

Short Stories

Joie de vivre

- N. D. Dani

When I went out to unlock the gate of my house in the early hours of the morning, I was in the grip of an ominous apprehension. Several men were sitting in plastic chairs outside the house of Mr. Ram Sajeewan. Only a four five days back I learnt from his daughter that her second brother, a dashing young man of twenty-something, was hospitalized in a hospital in Shaktinagar, perhaps the poshest locality in our town, where we lived. When I asked her day before yesterday if the young man was better now, she replied in the negative. Today when I saw this crowd of some ten people outside Mr. Ram Sajeewan's house, my heart sank. I feared the worst. Mr. Ramsajeewan's house is just four houses away from our house. He retired from a class two government job and opened a shop in his house to keep himself busy and to have additional sources of income. Several people in our lane and other lanes bought their supply of packed milk from him. His social manners left nothing to be desired. Last year he had lost his wife who had been ailing for some time. Come Holi and every year he was to be seen in the crowd of the adult, elderly people of our and adjacent lanes going from house to house rubbing gulal on the faces of those timid souls like me who stayed at home even on the day of the Holi festival. He was soft spoken and his family- his two sons and a daughter- were well-mannered. His wife was not educated and mostly kept to herself not out of arrogance but lack of confidence or may be her caste. Yes, Mr. Ram Sajeewan belonged to what in our country is called scheduled caste. I never heard him or his children shouting at each other inside their house or anyone in the locality. His children never played loud music as some people's children in our locality did. Nor did he keep a dog to leave without a leash every morning to shit before anyone's house depending upon the dog's pleasure. As two or three people in our lane did. Nor did he have an unleashed pet dog to bark at passersby, grown-up or children. As two or three families in our lane did. He was what you would call a gentle man. Yes, a 'gentle man', not a 'gentleman', like the other people in our locality.

I was almost terrified by my hunches. I suspected something amiss. I called my wife who was finishing her teeth-brushing and told her about the gathering outside Mr. Ram Sajeewan's house and shared with her my worst fear. Slowly not having the courage to hear what I feared, I came to the gate of my house. One lady who passed our house every morning for a walk happened to passing. I greeted her and asked her what had happened. She confirmed my worst fear. Yes, Mr. Ram Sajeewan's son, dashing, young, twenty-something was no more. I was stunned. My neighbour Mr. Mangesh had also come out by that time and I shared the news with him. I gathered courage and went to Mr. Ram Sajeewan's house. Not having the strength of mind to accost him, I went to his elder

son and asked him about Ajai's death. The boy had fallen a victim to a severe infection in the liver. A bad case of hepatitis. I spent some time with him. It was both unsocial and inhuman on my part not to speak to Mr. Sajeewan. I went to him and sat down on the wooden. I am not good at consoling the bereaved. I can not utter the customary words that are uttered by consolers to the bereaved and her/his family. I believe that it is not possible to compensate the loss of a bereaved person with words. Yet this is how the world goes. People parrot like utter formulas to the bereaved and having done their ritual task done take leave. That is the way of the world. I did not know what to say Mr. Sajeewan who had just lost his young son to hepatitis. I knew Ajai. He was interested in street theatre and loved to organize theatre shows in localities in which children trained by him would act before their proud moms and dads. In fact I made myself absent from the scene when Ajai's body was being lifted onto the truck to be taken to Bhainsa Kund, the well-known cremation ground as I could not stand the sight of the crying members of Ajai's family. Later my wife told me that Mr. Ram Sajeewan who had put up a calm and brave face all along broke down at the time of moving for the cremation ground and wept bitterly. I felt immensely sad and sorry for the man who had lost his young son in his sixties. I also didn't go to the cremation ground because I now fail to cope up with the exhausting rituals and long wait at the cremation ground.

Diwali was only a fortnight away. I shared with my wife my resolve that we won't celebrate Diwali this year to show our solidarity with the bereaved family in their hour of grief. My wife was not against the idea but said that we ought to light a few diyas as total dark is inauspicious. I had no objection to this token observance. I also believed that in our lane Diwali will not be celebrated with the usual fanfare with which it is celebrated every year what with the sky lit up with fireworks for hours together and the bang bang of crackers going late into the night. After all Mr. Sajeewan was a neighbour in our lane and the death was a shock to everybody. I clearly remembered how there was neither any lighting nor any fireworks in the small kasba like town from where we had migrated to this growing metropolis some fifteen years ago. A young man had died in a colony and as a mark of solidarity with the bereaved family the entire colony and some other houses did not light a single candle on their homes nor did they do electric illumination. The face of Ram Sajeewan would swim before my eyes from time to time making it difficult to be at ease. As the news of Ajai's death reached the homes in our lane, both men and women came out to silently mourn the young man's death. There was grief and shock writ large on everybody's face. Many men in the houses in our lane accompanied the funeral procession on their scooters and in their cars. I was feeling embarrassed for not having gone to the cremation ground. The topic of Ajai's death was on everybody's lips. People were sad. Everyone looked crestfallen. They said it was a cruel stroke of destiny that a youth had been nipped in the bud. Every man and woman felt so sorry for the unfortunate Ram Sajeewan. A son is the star of his father's eyes. For a man of sixty plus, his son is a hope in his advancing years. I was shocked, too. I found it to recover my equipoise for several

days to be able to concentrate on my paper which I was writing for a journal.

Diwali day came but there was no enthusiasm. I came out of my house to buy my daily packet of preserved milk, the first thing I had to do every day in the early hours of the morning. There was a surprise waiting. The house in my front was covered with rows and rows of small bulbs that people decorate their houses with on the occasion of Diwali. I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought that probably since the lady owner of the house in our front believed in showing off, she couldn't resist the temptation to decorate her house for illumination at Diwali night. I dismissed the rather unpleasant thought from my mind that my lady neighbour's love of showing off had the better of her grief.

The evening melted into night. There was no sign of candles or diyas on any house. Even electric illumination on my lady neighbour's house had not been switched off. I was perhaps wrong in my assessment of the lady. Probably, the decorator had received the order for decoration before Ajai's death and he sent his men to decorate her house accordingly. The lady may have forgotten to cancel her order to the decorator. I accused myself of being holier-than-thou. I was touched by the show of neighbourly grief in poor Ram Sajeewan's hour of misfortune. Human beings have a natural tendency to share in each other's grief. I remembered how once crows had descended, nobody knew from where, upon the roadside when a crow had fallen dead from a shot from trigger-happy Mr. Kalra's air gun in my childhood. I went into my study and returned to typing my research paper on my desktop. I had for half an hour when there was a ring of the doorbell. I came out to see who it was. I couldn't trust my eyes. The entire lane was ablaze with light. Several houses had taken care to decorate their houses with closely hung rows of small illumination bulbs. Candles and diyas had appeared in large numbers on all the houses. As I stood disbelieving the shining spectacle, lo and behold, ban bang quickly took over the entire lane. Young men were bursting crackers with glee. Fireworks of every shape and size illuminated the fronts of the houses. There was a mood of gaiety and joy all around. Wasn't it TS Eliot who said in his 'Preludes': *"Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh / The worlds revolve like ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots."*

It took me several minutes to take in the scene. Didn't I know it was Diwali night? The night of celebration. The entire neighbourhood was celebrating the death of the dashing, young Ajai. Poor, unfortunate Ram Sajeewan's Ajai. From somewhere Mathew Arnold's lines swam into my mind: *"In the sea of life enisled / With echoing straits between us thrown / We mortal millions live alone."* Yes, I was living in a large metropolis. Where even death is an occasion for celebration. The death of a good, gentle neighbour's young son. I envied the *joie de vivre* of the celebrators.

