

time. How do you say to two complete strangers:

«My uncle is totally *asetchual*, not only because he's a teetotaller, but because after having been *heather* (hetero, ha!) he became *bike* then *homey*, and now he can't be bothered with any kind of *setchual* shenanigans. Then too, he's quite satisfied with spending most of his free time with his dear lil niece - hey don't even try to think he's a child molestor, he doesn't do pedophilia; first of all I wouldn't let him and second of all, my uncle is a dreamer, not a doer, ok, he's what is known in *literatoity* lingo as a purely plutonic dude - I don't remember Pluto having a girlfriend, do you? Actually, I sometimes believe Unky Berky is a fictitious character, so much so, that I often want to knock one or two of his teeth out, to make sure he is real.»

All the while I was mulling over how I could help Bonka get out of this sorry situation, Boolissa was making doe eyes at him and didn't stop asking him questions, like:

«So, tell me young man - ahem, he's forty-six! - what do you prefer in women, their minds or their bodies?» in that low-pitched toady voice of hers. «Do you fancy 'la femme fatale' or rather the gentle housewife type?» «Being a Parisian, I'm sure you have had a lot of experiences with the sassy kind. I hear men there gallivant like there's no tomorrow, whether they're married or not. Oh, you latin lovers, swashbuckling devils!» And she winked at him like a shameless hussie.

My poor uncle probably forgot all of the latin he learned at school the minute she spoke to him. I call it black hole amnesia. He began to sweat again profusely, in spite of the pleasant little breeze that was now blowing through the drawn curtains.

We were in a real spot and I had to act fast before Bonka disappeared inside his own clothes, coz that's what happens when he can't disentagle himself from a bad situation. Yeah, all of a sudden his clothes seem two sizes too large and all you can see is part of his forehead, with tufts of hair sticking out. He acts like a turtle, with the difference that he can't hide himself entirely, the tip of his shoes also emerging clownishly.

«Yo!» I exclaimed, addressing both women, «my uncle has a new girlfriend, a colleague of his at the post-office where he works, her name is Annette.»

Suddenly *non-pussied*, Unky Berky rolled his eyes like them stoned bozos sprawled on a Turkish sofa with a hookah between their teeth. And before he could conk out, I slipped right next to him and pinched him through his shorts.

«Whoaah tss tss!» he whistled, coming to, while shifting from one buttock to the other on his chair like he wanted to scratch himself.

Locking my gaze into his, furiously, like a schoolmarm, warning her pupil, I said:

«I hope you didn't forget to give Annette our address here, she might get

worried, coz you know how anxious she can get.» And, without waiting for his response, I turned to Boolissa: «She's a very sweet girl, really, the only problem is that she is terribly jealous. She calls him every hour on the hour when my uncle is at home to see what he is up to. Imagine, he even has to tell her when he goes to the loo!»

Boolissa's face was mostly slack now, but she nevertheless let out a muffled roar:

«Errr, don't they live together?»

«No wwwaaay!» I almost shouted, «my uncle needs me by his side after work.» Then, realizing I was being a little patronizing, I added on a softer tone, «Unky Berky and I are like two fingers in a hand (or whatever the expression is), ever since I was a little girl. Isn't that sssooo?» I insisted, sporting a perfect Colgate smile at Bonka, making him well understand that he had better not contradict me, orrrr else.»

My uncle, being used to my frequent about-faces and improvisations during emergencies, like this one, nodded sheepishly. At times tho I babble thru my nostrils, so that I get people confused, which was the case of our hostess and her guest. They must have thought that my uncle was under the spell of some witch - me, for krissakes - and that he was consequently feeble-minded. Gosh, what situations I sometimes get myself into! But thank Goddess, unlike my poor uncle, who can stay *dummy founded* for an *unconscious* stretch of time, I swiftly put two and two together, that make four (and not five or such), which *literatoitily* means that I have what is known as repartee, and *pussy-footed*:

«Mind you, he doesn't brag about it, but my uncle is the most cultured man you've ever met, and without his help, coz he takes me to the movies, to variety shows, to museums, to concerts and even to the opera - shiiit, do I hate them last three -, I would be the boorishest of all ignoramusses.»

A light suddenly shone like a halo around my uncle's face. He was beaming and instantly forgot all the nonsense I mused about his nonexistent Annette, while Yaloni and Boolissa stared at both of us like we had just landed from Galactica.

After that intermission, the talk was all about food, cookies, pretty clothes, Israeli artifacts and such, and, of course, my uncle, the history nerd that he is, asked the two ladies what interesting sites and events we could see and take part in, here in Tel Aviv and around the country. The two dudesses tried to be graceful but had rather longish faces, specially Lady Boolissa, disappointed as she was that Unky Berky was not the latin lover she had expected, rather, that here now stood instead two more friggin useless tourists, who wasted her time and her breath.



The Café Bloomfield

- Sunil Sharma

It was a Café where the strange was the norm.

On my first visit there for the local news channel, I ran into a cast of characters that were a delight. I still carry that wet afternoon in my memory.

They were four. Sitting in four corners of the almost-empty, waterfront-facing little coffeehouse with low-backed furniture, red-painted walls and glass- frontage facing a tossing sea on a wharf. A gentle guitar by Santana played in the background and three young men with perfectly bored faces looked on at the doors and the sea beyond with the calm detachment of the Zen monks.

They were, the customers, self-absorbed, having reduced the spinning universe and orbiting galaxies to a few inches of elevated space just before their eyes and stared fixedly at those revolving spots, the way a Mexican knife-thrower does at a revolving board featuring a female nubile fearless target.

They were all startlingly-strange characters, at least to me. I mean not the usual 9 am-5 pm regular guys who wear to work the crisp white cotton button-downs and a perfume to mask the tropical sweat-smells and regularly pray and do not answer back their boss, but real weird guys. Or, perhaps, I was judging them wrong or with the standards of my judgmental culture that has got fixed notions and decides what is normal and what is queer. Anyway, to continue our story, they were four and vastly different from us. *And that was the real remarkable story.*

One was a bilingual South-Asian poet who continued to compose lines in stilted English, although never published in his short life of 64-years.

Second one was an Australian young female English teacher teaching in an Asian slum a foreign language that no hungry and impoverished kid could ever understand but each helpless child felt personally dominated and fascinated by the gibberish.

The third one, a lonely British banker dad, in his corpulent 50s, waiting to see a fictional kid.

And the fourth one, a nerdy Indian student, a computer software techie in his late 20s, waiting for a head-hunter from USA who did not exist.

No, I am not talking of waiting-for-Godot or Sisyphean-syndrome but real characters hoping for real breakthroughs in impossible social situations.

My brief was brief: Interview them for the hyper- local beat and talk of their hopes and aspirations in an alien mega-city swarming with creatures from red- Mars!

As the camera rolled and lights were on, I talked of the Café Bloomfield, a tiny franchisee from tony Pittsburgh, selling coffee and macaroni to the clients diversified, in a South-Asian city, dreaming of dollars and California dreams.

"Your name, please?" I asked the withered poet looking into the space ahead listlessly, like a deeply-wounded pilot whale in the Taiji Cove, Japan, before being butchered by the whaling fishermen there.

The man smirked. His eyes were the saddest at that moment.

"What name? I am Poet Anonymous. Nobody knows me. Or cares to know me. I am a washed- out guy who writes lines that nobody understands," he said slowly, chewing each word and then spitting it out, sans any rancor or sadness. I was taken aback by this bald response delivered deadpan by this leathery old guy with narrow eyes and a hoarse voice of a chain- smoker. "There are many such poets in other societies also. They cling to their obscurity. Poets are the Unseen of our culture."

"Is it not a paradox? Unseen ones writing? To get Seen by others." I said.

"Unless you are mass, you are zero. You do not exist. In mass society, the poet, serious one, can never be mass. Hence, a zero." Now, that is Einstein talking to a kid in his apartment building, about the general theory of relativity.

"Published?" I asked.

He ha-ha-ed loudly. The hollow laughter echoed on the bare floor like a rolling, scratching brass tumbler of Mogul times and its strained notes jabbed the bored servers behind the counter.

"What a joke!"

I gave a blank expression.

"Who will publish an unknown poet? They have banned poetry and banished all the poets. Plato rules. Porn sells. Not poetry to-day."

Now, it was all Latin again. I regretted the assignment. This man loves to walk in circles. And talk in circles.

"Why write then?" I asked, confused, irritated.

He smiled. "All cities in the world are heavily polluted. You breathe lot of this heavy polluted air and cough and gasp. It does not mean you should stop breathing at all. Poetry, my son, is like that. It keeps you up floating in polluted waters. It saves your damned soul," said he.

"Why English?"

"Because it gives you pounds or dollars and Bookers. For the lucky ones. The rest are doomed and bypassed---like the plebeians of ancient Rome or the proletariats of Tzarist Russia." His voice sounded distant and commanding---like a fast- fading prophet.