

Inspiration

A few days back while dusting and cleaning my old papers, I came across an old letter – a letter that was engulfed in a dense fog of mystery. It was from Germany and was written in English. It ran like this.

“Dear _____,

I felt greatly comforted on receiving your phone call yesterday. It is quite something that you have understood the importance of the matter. Whatever, it won't be correct to delay any further. I will be at the SFA office (room No. 3, telephone no. 70105) on Tuesday till 4.30 in the evening; meet me by any means within this time. I am giving the address below.

Yours,
Robert, Monday, 5th February

PS.: Come at all cost!!”

There were two exclamatory marks at the end of the postscript. In German, this indicates that it is “urgent” or ‘to be remembered’. There was a small-hand drawn map beneath it of a small lane, Barfuture-gausse, which was leading out of Wienderstrasse, the main street of the city. Cafe Ludwigg was marked on the map by a rectangular inset. An arrow running through it showed that the SFA office was located on the floor above it.

Picking up the paper, I walked out into the sun on the veranda and sat there for a long time, looking at the letter. The paper had the moist stain of time and the letters on it were beginning to fade away. In the left corner was the rusty imprint of a paper clip. Robert. Robert Goldsmith or Bob in short. An American boy. While studying in America he had to join military service and had, therefore, gone to stay at a German camp with Russian soldiers. He somehow managed to take leave from the military services for two and a half years and had gone to the university city to complete his study. After completing his degree in psychology he wanted to do a doctorate in the subject. I met him in Germany for a few days. How we became so close, that is of course, another story. But we became quite close, almost inseparable. He used to receive regular salary from the military. Besides, he used to get a grant too. As he had very minimal uncalled for expenditure he always had money in abundance. My condition was not always sound; I had to borrow money frequently. Therefore, I made him my local *Kabuliwallah*, moneylender (I did not pay him any interest.)

I sat contemplating for a long time – I just could not recall what this most urgent piece of work was. The year was also not mentioned, I could not guess as to when all this had occurred. Scenes of Wienderstrasse, the main street of the city came floating to my mind; I could also recall Barfuture gausse, leading out of it and the gray, ancient, high-rise buildings on it. I also recalled the small, hazy, smoke-filled, jam-packed Cafe Ludwigg, the favourite haunt of students. Bob and I sometimes went there for coffee, ‘wurst’(sausage) or beer. I recall now that in the upper floor there was a semi-government Research Institution, “SFA”, which in German was the abbreviated form for Social Science Research Institute. I cannot recall at all whether I had ever visited the office above Cafe Ludwigg” – I seem to recall a few indistinct images of some place resembling an office, yes, some such images seem to be coming to my mind... coming to my mind ...

What was this very urgent problem? Of course Robert had a lot of problems – his small, domestic problems, problems pertaining to his leave from army, problems relating to the finding of a comfortable house along with an appropriate landlady; many thought him to be a Hebrew because of his surname Goldsmith - that was a nuisance of a problem. He had differences with an accomplished faculty member of the department of Psychology - that was quite a major problem etc. I was a good listener; with me he could jabber away without any restraint; he would be satisfied if I ‘hemed’ and ‘huhed’ at the right places. And I also recall that in those days because of a series of incidences, he had got emotionally involved with a ‘Germanistic’ student; in other words, he was yoked into a sort of love relationship; but whatever it was, it was not something simple. (Had it

been, how would it be a problem?) All those complicated narratives, perhaps, he felt enthused to tell me only. And perhaps that is why the two of us were so intimate. Perhaps this letter was something pertaining to that. The girl's name was Renate. I had not met Renate. She had a sister named Erica. I had not met her also. I had seen her from a distance. Robert wished to introduce me to both of them. Thus, it would suit the four of us to go hither and thither on dates. It can be quite disquieting for two girls and a boy to go out on a date. You don't get the opportunity to keep the sister at a distance. He wanted to take me to their house, to the cinema, for a stroll, to a dance - but there was no limit to my own problems. Over and above, I had no desire to get involved personally in Robert's intricate love affair. I wasted time, patiently listening to his narrative - wasn't that enough. Seeing my detached attitude it wasn't as if he didn't get irritated. He told me one day, "I know you down to your bones; don't try to fool me. Do you deny that you too are made of flesh and blood?"

"Yes, made of flesh and blood," I said. "But your blood is, perhaps, hotter than mine."

"Nonsense. People need companions in their young age; they want girl friends. I crave; you too crave for one - yes or no?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Perhaps!" Here Robert uttered an unspeakable, unprintable word. "But, till date, I haven't been able to find any clue of you having a girlfriend - or do you have one stashed away somewhere?"

"No, no buddy; I have none with me"

"To hell with you. I am sure you feel the necessity of having a girlfriend. Do you deny this?"

I shook my head to indicate that I did not deny it.

"Do you deny that Erica is a beautiful girl? Erica is an excellent girl, a very nice girl - do you deny that? You have seen her many times, I am sure you desire her companionship - can you deny that? You have yourself said that she is beautiful, smashing, she has tremendous sex appeal - do you deny that?"

"No, No. The question of denying does not arise. She's terrific."

"Then why this hypocrisy? In spite of the fact that I have offered to introduce her to you, I do not understand why you do not have the courage to face her.

"Look Bob," I replied quietly. "You know I am slightly shy by nature ..."

"Shy, huh! The description you gave of Erica the other day - it is no less than Ovid's *Erotica*. Your description and pornography, they are one and the same thing. This is what you call being shy! Actually you are carnal ..."

"Theoretically, buddy, theoretically. Practically I am still"

"That means you are starving but you do not have the guts to search out the food; you do not want to go near. You will describe from afar only like a bloody litterateur"

I had never told Robert that like a 'bloody litterateur' I too secretly tried to write something at times. Reading my mind he had almost correctly guessed that my secret desire was to study people from a distance and make them into characters in my stories. I greatly hesitate to become personally involved. By the by, I would like to mention that later on Erica had found her way into one of my stories; but she is an entirely different person there - whatever Robert had said about my description of Erica, that was obviously poetic. In the story there is absolutely no trace of that. Therefore, his description of me as a carnal being is perhaps not wrong; but on the other hand whatever little I have understood of myself, I am actually a materialistic being. I recall that in those days I had hurriedly written a story titled *Asanta Electron*. The inspiration behind the story was neither the desire to reform society, nor the craving to sketch a picture of a genuinely religious and social life, nor the 'sublimation' of a suppressed, sexual desire. The inspiration was the mere thirty rupees of prize money. (During those days thirty rupees was a lot of money.) Even today when I receive a request for a story the first thing that comes to my mind, "Oh *Monideepa*, perhaps I will be given around twenty-five. Or *Prakasikha* - perhaps they will give about fifty. Or *Asom Jeuti Bihu Sankhya* - maybe sometime in the distant future they may give something - what is the

point in writing for them?" And after the story was published when I received the envelope with the name of the magazine written on it, I held the letter in my hand and weighed it, considering whether it had a cheque enclosed inside it?

In other words, I am a greedy person; but is money the only inspiration behind writing? No, the inspiration actually is a pressing pressure, a demand. The editor's pressure. The editor's personal arrival, his letter, a telephone call, followed by another letter and an early morning thirst-filled demand from him, "No time. Want it by any means within the 24th", etc ... as if the auspicious moment would pass by. I am forced to sit down and create something. If somebody were to ask, "Under what pressure did you write this?" without hesitation I would reply, "The editor's pressure; couldn't get rid of him; was helpless." But then I have had to write for such magazines which do not pay a *paisa* to save themselves (and they eventually die). I had stayed abroad for sometime – it was not possible to send me money there. But I could not disregard the editor's letter. I wrote for them knowing that I would not receive a *paisa*. Another magazine – did not talk about money. They would regularly send a free monthly or fortnightly issue of the magazine. I sold these to the scrap-dealer to get a paltry amount. But I also knew this that if the editor's living form were to appear in my accommodation not only would I not be able to talk to him about money but that I would end up saying "okay I will write something and send it by the 15th". Therefore, I can briefly say that the inspiration behind my literary life is a pressure, in other words, the editor's pressure. This pressure is a writer's instantaneous reason. It is a mere switch, which opens the current of writing; it is not the dynamo or the real source. Where is the real dynamo? In other words, what is the real inspiration behind this pressure? My flesh and blood nature? True. But if I look at my stories I will find very little of this in them. And right, my materialistic nature has also minimal influence in them. Then what is the real pressure?

I have not yet been able to solve the mystery surrounding Robert's letter. He had some urgency for fixing this appointment with me at the SFA office that day. He had even drawn a map so that I would not make a mistake in locating the address. He had given his telephone number and added a postscript to his letter so that the urgency of the matter was conveyed. What was the reason behind this urgent call I too knew that day, for he had written that I had spoken about it with him the previous day. But the important life and death matter of that day - where is it submerged and lost today? Only this disintegrating piece of paper stands witness to that perplexing pressure. I frown trying to recall, I sweat trying to recall – there is no doubt that this effort will bring back everything to my mind someday, just like going back to my past will bring back to my mind what pressure had inspired my first writings. But of course there are lots of influences, lots of incidents; therefore, it will not be a very easy task.

(Radio Talk)