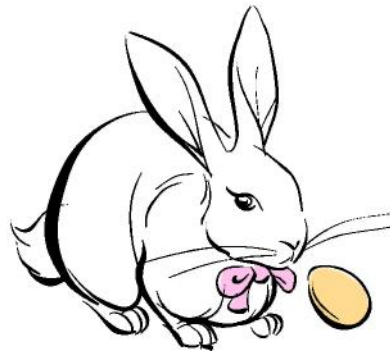


A COLD MORNING IN DENMARK

BY

KRISHNA



“There are a few things in every life which shine always like pathfinders. At least I believe so. The passage of time may obscure the details, but the message and characters will exist in the mind for ever, like ambrosia, to rejuvenate it whenever it feels an unknown grief and loneliness.” He said.

I could not find an answer. But that was not a problem. In fact, he was not speaking to me, but to himself.

It began with the news of a terrorist attack in the newspaper. Now-a-days, it was becoming so common that it had almost lost the news-value. Yet, it worried everyone and in this aspect, there was

no difference between the public and public servants and politicians.

We went on talking and somehow it turned to extraordinary happenings in life leading to his reminiscence of a distant past.

Then he began to narrate the incident.

“It happened twenty years ago. It was while I was in Denmark – or was it in Belgium? – No. It was Denmark. I had a wonderful experience there.

It was a very cold, yet bright morning. I was there on deputation for three months and wanted to visit the countryside, as much as possible. With this intention, I had arranged my residence at the outskirts of the town.

It was a Sunday. I got up early and after breakfast, began a lazy walk through the countryside. I had heard about a temple of the members of International Society for Krishna Consciousness in Denmark. The other day, someone had also said that it was not far away from my residence. Even now I remember the location he had given. It was 23, *Hillerod Bendstrup, Bauneholm*, Denmark. The landscape was very beautiful and the climate was pleasing. Being a holiday, almost all shops were closed. Chirping of small bird and insects added a melody to the sweetness of the morning atmosphere. There were tall trees and bushes on both sides of the path, making the walk a pleasant experience. As I advanced, the place was becoming more and more beautiful. I felt that I was going away from the direction of the temple, but the beauty of the surroundings had enticed me so much that I did not mind it. And scarcely there was anyone outside the houses, to whom I could have asked for direction.

I walked about two hours, but the temple was nowhere in the immediate vicinity. I had walked at least four miles, I was certain, and so I returned from there.

By this time I was feeling very hungry. It was almost 12^o clock.

I desired to have some south Indian food and so walked along in search of such a hotel. I might have walked about one mile and yet I could find any hotel, let alone a south Indian one.

After walking about one more mile, I saw that the landscape had changed. It was like an entrance into a town. The area where I lived was surely more than four miles away from where I returned and so it was clear that I had lost my way again. Anyway, the foremost thing upon my mind was to take food, let it be South Indian or Indian or western.

But, after a little while, I felt so tired that I sat down under a tree and inadvertently fell into a slumber.

A noise awakened me. I looked around. A few birds were making noises on the treetop. I thanked them for awakening me and started walking back.

But when I walked ahead, I had a feeling that the area was vaguely familiar. I was certain that I had never come to the place. Then, how was it that I recognized the place? As I advanced, the familiarity increased. Now I was able to foresee as to what would be in front of me, to realize the correctness of it after a little while.

Wonderstruck, I walked along.

After some time, I reached a place, from where a byroad was going to the right. How I knew I cannot say, but I knew that on that road, I will be able to get food in an Indian Hotel. Praying that it should be a south Indian hotel, I walked along.

And it was there! Just after the turn! From the board I recognized it.

I reached in front of it. The front door was partially open.
“Aayiye, Aayiye¹” A voice said from inside.

An old man and a young man and a boy were inside. The boy was wearing white *kurtha* and white *pyjama*. (A long shirt and pants-like garment made with cloth of normal thickness.) The young man was wearing normal pants and shirt.

I thanked God that at last I found an Indian hotel, although not south Indian. And I felt a sort of jubilation, as my gut feeling had come true.

The old man was about seventy years. He too was wearing white *kurtha* and *pyjama*. He had long, clean beard, the ends of which were tied into a knot. The mark of strict observance of *Namaz* (the form of worship which a true Musalman is supposed to perform five times a day) was there on his forehead. Even at this old age, his eyes were shining bright. And somehow, I had a feeling that I knew him already.

I asked him whether I can get food. “To-day is holiday to us.” He said. “Oh. I am sorry.” I got up to go.

“I said that it is our holiday. But I did not say that you will not get meals.”

I could not understand what he meant. But about one thing, I was certain. The eyes were smiling at me. In more than a friendly manner.

He looked at the young man. And he, along with the boy, went outside, through the back door.

The food-problem solved, I decided to have a little talk with him.

It began by asking about his hotel, the sales, the customers etc. To each question, he gave the reply.

And he asked the purpose of my walk. I explained it. All. The temple you searched is not far away. Perhaps you might have taken a wrong route.”

“I too feel so now,” I said.

“Do not worry. You can go the next Sunday.”

“Which is your native place in India?” I asked. But as soon as I completed the question, I felt a sort of uncompleted-ness. And I added. “Baba.”

Now, the word ‘baba’ has different meanings. It is the way to address an old man. It is also a way of addressing one’s own father.

I used it as a respectful word to be used while addressing an old man. But as soon as I uttered it, I felt that I used it the way a young man addresses his father, although there is no difference in the pronunciation.

He went on looking at me for quite some time, immersed in thoughts. Then he said: “You say it.”

Now, it is not easy to tell one’s native place just by guessing. Yet, I had feelings that since his Hindi being so beautiful with an added taste of Urdu, he may be from Lucknow.

“Lucknow.” I said, enjoying the talk as if it were a quiz program.

“You are right. And wrong too,” He said. And being quite unable to understand the meaning of the riddle, I looked at his face.

And then I saw it.

A speck of recognition in his eyes. Recognition and deep affection.

As if he knew me for a long time! Me, who reached the country just two weeks ago!

“Is it Lucknow?” I asked again. I was feeling such warmth between us to insist for an answer.

“You are right in saying that it is Lucknow, because I was born and brought up in Lucknow. But presently, I am from Lahore.”

“Lahore?” I asked bewildered. A little afraid too.

“Why? Is it not possible?”

I fell silent. I did not know what to ask.

Then he said: “Now I am a Pakistani citizen.”

It was like a bombardment. I, an Indian, sitting in the hotel of a Pakistani? Waiting for food?”

How can I take the food? How can I believe that the food will not be poisoned? To kill me? An Indian? Otherwise, why he is giving me food, when it is their holiday? No. I won't take the food.”

And as if to test my resolve, they brought the food. Chappathis and vegetable curry. It had a delicious, mouthwatering aroma.

Now what to do? I was unable to decide.

I looked at him.

He might have noticed the confusion on my face that he asked: “Why, what happened?”

I could not answer.

“It is homely food. Prepared for you at our home.”

I was between the devil and the deep sea. Danger at both ends. Either by poison or by extreme hunger and tiredness. On the other hand, there were his affectionate words and eyes, invoking a feeling that he was like my father. Even the word 'our' seemed to involve me too.

I prayed to God and began taking the meals. It was really very tasty.

"How is it?"

"First class." I said, making a symbol joining the thumb and index finger of my right hand. "Only at my home, I had taken such tasty food."

"What is your age?" He asked suddenly.

"Forty."

"I had a son. If he were alive, he would be of your age."

"When did he die?"

"On fourteenth August, Nineteen forty seven."

"Fourteenth August? Nineteen Forty Seven?" Somehow, I could not believe it. A child dying on the independence day of a country!

"Yes. On the independence day of our new country."

"Was it in the riot?" I asked. I had almost completed the food. My fear about poison had vanished.

"No. But the riot was the reason for his death. Hospitals were not open. Doctors had closed their clinics for fear of violence. Many of the doctors had left the country. And those who arrived there had no facility to admit or treat patients. And we and our parents had reached there only the previous day."

"Why did you leave Lucknow? You could have...."

He did not let me complete the sentence. "There was violence in Lucknow too. Moreover, my father was made to believe that by migrating to Pakistan, all our problems will be solved."

"Did they get solved?" I asked. I knew that it was a naughty question.

“How can it be so? After all, Human life is a mixture of pleasures and worries. Wherever he may be.”

I had finished meals by now. After washing hands, I sat on the bench. I did not want to leave his presence. It was like reaching home after a long time. With a desire to be with him for ever!

Then I dared to ask him a question, the answer to which was already there in History.

“Why was India divided, Baba? Why? Why we are now in different countries, being enemies of each other?”

He went on looking at me for some time. “What do you think of me?”

“Like my father.”

“But you are a Hindu. How can I be like your father?” He asked.

He asked the question seriously. Yet, I felt that beyond the seriousness, there was pleasantness. “I do not know.” I said. “But it is.”

He came near me. “Who knows the ways of Allah? And do you know? As soon as you came, I felt a sort of, er...acquaintance. And it made me think of my dead child.”

“Baba, you did not reply to my question?”

“Which question?”

“Why was India divided?”

“That you might have studied in history books.”

“But what dooo.... you think?”

“I think that there was only one reason. Many of them were power-hungry. To rule people. The desire itself is intoxicating.”

“Who were those?”

“That I do not want to say. Maybe, I am wrong. But, to have two governments mean only one thing to me.”

“What is it, baba?”

“To have more politicians in power.”

“That means more people wanted power and to accommodate them all, more than one government was necessary.”

“It is my belief. I had heard that Gandhiji was dead against partition. But in front of his eyes, India was divided.”

“How?”

“If we can get the answer to that question, probably the enmity between the two countries will end.”

“But I had heard that if the country was not divided, there would have been mass killings.”

Baba laughed aloud.

“Why are you laughing?”

“You said it as if there was no mass killing since India was divided.”

“Yet..?”

“I believe that if the country was not divided, the vested interests, maybe from both religions, would have provoked violence; but that will end soon, provided the government was determined. But now? After partition as desired by the ambitious leaders? The mass riots in 1947 and after, wars and threat of war between the countries. A good percentage of the money of both countries is being spent on defense, rather than on development or agriculture.”

I looked at my watch. It was almost two hours since I reached the place!

“O.K. Baba, I am going.” I was feeling a little hesitation in asking the cost of food.

“O.K. And come here again before you leave Denmark.”

“The food.....?”

“What happened to the food?”

“I did not pay for it.”

“Don’t worry. We take money only for hotel food. But these chapathis were made at home. Homely food. It is only for

members of family and guests and no one will take money for it.”

I asked a naughty question. Naughty it was, but to ask the question was a necessity to me.

“Who am I? Family member or Guest?”

“Family member. Didn’t feel so?”

“Yes. That is why I asked.”

And I came out, thinking about him. I looked back once. He was standing, still looking at me.

The next Sunday I went to the temple. But could not go to Basheer Khan.

And I returned to India.

But the story does not end here.

After four years, I happened to go to Denmark again, this time the assignment being for one year.

At the first available opportunity, I went there. I enquired about him in the surroundings.

No one knew a Basheer Khan, who ran a hotel there. In fact, no one knew a person namely Basheer Khan, who had resided in that area for the last fifty years!

I returned disappointed. Are they telling a lie? For some reason? But can everyone in an entire locality be lying?”

But one sentence of Basheer Khan still echoed in my ears.

“If that question is answered, probably the enmity between the two countries will end.”

“I have to find the answer. I have to. That was what I was thinking through the way.”

“Did you find it out?”

“No. But I hope that someone will find it. Soon.”

¹ Addressing a person respectfully to enter.

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