from St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science, Cuddalore, where he was awarded a Gold Medal, as well as a B.A. in English from the same institution. He also has an additional Master's degree in Linguistics from Annamalai University. Since 2013, he has been serving as an Assistant Professor of English at Jawahar Science College, Neyveli. Dr. Daves is a prolific writer and researcher, with 23 published articles in esteemed international journals and over 30 articles and book chapters reviewed. His literary talents extend to poetry, short stories, and book reviews, showcasing his multifaceted expertise in the realms of English language and literature.