

The Empty House

By Sreya Sarkar

The cab pulled up in front of a colonial style bungalow in Gainesville's Duckpond neighborhood, well-known for its old Florida charm. Atish Majumdar had returned from a four-week summer teaching engagement in Switzerland. Summers were always fun for him. A bit of work and a bit of sightseeing can never be a bad combination for anyone. He twirled his carry-on spinner into his house.

"Gargi, are you here?" Atish hollered expecting his wife to yell back, but all he heard today was the uniform ticking of the Cuckoo clock.

He had brought the Swiss souvenir home years ago but forgotten all about it till now. It made its presence known by its even tick-tocking, accentuated by the silence around it.

He swept his eyes around his home. They had moved into this house fifteen years ago when he joined University of Florida as a new Physics faculty. Gargi had welcomed Gainesville sun after years of nose-numbing winters in Boston.

The house felt different today. There was neither the smell of fresh cooking nor his wife's lavender perfume wafting in the air. No Bhimsen Joshi, nor Chopin greeting his ears. A detached coldness collided with his presence and all of a sudden, the four-bedroom house seemed too big for a couple

with grown up children. Their twins had left home years ago. Urmi was finishing her Masters in Computer Science in Boston and Rahul had finally joined his dream job in an advertising agency in New York City. Atish had hardly noticed them growing out of their teens into adulthood. Like most other domestic chores, he had delegated his children's responsibility to his wife. Now moving aimlessly through the rooms, he remembered the cramped apartment he had shared with Gargi in Boston during their earlier years together. There was hardly any space to move around there, yet enough to love each other thoroughly.

He had met Gargi when she was studying Art History. Her way of looking straight into people's eyes, like they were the only thing that mattered in the entire universe, had stolen his heart. And it was how he had looked back at her with his disheveledness, that had swept her off her feet. Their mutual admiration had quickly turned into a passionate affair. They married quickly before the haze of passion could subside and give them a clearer view of each other's personalities.

Gargi soon devoted herself to looking after Atish and their twins. Atish filled his life with work, and only work, left early for his laboratory and returned late. He would often stay back in his office, skip meals, showers and sometimes sleep and forget to inform her. Atish had heard dreadful stories from his colleagues about their failing marriages and thanked God secretly that Gargi was different from all those horrid, selfish partners who did not know how to make a relationship last.

After a bottle of beer and an hour of loitering around the house, he tried Gargi's cell and found it switched off.

He dialed his son's number.

"Hi Dad, how was your trip?" Rahul answered distractedly.

"It was good but I wanted to come back early. I was missing home."

There was a pause and then his son said, "Are you okay? It's not like you to cut your work trip short."

"I am fine, have you heard from Mom today?"

"Not today but, we spoke a couple of days ago."

"What did she say?"

"Some stuff about what she was doing and how she missed us, the usual. Why are you asking?"

"Just like that. I...I miss you."

"Okay, now you are really freaking me out. Have you been drinking too much coffee again?"

"No! Can't I miss my family?" said Atish irritated.

Rahul chuckled. "Sure, you can."

Atish disconnected the phone wondering how Rahul could get away talking to him in that condescending tone.

As Florida night dropped its curtains over the long summer day, the last rays of the sun rested its gaze on the large landscape painting hanging on the living room wall. A sun-kissed beach with shady palm trees swaying in the breeze. It was one of Gargi's best. Atish remembered how much he had nagged when she had decided to mount it there a couple of years ago.

"Why do you want to hang your own work in the living room? It's too personal, don't you think?"

Gargi had looked surprised. "All my art is personal. So, can't I ever display them anywhere?"

As her children grew up, she had channelized her energy towards her art. Unlike Atish she had tried to include him in her World of Art but with time realized that he was not interested in learning anything about it. He had tried to defend himself. "You see... I don't understand anything other than my subject."

He had noticed her stiffen. "An intelligent person like you does not understand only when he is determined not to." Her words had sounded tight, like she was trying to contain a dam of unexpressed emotions.

Atish sighed and opened the refrigerator door to find a neat pile of containers. Gargi had stopped including carbohydrates in her meals. Had she known Atish was coming back tonight, she would have prepared a curry dish and rice for him. He had protested when they had switched from white Basmati to brown rice but Gargi had adamantly stuck to her decision. He popped a bowl of grilled chicken and vegetables into the microwave oven. *When was the last time that he had the kitchen all to himself?* He had looked for solitude all his life but now that he had the entire house to himself, he felt oddly miserably.

He pulled up Gargi's email on his laptop. She had sent him pictures from her recent Boston trip. Urmi, Rahul and Gargi had had a family reunion without him. Urmi had purple hair now. Rahul looked thinner than before. Gargi looked beautiful in a turquoise *kurti*. She still had shiny long hair which she generally tucked neatly into a bun but for these pictures she had let them loose.

Gargi would plan their family vacations every year. It was like a yearly ritual for the four of them. They visited Niagra Falls, Smokey Mountains, and so many more holiday destinations. Gargi had to drag Atish along, like an unwilling horse to most of them. In the last ten years those vacations had slipped out of their calendars.

Art had slowly but steadily taken over Gargi. She had gradually withdrawn from her household engagement and immersed herself in sketch pens and colors. Somewhere along the way her sentimental demands stopped as well. This should have made him happy for he mostly wanted to be left alone, but now in hindsight he had a creepy crawly feeling that Gargi had stopped pursuing him because something between them had ended. *When had the lull set in?* Their house was full

of children, cooking, love and warmth once. Gargi's unselfish personality had bathed his home with sunny cheerfulness, and what did she demand in return? Not much, really. *What the hell was I doing all that while?* he asked himself with a sudden disdain. He had repeatedly slinked away to his academic fort and shut the doors tightly. He remembered what his PhD guide had once told him and how seriously he had followed that. "One's heart needs to be cut out from the chest to surrender to brain completely. If you can do that, you will be a successful physicist. If you are going to play home and hearth, you will only be a good husband."

He had broken her heart so many times without meaning to. She had cooked a big meal for his fortieth birthday. There was a problem in his laboratory that evening and he could not return home without resolving it. Gargi had complained when he arrived home late. He told her that she should stop making such a fuss about his birthdays and she had raised her voice uncharacteristically to that. "You are so selfish, so so selfish and you don't even realize that!" she had cried out.

He had lost his cool. "You don't have to prove to me how much you love me everyday. You don't need to be the dutiful wife always. It's quite suffocating actually!"

"It is not about proving anything to you...you just don't get it. Even after so many years you don't understand me." She had looked at him differently that night. "My love for you is a living, breathing reality. Like a living person it needs food and drink. It needs care and nurturing..."

Atish had rolled his eyes and not allowed her to finish her thoughts. “Okay! I am very sorry...that is exactly what you want to hear, right? You win. I lose.” He had hurriedly heaped his plate with the special food Gargi had prepared for him and eaten alone in his study.

Gargi’s tear glazed eyes that night had reflected a sort of plea and not the litany of complaints, as Atish had imagined. Now sitting alone in the kitchen, he realized these slight nuances, saw the past events in a new light, from the perspective of a person who waits at home without knowing when a loved one is coming home.

The landline trilled, rattling the unnerving silence in the empty house.

It was his daughter. “This is a nice surprise! You got back early... Rahul just texted me.” she said as Atish answered. After talking a bit about his trip and Urmi’s life in Boston, Atish asked her about Gargi. “Have you heard from your Mom?”

“Why, what’s going on?”

“She is not home and she isn’t answering her cell so I was wondering...”

“Oh, it’s Thursday, she must have gone to her book club. Sometimes she goes out to dinner with her book club friends afterwards.”

“When did she join a book club?”

“A couple of months ago.”

By the time Atish finished talking to his daughter he had a frown etched on his face. As he went down to their spacious basement, now converted into Gargi's studio, he realized that he had no idea what was going on in his wife's life at all.

Gargi's studio smelled of paint and her lavender perfume. An unfinished painting stood leaning against a wall, waiting for her concluding strokes. Was he hoping to find her here hidden in the paints, or behind a canvas? He stared at the oil colors, charcoal pencils, easels and brushes and they stared back at him, defiantly. What did he expect? To start a fight with them because he could not find her? He shook his head, feeling loopy from the long flight. *I will feel better if I shower* he told himself.

As he entered his bedroom, and unbuttoned his shirt, he noticed two large suitcases standing near the row of windows. What were the suitcases doing there? Atish felt a sharp needle of fear prick his heart.

Was Gargi planning to leave him? Is that the reason that she was not taking his calls?

He felt his heart leap to his throat as the phone's shrill ringing cut through the silence of the house again. He picked up the bedroom extension his hands shaking. “Hello!” No one spoke at the other end. “Who is this? Is it you Gargi?” No response. The line was disconnected.

A thousand thoughts ran through his petrified mind. His eyes fell on the two packed suitcases again. They stood there mocking him, challenging him to open them up and find out the truth, but he was not ready to find that out yet so, he inched away from them and ran to take a quick, clumsy shower. After wards he found himself lumbering back to the kitchen to pour himself a stiff Whiskey to calm his nerves, as a growing chill marched up and down his spine. *What was so damn important that he had to remain away from her all this time? That he did not have any clue about what was going on in his house?*

Over the years, she had let go of him gradually, one small part at a time. Now she acted polite with him, like someone would treat guests. *When did he become a stranger to Gargi?* A jumble of complicated feelings bounced around in his throbbing mind as it grew dark outside.

Then he heard the front door latch opening and froze.

Gargi stood at the door. “Who is it?” she said with a slight tremor in her voice. Atish felt a tremendous sense of relief wash over him. In his fit of anxiety, he had forgotten to switch on the lights in the living room. Now as the lights came on, Gargi’s expression changed from alarm to surprise. Atish could still not move from his spot. He said in a weak voice, “Why were you not answering your phone?”

Gargi stared at Atish for a few seconds trying to gather her thoughts. “Oh, I think I had turned down the volume. And then it died. How come you are back early?”

After moments of awkward silence, Atish's sarcastic side made a come-back. "Why? Did I inconvenience you by coming back early? Perhaps I ruined your plans for the evening!"

Gargi was taken aback. He had not spoken to her in this *concern turned needy* tone in many years now.

He stopped himself and coughed uncomfortably. "I am sorry...you got me so worried. You made yourself *unavailable*."

It hurts badly when your partner is unavailable, right? she said secretly in her thoughts, but not aloud. With a neutral expression pasted on her face she said instead, "How was I supposed to know that you wanted to reach me or that you will be back sooner?"

Atish set down his glass on the dining table, walked over to his wife and hugged her fiercely. "You gave me such a fright!"

Gargi smiled. "Wow, that is extreme!"

Atish blinked several times to make sure that he was not dreaming. He framed her oval shaped face in his bony palms and continued looking at her. As his heartbeat settled back to its normal pace, he said gently, "I missed you Gargi."

She looked worried. “Are you feeling okay?”

As they silently ate dinner, Atish noticed Gargi’s hands. Long shapely fingers. Soft blue veins gathered in a distinctive pattern on the back of her palm. She used her hands a lot when she talked.

Atish asked almost in a whisper, “Are you leaving me?”

Gargi’s eyes widened. “What?”

Atish looked tired and deflated. “I don’t know...I just felt it. You were not taking my calls and...your bags are packed...”

“Did you open the bags?”

“No.”

“Had you opened them you would have understood,” she said. “I am moving some old stuff from our bedroom to the basement.”

“And what is the point of having a cell phone if you don’t use it?” He was sulking now.

“You know that I don’t like checking my phone all the time. Sometimes I like being on my own, undisturbed. And...you need to stop taking me for granted. Why couldn’t you inform me a day before that you are coming back earlier than expected?”

He noticed a shade of irritation in her controlled voice. He knew he had earned this with years of neglect and insensitivity. “It was a last-minute decision. I am like this. You know me, right? But you are not like me!”

“Maybe because I have spent so many years with you, I have started behaving like you.” She looked at him with sharp eyes. Atish realized that he deserved to be told this. He wanted to say sorry but couldn’t. “I heard from Urmi that you go to a book club on Thursdays. Maybe you had told me but I couldn’t remember.”

“I did not tell you about it”, she said matter-of-factly. “I generally go there on Thursdays but, today I skipped. The weather was nice, much cooler than usual. I went for a long walk instead.”

“Remember, how much we walked around 23rd Street when we moved here? We should start doing that together again,” said Atish.

Gargi gave him an odd look. It made Atish uncomfortable. It would not be easy reconnecting with his wife, he knew but he was not willing to give up yet. He brought out some old photo albums and together they went through the photographs. Their wedding, their first car, Rahul and Urmi’s birth, and the countless events they covered in the last twenty-seven years together. Atish stole glances at Gargi every few minutes. He still found her beautiful and fierce, but he never thought of expressing so. Gargi had yearned for his acknowledgement and his participation and he had turned his back towards her unwittingly. He went to bed with a strong resolve to make changes in

the way he lived his life from now on. He would stop obsessing about lining up his summer assignments and spend time planning holidays with his wife instead. He would learn more about Gargi's art and book club.

Tomorrow will be a brand-new day, he promised himself.

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Gargi tiptoed out of the bedroom at the crack of dawn. She crossed her living room and stepped outside onto the porch. Last night's cool breeze was replaced by a stifling humidity this morning. She punched in a number on her cell and waited anxiously. After a few rings, a deep voice answered. "Good you called. I was so worried."

Gargi let out a tired sigh. "I can't go through what we planned at this moment." There was silence on the other end. "I know I am not being fair to you and you have every right to be mad at me. So, I should let you go..." Gargi's voice cracked with pain as she left the sentence dangling midway.

"I am not here to force you into anything."

A tear slipped down Gargi's smooth cheek. "I know."

"What is the hesitation? Is it because he is back?"

Gargi was surprised. “How did you know that he is back?”

“I had called your land line yesterday when I could not get you on your cell.”

“What? Did you talk to him?” she sounded nervous.

“Of course not.”

Gargi took a deep breath and said slowly, “I have not entirely thought this through, I realize. And I don’t want to keep you hanging like this.”

“I love you Gargi. And I know that you love me too. So, what is the problem? Have you given him the letter?”

Gargi let out a long sigh. “No, I could not give him the letter. It is still in the drawer of my bedside table, I hope. He looked nervous, he saw the suitcases but...I don’t think that he found the letter yet.” She looked around cautiously. “And I don’t think I should let him read it. Now that I am not leaving for Paris right away I have some time to explain to him what has happened between you and me.”

Gargi thought she heard a noise. “I need to go. You have a safe flight! I will call you once you reach.”

“You are going to come to Paris, right?”

Gargi squeezed her eyes together as she spoke the next few words. There was a shade of uncertainty in her voice. “I...yes, I want to be with you...but I owe him a proper explanation.”

Gargi leaned against the backdoor as she ended the call.

Andre. Andre Perrin. *The healing breeze in her stifling life*. His name always brought a smile to her face.

She had met him at an art gallery two years ago, in her annual exhibition in downtown Gainesville. She had sold him one of her paintings, the one that had gone unnoticed by others. She was intrigued by his choice. He explained in simple words. “It makes me happy and sad at the same time.” That was exactly what she had felt painting it. A rainy morning depiction of a leafy forest trail leading towards a narrow waterfall. The careful brush-strokes in pastel shades had given it a dreamy quality. It was very subtle. Gargi had suspected that nobody other than herself would notice the endearing quality of the painting, but Andre did.

She ran into him again after a few weeks at a friend’s house. Blue eyed Andre was from Paris, visiting Gainesville for a year to teach French in the Art and Literature Institute. He was a few years younger than Gargi, but had such an old soul. She realized that she had finally met someone who knew what she wanted to say even before she finished her sentences. He was easy to talk to, had a special ability to extract her from her mundane life. Gargi would initially spend a lot of time

talking about her children, her husband and her family chores. Andre would smile and remind her that her family was a part of her life—but not her entirely. She was more than that. It had taken her a while to understand what that really meant. By placing her own priorities after everyone else's for the longest time, she had forgotten what her needs were. *Who was she? What did she like? What did she enjoy? What did she want to do for the rest of her life?* She could no longer find answers to these fundamental questions. She had become invisible to herself and to people around her.

When her children had left home to pursue their dreams, she had felt lost for a long time. She had reached out to her husband but, had not been able to find him. He had slipped away from her into his own World like he often did, into a realm that did not include her. She tried to immerse herself in her work, which she had neglected for so long. Gargi thought she had fought off her growing depression when she started concentrating on her work but it came creeping back when she started painting full time. Dark hued thoughts oozed out of her pores and she saw herself drowning in a pool of murkiness. She turned to religion and meditation but that could not calm her. It is at this confusing juncture when she was re-discovering herself in a new emotional terrain, that she met Andre.

Talking to Andre brought the emotions she had tried to rein in, flooding back to surface. She was attracted to his effervescence. His inclusive happiness was infectious and she was drawn to him like a moth drawn towards fire. She was startled at her reaction to him and decided not to see Andre for a while, but that did not help either. Her eyes started losing its spark and she felt like she could not breath.

Andre did not give up on them easily. “Why are you so afraid to admit that you like spending time with me?” he asked her repeatedly.

She had a husband, she reminded him.

“Then, where is he?” he asked her gently.

That made Gargi stop in her track. *Where was he, indeed?* The coldness in her marriage was choking her, she had realized with a shudder. She started meeting Andre again and her tender feelings for him gave her new wings. She soared up in the sky like a free bird, feeling the wind in her hair and eyes. Andre’s honesty and thoughtfulness had touched Gargi’s heart, but what truly nurtured her fondness for him was his accessibility. He was always there when she reached out for him. She fell in love with him deeply and absolutely. Andre sensed her restlessness and gathered the courage to ask her to come with him to Paris. She said “Yes” and he picked her up in his arms and danced in joy.

Atish had to be told of course, but she had avoided doing that for the longest time. “You can’t hide from him forever!” Andre had reminded her. “I am surprised he has not sensed it already!”

She had reassured him. “I am going to tell him everything in a letter.”

Gargi opened her eyes to see Atish walk into the kitchen. “When did you wake up?” Her heart beat hard in her chest. *For how long has he been awake? Did he hear me talk?*

“Just now,” said Atish and started heaping coffee in the coffee maker. He flashed her his best smile.

“What are your plans today? I was thinking of taking the day off and going for a drive to Tampa. Do you remember that little restaurant that served Cuban food? It’s been so many years since we last went there.” He walked up behind her and rubbed her back. “Can you come with me?”

Gargi shrank back from his touch. “I don’t know. I have a lot to do.”

“Like what?” Atish observed his wife closely. Her cold politeness made her face unreadable. Living together for so many years Gargi did a lot of things out of habit, not necessarily out of love.

He had woken up to an empty bed earlier and looked around the house for Gargi. He saw the porch door open and stepped out to find Gargi dialing a number on her phone. She was so involved in the conversation soon after that he had gone unnoticed. Neglecting her for so many years had come with a shocking price. He had heard her side of the conversation but that was enough to make sense of what was going on.

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He stirred his coffee deep in thought. *I should go back to the bedroom and find the letter before Gargi destroys it.* Gargi was sipping her coffee and planning as well. *I should destroy the letter before he sees it.*

They continued smiling politely at each other contemplating their next move.

