

strapped the .22 gun on his shoulder, attitude-ing tit for tat, retorted back, *"Well you are right! In fact, over-right If I go, I come back, not you come back. What goes comes back, not something else!"* The code of stark silence broke. We roared with laughter, louder than the roaring of lions (If at all there were any) Even what wild we could have shot, we had shoosed it away. We were jungle jangling back home, booty-less, wearing weak smiles, thru' the agony of walking, a one-time exercise at one go, maybe for a lifetime. The planning was jungle jangling but the proceeds were joint jangling. In unison we serenaded the rhyme- Remember the nursery rhyme?..... *'Joints are painin, joints are painin! Call the doctor Call the doctor, Just now.'*

Coming of Age

- ND Dani

I taught him English Literature in B.A. He came to college dressed in jeans long before anybody started wearing jeans in our mofussil college. He walked with a leisurely gait deliberately throwing his arms on the sides and gave the impression of an arrogant but empty young man. He once annoyed me by asking what the utility of reading Gray's Elegy was. He generally evinced a lukewarm interest in other subjects, too.

I put him down as a vacuous young man whose chief pastime was to spend considerable time before the dressing table. He was proud but his pride was in the wrong place. He once told me that he refused to run errands for his parents because it was *infra dig* for him. He was handsome but not a loafer and nobody had heard about any *affaire la amour* in which he had participated. He managed to pass his B.A. with a borderline second class. This was expected. I had good-natured contempt for him and loved to make fun of the way he walked, the affected way in which he talked. He often told me about his differences with his father and described his family as low-bred and rustic. His uncle whom I knew used to ask me to put some sense into the fellow's head so that he gave up his woolly schemes.

I did not see much of him after he left college and gradually he was out of mind. He was forgotten. Yesterday, I opened the door of my house to answer the doorbell. Who do I see? Shailendra. He was standing near the door, telling me that he wanted to talk to me. I asked him to come in. He was not changed much in these seven years. I found I was curious about him. He told me he had gone off to Bombay. I nodded as if saying I knew that. In fact, he was just like that. Like those guys who take a train to Bombay from mofussil towns to burn their father's hard earned money in that big bad and very alluring city. "Tell me about your life in Bombay", I said, intending to look kinder. "I was working at a five star restaurant." "I scrapped up 20,000 a month." He doled out little bits of information. I was not impressed. I knew he was fibbing about the 20,000 figure. "OK.

It is good to see you back, Shailendra", said I, covering up my lack of interest. "Sir, I want to do M.A. in English." "What on earth gave you the idea?" I demanded a little irritatingly. "I am teaching at an English medium school run by missionaries at Gopalpur." Shailendra explained. "An M.A. in English will get me a permanent job as an English teacher." I suppressed a laugh. I recalled his query about the utility of reading Gray's *Elegy*. Politeness makes cowards of us all. I didn't therefore bluntly ask him to forget all about teaching English and to get lost. Instead I found myself asking him, "But Shailendra, why are you in teaching? You had a job in Bombay?" "Sir, I am in teaching for money." Exactly like him, I thought. Loudly I said, "Nobody ever went into teaching for cash." "Join the family ice making business." He was adamant. "But Sir, I make some money on the sidelines by giving tuitions to school children." By now I was beginning to get irritated. "Try smuggling, my lad, or accept ornaments as pawns, your other family business." He did not reply. I gave him a dressing down. "Young man, teaching demands sincerity. That is the first thing. It is neither for passing time, nor for making moolah, simply because there is no moolah in it." He stuck to his guns. "Sir, I understand. I want to stand on my legs. Would you help me?" I brushed aside his last two sentences as sheer theatricality which he must have picked up in Bombay. "OK. What do you want?" I asked him point blank. He said he wanted guidance in the preparation of the examination. Could I supply him with the names of books and enlighten him about the questions?" He drew out a few guidebooks which I immediately recognized. They were the usual stuff sold to mediocre, third-rate students by unscrupulous shopkeepers and penned by authors who call themselves experienced teachers. Such guidebooks only guide those who are involved in their writing, printing and marketing. They ensure a hefty commission to the shopkeeper and he promotes them with the enthusiasm of somebody devoted to the cause of student welfare. Inwardly, of course, the shopkeeper smiles a broad smile. Shailendra had bought four such guidebooks, one for every paper. I dismissed them with my usual disdain for such rubbish. He didn't show any signs of quailing. "Sir, I have come to you to know which books I should read. I must read good books to secure a good percentage." I said, "OK." And I gave him the names of some good guidebooks and helpbooks. I knew he won't be able to read original criticism. He had never shown any intellectual capacity for that. By now my earlier dislike for him had begun to melt slowly, very slowly. I thought that if he wanted to be serious that was his business. Whether his seriousness was genuine or a piece of self-delusion was entirely his concern. I gave him a go ahead. He took down names of writers and publishers. After he was gone I put him out of my mind.

Shailendra resurfaced after a week. I saw him alighting from a rickshaw before my house with a rather large airbag in hand. He told me that he had bought all the guidebooks that I had asked him to have. I gave him some important questions to read and gave him a short lecture on the

necessity of closely reading the text in a literature course. He listened with rapt attention. I told him rather plainly that he didn't have much time to prepare for the University exam and his only hope was donkey work. How many hours can you read a day? "Six.", he replied. "Only six?" "I can manage a few more, Sir." "Oh yes, nowadays you are not keeping fit", I said mockingly. I knew he was hale like a bull. "Young man, you can miss the gallows only if you can put in 10 hours a day." I knew it was a tall order for him. But I heard him saying something different. He was saying that he was rather a stickler. If he made up his mind about anything he didn't look back. I brushed it aside as bravado. Such bravado, I knew, comes easy in adolescence. Partly Hindi films to blame, partly the age of the boy. He went on, "Sir, I have burnt my boats. I gambled with fate in Bombay. I went there to try my luck before the arc lights. I worked at a restaurant reception counter for my survival. (In the heat of the emotion he forgot the five star hotel and the 20,000 figure he had told me about.) I had no support from my father. You know my father, Sir. He could not support me in Bombay. I have talent, Sir." He stressed the word talent. I was getting interested. Sympathy lurked in the corners. He continued, "Sir, I failed because I would not accept 'extra' roles. You know in Bombay you can not take off a label. Once you work as an extra, you are an 'extra' for life. Nobody would give me important roles. I have no father to stake his money on a film. Star sons quickly get big roles. Fahmeed Khan struggled in Bombay with a house of his own and a car and a father in the film world. I finally threw up my job at the restaurant. I will now work for a good M.A. degree and try for a teaching job. Give me your blessings, Sir." He stopped for breath. Then he went on. "My future is bleak. I am lonely. I am already twenty seven. I won't enter my family business. I want to live life on my terms. Sir, believe me I have self-confidence. If my father doesn't support me, I will save money from my salary and tuitions. I must get an M.A. degree to find my feet." I was looking at him. With admiration, yes. I was touched by his commitment to himself. There were two Shailendras, in fact. One, who had cynically suggested the uselessness of reading the *Elegy*; the other who was much like the gems of the 'purest ray serene'. Gray's lines began to sing in my head. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen. / To waste his sweetness on the desert air." "No, I won't let this flower wither." I quietly but firmly said to myself. I talked about 'round' characters in my fiction class. That was part of my pedagogy. Here was a real life 'round' character. From a woolly-headed youngster to a determined, self-confident, struggling human being. "All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born." Yeats whispered in my ear. I got up from my chair and put my hand on Shailendra's shoulders. "Go ahead, yours is the earth, my son".

