

STORY

THORNS CANNOT HURT FLOWERS

KRISHNA

I was never interested in reading newspapers. It was rather an unavoidable luxury to me. I found no need to read it. My reading or knowing will not stop the terrorist attacks or accidents. And about the shouts, speeches and declarations of the politicians, less said the better, because, shouts or declarations will not bring a remedy or relief to any problem. And if they do something, it is not necessary to read a newspaper to know the effect, if it concerns me.



Yet, to buy a newspaper was unavoidable, because in my place, if a person does not buy a newspaper, he would be considered as a miser. And to tell the truth, I was interested to read and laugh at the speeches of leaders after a terrorist attack. Like a comedy item. They will invariably express shock (hollow?) and condemn it, as if such a reaction may bring a change in the attitude of the terrorists, making them think twice before taking a cruel step in future! There will not even be a single word in them which may touch the

minds of the misguided ones, to awaken the frozen emotions like love and mercy and kindness in them. Cartoons of course I like, but they are rare. And sometimes, there will be articles by some cultural heroes and heroines, who happen to believe that their knowledge is beyond space and time, but such 'beyond space and time' language is above my reach.

Anyway, as I had to make payment to the newspaper agent once a month, I used to go through the pages as a routine manner,

especially through the obituaries, to know whether any of my friends or distant relatives has left this world.

As such, on that day too, I was involved in the same exercise that I saw a photograph, which looked familiar. His name was Gowrishankar Prabhu, aged 74 years. I read the report and saw that he is a retiree from the same firm where I had worked. But I could not remember the exact place or period when I had got acquainted with that man.

Although I wanted to forget about him, it was not easy. The thought persisted and at night, when I was about to sleep, it all came to me. The place and the related incident and all.

It all happened about sixteen years ago.

The management of our company had arranged a three days training program to some of the officers. The venue was the conference hall of a big hotel in the capital city. Apart from learning new things and having a refreshing escape from the routine, tiresome jobs for a week, it was also an opportunity to meet old friends and also to make new acquaintances. Although the class was to begin only at 10'o' clock, almost everyone reached by nine. It seemed that everyone had one or two or more friends there except to me, as I had come on transfer only recently from an office outside the state.

I was just looking around that I saw another man enter. A few of them looked at him, but it seemed that he was new to them. He was very tall, with broad shoulders and long arms and healthy body. He came and sat near me. After sometime, I asked his name and he said that it is Ramesh. But when he did not even ask my name, I understood that he is not interested in small talk.

It was about 10'o' clock that another man entered. He was very old, almost on the verge of retirement. His face looked as if he was afraid of the gathering. He moved slowly, being careful not to make any noise. As he was about to sit near Ramesh that one man from the front row turned and saw him.

“Oh, you? You are trying to sit there to hide from us?”

I was flabbergasted! Because, unlike in English, where there is only the word 'you' to address a person, there are different words in our language to address people of different social status, age etc. And the old man was being addressed as if he is of their age! Devoid of any respect, when such a behavior is usually being considered as a vulgar, uncivilized and unethical practice. And this man is an officer in a reputed concern!

Speaking, the front row-man got up. He said something to the man who was sitting near him and both walked towards the old man. They pulled him up and the old man began to shiver literally.

One of them held his arm while the other one tickled him and said:

“Come on. Get up and sit with us. After all we are old friends.”

“Is it not?” Asked the other man.

The old man moaned something. It was very clear that he did not want to go and sit with them.

But the twosome was adamant. They forcibly took him towards the front row calling him names. And they smiled at others, as if they had won a battle.

They made him sit between them and began asking various questions. It began as joke, but gradually became more and more vulgar and insulting. And their sound and laughter went on increasing. All the others were silent, either wondering or enjoying the drama.

Then, to the relief of the old man, the instructor entered. He was a young man with a pleasant face and no non-sense manners. First of all, he introduced himself and then asked the others to do so and then began the class.

At noon, everyone returned after meals. There was about half-an-hour more for the class to begin.

The twosome began again their sharp and nasty comments at the old man. Their voice was so high that everyone stopped talking and began listening to them. This encouraged them further and

their questions and comments became more and more ugly and insulting. And the old man sat helpless between them like Santa Claus between two Dirty Clowns. Jesus between two thieves.

Suddenly, one of them asked in a low, yet audible to all, voice as if it is a secret.

“Where do you stay?”

He said that he was staying in the Blue moon Lodge. It was there where I had also taken room.

“Is she with you?” One of the dirty clowns asked it in such a manner as if the ‘she’ was a cheap, immoral woman. And the old man moved his head in assent.

So this old man is not as simple as that, I thought. Nobody come to attend a three days training with his wife to stay in a small lodge, where she will be constrained to sit alone throughout the day. It never happens. So this oldie has arranged to rendezvous with his keep here. Such an old man cheating his wife!

I felt a little respect towards the two men. They say all this to expose the old boy to others. And he deserves it. To be a womanizer at this age? How dirty and shameless? And I compared this rogue with Santa Claus and Jesus! My God! What a fool I was!

Nevertheless, the next words of the man shocked me.

Turning towards the old man, he said in a low voice, in order to draw the attention of everyone around:

“Do one thing. You go to my room to-day and stay there. I will go to your room. And don’t forget to tell her to wait for me.”

It was too much. Is it the place to discuss such things? The old man was at least hiding it from others, but this fellow is talking about it as if there is nothing wrong in it all.

I looked around. The words had stunned everyone. They were waiting to see the response of the old man.

Then the old man turned his face to one side. And I was shocked to see that his face was wet with tears and he was sobbing.

A few moments passed on. Suddenly Ramesh got up and walked towards the old man. Everyone viewed him with anxiety.

Reaching near the old man, he smiled and said:

“It is so long since we met sir. And only now I saw you. Now come, let us sit there and talk.” He pointed towards the back row.

The old man seemed to hesitate a little, but then he got up and moved with Ramesh to the back row. He sat near me with Ramesh on the other side.

They did not speak anything. And everyone knew that Ramesh had played such a drama to save the old man from the clowns.

The next day, the old man entered along with the instructor at 10’o’ clock as well as at noon. I understood that he did so purposely to avoid the clowns. And it is also to be mentioned to the credit of Ramesh that the clowns did not even look at us.

I did not speak anything to him on that day except to ask his name, which he said as Gowrishankar Prabhu. He asked my name too. But apart from that, we did not speak anything. I could not decide as to whether it is desirable to be friendly with him. At one end of my mind was she; the cheap, immoral woman. And at the other end was the sobbing Gowrishankar Prabhu. Which is the real one?

In the evening, I had to do some shopping and so I reached my lodge after nightfall. And there, in front of my adjacent room, I saw Prabhu standing, as if waiting for someone.

We smiled to each other and I said the reason for my delay just as a formality.

“Last night, I had seen you in this room. But you were engaged in reading that I did not want to disturb.” He said.

I opened the door and invited him inside. But he did not enter inside, but stood at the verandah and asked me:

“Have you taken tea?”

“Yes.” I said.

“Then let us go to my room and talk.” He said and walked towards his room.

I thought for a while as to whether to go with him. Is it right to go and meet such a woman, especially in the presence of her paramour? But will it not be like insulting him, if I do not accept his invitation?

I decided to go. After all, it is only my guess from the loose talk of two clowns that there is such a woman. And if such a woman is really there, who is going to prevent me from leaving the room then and there?

He was standing near the door, waiting for me. And when I reached, he moved inside.

I entered inside and looked around.

The woman was indeed there. But she was not as I had expected.

It was an old lady, almost as old as Prabhu, with hair gone grey. She was lean and tall and had the color of sandalwood. She was wearing a white cotton sari and had no ornaments except two or three bangles and a very small wed-lock chain. She wore sandalwood paste on her forehead and had the vermilion mark above it. There was a pleasant smile on her lips which mingled with the luster of the face, to give almost a divine touch to her.

She got up as I entered in. She looked very happy having a guest.

Prabhu turned to her and said:

“This is Albert.” And turning towards me he continued: “This is my wife Janaki.”

So it was about his wife that the clowns were making such dirty comments. But how could he tolerate it? If they had said those words to another person, they would have lost a few teeth, no doubt. But this poor man is unable to do anything of that sort and they knew it well. Probably they know him for a long time to dare to say such words.

“Please sit down.” Prabhu said to me.

“Shall I prepare some tea?” The lady asked.

“No. Thanks. I took tea just now.” I said.

We sat silent for some time, as if not knowing how to continue with the talk. After sometime, the lady said, laughing:

“You are sitting like two strangers in a railway station, waiting for the train to come.”

Her remark made me laugh.

Then she began to ask me about my place, my family and children and about the places where I was working earlier. And he went on adding some or other information for our benefit.

Gradually I began to feel that she is asking these questions, not only to know about me, but as a means of entertaining me, treating me as a very close relative on a visit. Her words had the fragrance of affection and pure love.

“Do you know that she is a poet?” Asked Prabhu.

“And he is a marvelous story-teller.” She said.

I looked at them with admiration.

“I make-up stories and tell them only to her.”

“And he is the only person who has read my poems.”

She got up and brought a note-book and gave it to me. And I opened it.

There were a few poems in it written by her. The handwriting was very beautiful. I read one of them. It was not very great or something like that, yet it was beautiful. I turned the pages. Almost all poems were about the innocent pleasures of life.

“They are all beautiful.” I remarked.

“Naturally.” She smiled. “You cannot say otherwise, because it is a question of formality.”

“Not like that. They are really beautiful.”

So far I had not asked anything about them. In fact, I had no idea as to how to begin and continue a conversation with strangers. But good mannerism demands such a conversation. So I asked:

“Where is your native place?”

He said the place name and added: “We both are from there.”

“Relatives before marriage?”

“No. But from the same village.”

I wanted to ask whether theirs was a love marriage, but abstained from asking such a question to them.

“You want to know whether ours was a love-marriage. No?” She asked gleefully.

I was wonderstruck! How could she guess it?

“It is a natural question and everyone asks it, as we are from the same village. And I read it in your eyes.”

“And the answer is a perfect ‘No’. We had not even seen each other before marriage.” He said.

“You come together to attend every training?”

“Not only training. We go everywhere together.” He continued.

“After all, what is the use in one person sitting alone at home?”

“Children?”

“No. We have no children?”

“Oh. I am sorry.” I said.

“What for?” He asked.

“That too is a formality.” She said. “But we are not aggrieved at it.”

“It is the poet’s mind. She says that it is our luck.”

“Don’t make him misunderstand that I hate children.” She said. “But sometimes I feel that we are lucky because when the others have only one or two children, we have all the children of the world as our own.”

I went on looking at her. And she continued, as if speaking to herself:

“In the beginning, we were also disappointed. Having a child of our own seemed the only purpose in life. And the sympathy of the relatives and neighbors was intolerable. But when we thought about it seriously, we saw the other side of the issue.”

I waited for her to continue, but she did not.

After some time, I asked him: “Were you with Ramesh somewhere?”

“No. I saw him only on yesterday. Yet, I am very thankful to him. He saved me from those mad people.”

“I wonder why they were speaking like this.”

“It is their nature. They have no qualms about telling anything about anyone, if there is an audience. They want to be in the limelight and for that purpose they will speak anything about anyone, even about people whom they do not know at all provided the victim is not capable to retaliate and there are listeners to enjoy. Sadism at its worst, as a few of our colleagues used to say.”

“Were you with them somewhere?”

“Yes. We were together for more than six years.”

“Oh. That is why they selected you to crack jokes about.”

“Joke?” He said angrily. “How can anyone take it as a joke? Asking me to permit them to spend a night with my wife?”

I felt embarrassed. I would not have brought it up in front of her.

“Don’t worry.” She said. “He has told me everything. But he could have stopped them then and there by just agreeing to their suggestion.”

“What?” I almost jumped up. What does she mean.....?

“That is how it happens. They would never have expected such a reply and they would not dare to utter a single word more.”

“That is correct.” I agreed, having relieved of the tension. “By the way, did she ever meet them?” I asked him.

“No.”

“If they had met her once, they would never have made such a dirty comment.” I said.

“Why?” She asked curiously.

“That I know. By the way, I could not understand the meaning of what you said earlier. That it is luck to have no child.”

“I did not mean that. What I meant is that having a child does not necessarily make a couple happy. Anything can happen. The child’s sickness, untimely death and even his becoming a constant pain to the parents. If childless couples remember this aspect, they won’t feel so unlucky. On the other hand they have one privilege.”

“What?”

“With a little effort, a couple without children can see all the children of the world as their own. But others cannot. And the pleasure of being able to see all children as one’s own cannot be explained. It is to be experienced.”

“That is why she is my kaleidoscope.” He said smiling.
 “And he is my periscope.”

I could not understand what they meant.

“You could not follow, No? I will explain. Whenever I happen to be alone here while he is out, I see the world outside only through him, as if I am sitting in a submarine. Seeing the space above water through a periscope.”

“And I call her the kaleidoscope because she can find beauty in any situation and explain it to me. Like a small stone or glass piece becoming a beautiful picture inside a kaleidoscope.”

“After all, what is the use in seeing something as ugly?” She said.

“If you are not busy, I will show you something?” Said Prabhu to me.

She looked at him as if asking what it is and in reply, he took the note book containing her poems and showed her the last page. Then he gave it to me.

“Read it.” He said.

It was a small article titled ‘LIFE’.

‘What is meant by living? I often wonder. We are all living beings. That means we experience living. But out of all that we experience, what is it that can be named as living?’

A person gets up in the morning and does a lot of work. He gets ready, takes food, go to office or work at home or somewhere else to earn his livelihood, that is, to earn something which is necessary to live. That which is essential for living. To have Food, shelter and clothes for living. And the person returns home in the evening, again does something essential to live and then sleeps. Everything he does for living. BUT DOING SOMETHING FOR LIVING DOES NOT MEAN LIVING. Then, when he is actually living?

I pondered over it for hours together. I asked him also, but he too could not give a reply.

But today, it is becoming obvious to me.

