

## Homeward bound

What sped swiftly past the window were two broad clumps of something pale red and bright but what did not dazzle the eyes. Perhaps they were bougainvillea, perhaps a cassia of some kind or bastard teak. After that, there was a confusion of trees-leaves-creepers-thorns and then suddenly a patch of open space, a bamboo fencing and behind it an enclosure of some kind made of branches and leaves as though someone was trying to screen off an area. Beyond all this was a small L-type single-storey house. The roof was probably of red tiles over black wooden beams and white walls. Amid the green of the velvety lawn were scattered here and there a few ridged flower beds creating a riot of colour. Some kind of yellow flowers covered the wall of the front room right up to the edge of the door frame so that within the wide courtyard the house looked like a small dolls house. At a cursory glance the house appeared to have small doors, windows and skylights. The white net curtains of the house fluttered inwards in the morning breeze. It seemed as though one could hear the flapping of the curtains even amid the rumbling of the train. One caught a fleeting glance of a photograph hanging on the wall of the front room or a bit of embroidery and a vague impression of a low wardrobe. Towards the end of the bamboo fencing someone had parked a bicycle against the fence. And then the fence came to an end, the house disappeared and outside the windows of the train there was again a long stretch of trees and forests.

It was not an exceptional house nor a very beautiful one, but some impulsive outburst of praise seemed to reach one's ears in the words, "Oh, what a fine house, I say!" One did not remember who made that excited observation or when. It might have been a child, it might have been even me or some old beloved one. Or perhaps one of us had seen such a scene of a beautiful house in one of those bygone days when the cares of family life had not made us withdraw into ourselves, at a time when we were capable of becoming spontaneously wonder-struck—in the pages of some magazine, in front of the cinema screen or when travelling somewhere in a car—one cannot recall where. But it was as though within that short span of time when the house appeared before our eyes and very swiftly disappeared again, sleep had left our eyes and it seemed as though we were overwhelmed and mesmerized, and as though the one among us who had liked the house felt like having a similar house with its courtyard, trees-plants-flowers-creepers, fluttering curtains, breeze in the rooms, a certain warmth in the house and a general sense of well-being....

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The train had left Nidanpur station only about a minute ago. The news of the day having dawned had wafted into the compartments with the cries of hawkers selling tea and cigarettes. The people in the sleeping coaches were beginning to wake up one by one and were making their beds in the disorganized compartment with the floor strewn with peanut shells, banana peels, cigarette packets, small earthen teacups and an amazing variety of garbage. There were diverse sounds of people brushing their teeth, washing their faces and gargling or making enquiries about tea. The night had been oppressively hot and no one had been able to sleep very well. A few passengers near me had played bridge noisily late into the light. On the berths behind me too some persons had been arguing excitedly in the Bhojpuri language. In the other corner of the compartment an infant of some family had cried its heart out all night and ruined everyone's sleep time and again. The bald old gentleman in the berth directly opposite mine who must have woken up long ago (or perhaps he hadn't slept at all last night) was looking outside through his thick glasses. He looked at me once and put on something like a smile on his face, but didn't say anything. The gentle breeze of the morning was coming in through the windows and perhaps he was

trying to enjoy the breeze silently. I had every reason to be happy, because last night he had annoyed me a long time. He had far surpassed the transient and superficial intimacy that arises between fellow passengers and bored me for a long time with many details of his personal life. I did not have the least inclination of starting the day with what he had to say right from the morning. He'd told me that his eldest son would have been almost my age if he had been around. No, he hadn't said that his son was dead, but only that he didn't know where he was. He had also told me that his son's physique was much like mine—but how annoying (so I thought) that he should inflict all he had to say on a stranger and bore him to death for just that reason. He was a man from Haryana who had come from Hissar and was going to Munger. He used to work in the Central Revenue Accounts and had retired long ago. He was a widower. He had no end of regrets. One was that he had married off his daughter at a very tender age. His wife had objected. She's so still so young, she hasn't finished her studies; let her at least complete her BA she had said. But he did not heed her objections. He insisted that they had found a good bridegroom for her and that these responsibilities should not be put off; the sooner the better; such opportunities did not come every day. But even before four years had gone by, the girl had become a widow with two children. For years he had debated on whether remarriage of a widow was proper or not and now it was almost time for him to leave the world. He couldn't look at his daughter's face without a wrench in his heart, but even today he could not get rid of the doubt in his mind that perhaps if he had listened to his wife and not married off his daughter at that time, perhaps today... but the moment of his mistake was not going to return, time always flowed forward, nothing could be changed, time's flow could not be obstructed, it had no return... And his older son....

Those were his problems, I thought to myself irritably. Let him do what he wants to with them; there is no need for me to get worked up over them. I have my own problems, and I have to think of them; I haven't tried to inflict my problems on him. For over a year now, I have been suspended from my job. As an immediate consequence, all my additional amenities have gone. Relatively speaking, these are my days of want and hardship. In place of an air-conditioned government quarter, I now live in a small, inconvenient rented house. Instead of air travel, I have to be content with trains and buses. I had been to Faridabad to see if I could find an opening in an industry that a former Punjabi contractor known to me from my Sivasagar days had started. Besides, he also owed me a lot of money—not clean money at all—but my efforts had not been successful. I was returning from that trip. I'm still trying to figure out what I should do after this.

Here I am, unable to extricate myself from the labyrinth of my own thoughts, and here is this old man literally sitting on my shoulders. He once asked me what I did for a living. I was in business, I said. This white lie came out of me quite effortlessly (it has become a sort of habit now). What kind of business, he wanted to know. Oh, this and that, order supplies, commission agency, miscellaneous, I said. Oh, you young people have a lot of enterprise and energy; you should carry on, the old man said. (I was almost afraid that he would start off with maxims like prosperity arising from business, and so on.) His son too, he said, would be my age by now. He too had a lot of energy and enterprise, the old man added. He too would certainly be doing something somewhere—he was not the type to die of hunger.

His eldest son was tall, strong and full of life, but with no interest whatsoever in studies. His only interest was seeing movies—sometimes even two or three a day. He came to know from others that his son actually wanted to go to Bombay. He wanted to be a film star. He failed in his higher secondary examination, and the old man had given him a terrible dressing down. He had told his son that as long as he lived in his paternal home, the first priority had to be studies. Then he could decide on what he wanted to be—a hero in the film world or a gatekeeper at a cinema hall. He didn't know what happened after that, but the

very next day the boy left home and went away somewhere. He put out advertisements in newspapers and slides in cinema halls begging him to come back and assuring him of all help to get into films. He even announced that his mother was on her deathbed. He himself went to Bombay, moved around the vicinity of the film studios and engaged people to look for his son, but there was no trace. All that he had done was to have failed in an examination. Where was the major crime in this failure? Didn't thousands of students fail in exams every year? As for getting into films, didn't almost 100 per cent of our youths nurse ambitions of becoming heroes and heroines of the film world? Was that something so terribly objectionable? As a father, he should have shown sympathy for his son's ambitions and helped him along the path of life without leaving any scars on his mind. Would God ever give him an opportunity to rectify his mistakes and atone for his lack of empathy? The old man said that deep in his heart he had the firm belief that God would give him such an opportunity because he had not done harm to his children knowingly. Whatever he had done was out of his belief that he was acting in their best interests. But that juncture, that moment of crisis at which the son's mind alienated itself from him... can that moment ever come back again? Can time ever return? So many years had gone by. Maybe he wouldn't be able to recognize his son even if he saw him now. But even today, in crowds of people, especially among groups of young men, the old man peered through his thick glasses and cocked his ears to listen if any of the voices seemed familiar to him.

I was feeling uncomfortable. After all, what could one say in reply to all this? These words had been spoken till very late last night. Perhaps the old man had got into the habit of saying these things to anyone he found near him. Perhaps he did not have peace of mind unless he did this or perhaps he could not help doing it. People travel when they have work to do or to enjoy themselves; they do not travel to hear heart-rending tragedies. What made matters worse was the terrible heat and noise in the compartment, the dead fans, the dim lights, the cloud of cigarette smoke and the smell of perspiration, the unceasing litany of the old man in my ears that caused the wrinkles on my forehead to form a cluster and my temper to be frayed and made the old man keep drinking cup after plastic cup of water from his flask until he finished it. In fact, at the very next station I had got down to refill his flask with drinking water but had remained standing on the platform until the train started moving merely to get some respite from the old man's company for at least a few moments. Here was an intolerant old man who had refused to listen to anyone, who had created calamities in the lives of his children as a consequence and was now bemoaning his fate to all manner of unknown people! I realized that the old man had committed many terrible mistakes, but what had to happen had happened. Where was the justification of inflicting all this on others whether they wanted to listen to him or not? Who does not make mistakes? I too had an excellent career. After having remained an assistant engineer for about two years in small divisions of small outlying towns, I had been able to go to Sweden for a year's training. On my return, I had had endless promotions as project engineers in Namrup and Duliajan and so on. It was only my crazy urge to swell my bank balance by hook or by crook that eventually ruined my career. The Anti-corruption Branch was obliged to file an adverse report. Maybe those were my mistakes. Maybe I overstepped all limits. But do I have to burn in the fires of repentance all my life? The old man's conviction is that God would give him the opportunity to mend all his mistakes and to commit penance for what he had done. All one needed was faith and patience. And it was for the exercise of faith and patience that he was now travelling to Munger. Close to Munger was a monastery of Swami Satyananda Saraswati. An old friend and colleague of his had become a resident of the monastery after his retirement many years ago. He had invited the old man to join him there. Perhaps he would spend the rest of his days in the monastery in meditation and prayer. He would have peace of mind, the layer of filth on his mind would get wiped off and he would see the right path...

Irrelevant humbug without a doubt! A fool's paradise! Time never returns, and there isn't the least bit of use regretting this. The freedom of my comfortable old job had come to an end and none of it will ever come back—at least not in the same form. The headstrong life cycle of this old man had come to an end in Haryana and he would not return there. He was rushing towards a monastery.

In the half-asleep condition induced by the swaying of the train, the old locations of my service days were coming to mind in bits and pieces. Suddenly, waking up after a more powerful jerk, I found that the train had stopped at a small station. In the berths behind mine the arguments in Bhojpuri had come to an end and the card-players had all fallen asleep. Even the indomitable infant seemed to have declared a temporary ceasefire. But leaning on the window the old man had narrowed his eyes and was looking at the almost dark platform as though he was trying to take a better look at a known person. When I woke up again much later at night, the train was still stationary, the man on the upper berth was still reading a magazine and asking someone else on another upper berth why the train had halted in the middle of a field and the other person was telling him that perhaps the 17 Up Varanasi Express was about to cross. But even then the old man, with a face devoid of any curiosity, was looking through the window at the impenetrable darkness.

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... But as soon as we had gone past the house, there was at once a doubt in my mind: is this possible? Could this be the house that had made someone shout in exultation? Was the house the one that one of our kin had seen on some highway of the past, was the picture one that some unremembered dear one had seen in some old magazine at a time when we had no hesitation about expressing sources of simple amazement, when a cautious life had not been weighed down by our blunders? Exactly this picture? Almost this picture? Ah, if I could see that house just once more, only once, just once... A keen sense of longing instantly and suddenly suffused my mind, it was as though the whole body had become numb and almost simultaneously I blinked my eyes, let out a short breath, shook myself and sat up. No, that house would not return again—in fact, that house had come into the consciousness of life only for a few moments and had receded, just as adolescence and youth had receded just like old faces, the small towns, Sweden, Namrup, Duliajan, Faridabad visited just two days ago and the Nidanpur station left behind a few minutes ago—universal nature was ever forward moving, the current of time ceaselessly unidirectional and unchangeable....

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Suddenly there was a metallic screech of wheels skidding over tracks, the long whoosh of vacuum brakes opening and the train stopped. But there was no station. On both sides of the tracks were huge expanses of dried fields glimmering in the sun and a cacophony of different human voices. In ones and twos, people were getting off the train. There were the uniformed guard and ticket checkers and someone who looked like a pointsman. The passengers who had got down from the train had formed small groups with everyone raising the curious question of what might have happened. Perhaps there was a crossing—some train would pass—but where? There were no signal posts or anything of that kind. This was the middle of open fields. Someone had pulled the chain. Pulled the chain? Why? What had happened? No, something serious had happened. Two persons had fallen from the train—no, no, three. Three persons? No, just two. Good heavens! What a terrible thing! Yes, how careless! True, but the railways too are so callous! Always there is so much of overcrowding. They see it all, but no one gives a damn. Where did the two men fall? How far away? No, not too far away. Just after we passed the distant signal of the station. The

guard was saying something. He was signalling to the passengers get back on to the train. Suddenly there was a long whistle followed by two short bursts. Then there was a gust of smoke from the engine and a *whoosh whoosh* sound. The train was moving slowly backward. The persons who had fallen would have to be picked up and taken right back to the station.