

Seeking the Centre

The train from Amsterdam pulled up at the platform. Some passengers got down and others boarded the train, after which the train left. There were about three hours still left for the arrival of the Amersfoort train. I returned to my own thoughts on Assamese literature and sat down on a bench.

It was certainly odd to think about Assamese literature on a platform of the Rotterdam station. It was Biman's letter which was the cause of this mismatch. The letter had arrived just before I left England. I pulled it out from my pocket and started to read it once again. Biman had written that he was getting married to the youngest daughter of Golok Bordoloi. The girl was eighteen, and she had just appeared for her matriculation examination. I could not decide whether I should laugh or cry. Biman, that donkey, was getting married!

The letter was in English (we probably believed thoughts could not be expressed faithfully in Assamese; so we used English instead). Biman had written: You will probably be surprised to suddenly receive a letter from me after a gap of about five years. I had to write the letter to give you a special message; lest I again get your unfailing rebuke (it meant he still remembered my verbal abuses!)... I do not know how you will react to the news, but I am getting married to the youngest daughter of Golokchandra Bordoloi of Dibrugarh on the 28th.

I hoped the proposed marriage would bring an end to his numerous and frequent affairs. "Perhaps you still remember my past affairs..." (Remember? I doubt whether my hearing was really restored after the incessant blah-blah of the Romeo in shorts). His accounts were not only an outrage on my nerves, I could probably still feel the pain in my limbs. God, how many Juliets of Guwahati he trailed, with me following him on his dilapidated bicycle! Now, he had at least the sense to convey the last scene to his Benvolio. However, I could not understand why this obstinate fellow wanted to get married at all. But Horatio, so many unusual things do occur on the earth and in heaven....

But what did Assamese literature have to do with all this? There is no point being impatient. Apart from conveying the news of his marriage, Biman had also written about me and Paresh. I do not know how your literary life is progressing, he wrote. Please do not mind, I am not much in touch with literature. You are aware that I do not understand literature, (this is not Biman's modesty; I still fail to understand how he managed to pass the Assamese and the English papers without cheating. In fact, it is hard to find a bone-dry Romeo like him). I happened to meet your elder sister in Jorhat last December and came to know the latest about you. I heard that you might leave Shepherds Bar **and go to Germany** in a few days. She also told me that you had not written any new stories in the last five years. I do not know why you have given up writing despite your keen interest in literary activities. I have not met Paresh for a long time. Now he is a headmaster in Korjhar. I hear that he is still into writing....

If the news of Biman's marriage was like the sound of a bomb blast, the news of Paresh becoming a headmaster was at least like the sound of a bursting tyre to me. It was not that Paresh and Biman were compatible with each other, but it was not possible for Biman to avoid Paresh since he was always by my side. It would always be me to listen to his rambling talk, to console him (his affairs always ended in 'tragedies'), to correct the spelling and the sentence structure in his love letters and to provide Shakespeare's 'quotations'. Biman would always stick to me like a leech (but I must admit, he diligently used to foot my tea and cigarette expenses). On the other hand, 'poor' Paresh—the passionate story-writer Paresh — he had nobody to discuss his stories with. So he used to get hold of me and explain that every author had one or another defect in 'style' and 'technique' and 'form' and thousands of such other weird things; these defects afflicted everybody from Dostoyevsky and Barnard Shaw to D. F. Karaka and Sayed Abdul Malik. I had not come across another ruthless critic like him. I must have had infinite patience — I can take pride in it — otherwise how could my ears tolerate such incessant verbal onslaughts? It was not easy to control the duo, since Paresh thought falling in love at the drop of a hat was a sign of mental disorder and wanted to take Biman to a psychiatrist; while Biman himself used to lose his cool at the hint of anything related to literature. Both of them were in a state of perpetual mutual hatred, ready for a duel on the slightest pretext.

Another train pulled up at the platform. A local train. It would not go far. I noticed that a lot of people had meanwhile gathered at the station, and three huge boys in leather shorts and green half-sleeved shirts were making a dash for the train. A bald gentleman put down his bag and coat, and sat down to my right. He pulled out a watch from his chest pocket, synchronized it with the platform clock, lit his pipe and started reading a newspaper. A lady, pushing a perambulator, stopped to my left, sat down and started to bottle-feed the baby. A gigantic woman, wrapped in a fur coat and with a black dog towed by a huge chain stood in front of me and obstructed my view. In front of me people moved hurriedly around, with sound of their shoes on the floor. Two little children quarrelled over

something and the suckling baby to my left started to cry with all its might. The station turned noisy.

I looked at the newspaper that the bald gentleman was reading and realized that it was the 23rd of the month. That meant there were just five days left to Biman's wedding. I would definitely have to write a letter so that it reached him by the 28th. I should reach Hannover by midnight. I did not have any idea where I would put up. If Bibhuti failed to show up at the station, I would have a tough time finding a hotel. I would also be very tired. And I had lot of work tomorrow. And yet if I did not write the letter by today or tomorrow, it would never reach Biman in time — it took at least four days for a letter to reach India. I must start writing the letter; there was enough time for my train. I pulled out the writing pad from my pocket.

Some peace returned to the platform after the train had left, and I tried to write the letter. I wrote (in English, of course): Dear Biman, I am rather late in replying to your letter. All those preparations to leave for Germany—passport, traveller's cheques and things like that—kept me busy. I couldn't find time. Please don't mind... It really felt very good (and that was true) to receive your letter after such a long time.... I am very happy (perhaps that was also true, but partially) to learn about your marriage.... I am waiting for the train at the Rotterdam station — had to take this route after I missed the Hannover train at the Hook of Holland....

I could not think of what to write next. Meanwhile, the baby had stopped crying and so its mother concentrated on a women's magazine after putting the baby in the perambulator. The gentleman to my right had folded the newspaper and started to clean his pipe. The mountain in front of me had vanished. It was now replaced by a young couple laughing and eating chocolates. I left the bench, started pacing to and fro, hands in pocket, trying to figure out what to write. I passed the book stalls and newspaper kiosks on the platform several times. I could recognize some of the titles on display — either from the titles themselves or from the names of the authors (Dutch appeared to have considerable similarity with English and German). God, who could have thought that there was such a huge body of books, magazines and newspapers in Dutch?

I listlessly tried to recollect the names of the Assamese daily and weekly newspapers. It seemed I did not know many names. Was I becoming more and more like Biman? Oh yes, I had almost forgotten that I had to finish the letter. 'I heard that you did not write a single story during the last five years?' — Was he teasing me? He used to predict that our — Paresh and mine — "most impractical" enthusiasm of becoming writers, doing literature, that too in Assam, would not last long. This would be swept away by the "practical" things of life (who calls whom 'impractical!') Perhaps he was now a practical, established physician. Was it an attitude like: 'Did I not tell you long ago that you would not be able to do much literature?' Or was it a ridicule like: 'Aspiring to become a writer is a sign of adolescence...now you know that, don't you? What an ass! What about Paresh? He was still going great guns!

I sauntered a few more times in front of the bookstalls; and memories of Paresh kept coming to my mind. The sight of books used to give pleasure to Paresh. He must have read the English version of most of these books. He was a mild-tempered guy; and the only person with whom he had problem was Biman. Paresh was the ever-smiling dear fellow, always ready to help others, what they call "the obliging type"; always in a check shirt, a pair of worn-out slippers, with pencil in hand and loads of irrelevant papers in pocket. He had a 'sweet' face (my elder sister's description of Paresh), but the face always had the shadow of two days' stubble (Biman used to say it belied his imagination how a face with stubble could possibly be 'sweet'). Biman was just the opposite: always clean shaven, new clothes, usually trousers, but in *dhoti* and Nehru jacket during those special escapades, a strong-scented oil on hair (he was of the opinion that I did not have a nose for fragrance). I guessed Paresh was still the same meek natured 'obliging' guy that he used to be. I remembered an incident. The three of us were once roaming in Panbazar when Biman, all of a sudden said, "Let us go to ____ quick." Why? "I planned to go to so and so's home today at six in the evening, and a friend, that is, so and so's sister... I can meet her if we start right now. But we shall have to leave this bicycle here. Otherwise it will prove to be a big nuisance." The bicycle was loaded, on that day, with medicine bottles, a loaf of bread, a can of butter, some laundry, a small table lamp and such other articles. Biman motioned me aside and said, "Ask Paresh to hold the bicycle and stay here for some time. It won't be long, a mere ten minutes. You know pretty well he won't oblige me if I ask him." So I made the request to Paresh. We left Paresh holding the loaded bicycle at a corner of Guwahati-Shillong road and embarked with some enthusiasm on Biman's adventure (Biman was ebullient at the absence of Paresh, and was of the opinion that the presence of bores in such missions creates problems). However, the adventure turned out to be quite a misadventure. The sad, horrible incident is better left undisclosed. In short, we took an hour-and-a-half instead of ten minutes to return. The street lights in the Shillong road had already been on. Paresh, like the Casabianca of our own age, with infinite patience and a blank look on his eyes, was standing at the dark corner, the very spot where we had left him, holding the loaded bicycle of the 'enemy'. The fellow indeed had some patience; he was still into literature.

I again got down to the letter after returning to the bench. The bench was now vacant—the bald gentleman was browsing through some titles in the book shop. I wrote: If you are trying to ridicule me then the effort has failed (your sense of humour — your jokes were always fit only to induce dry laughs), because I am thinking having another go at writing. True, it will be difficult after five or six years of being out of practice, but what is the harm in giving it another try; what do you say?

Having written this much I went for another cup of coffee. The stall was almost empty except for two gentlemen at a corner, sipping coffee while reading newspapers. A labourer sitting near me, asked for egg and potatoes, and a big family comprising parents and children, at a distant, bigger table, created a noisy situation in the stall. With the cup of coffee in front of me I again started to write the letter. I could not decide what to write next. I could, of course, write something about my present journey. But there was nothing special about it. I had reached Holland only this morning. Since there was still some time left for the connecting train to arrive, so I went out to have a look at the city of Rotterdam. I did not know why, but the city appeared to me to be much like Allahabad (but the buildings were certainly not alike). Small red trams, making the familiar metallic sounds, rolled on its streets. Suddenly it felt good to see them. I also had a desire to take a trip through the city by tram (but Allahabad had no trams). There were a few shops, some 'modern architecture' and the office-going people (now it was almost eleven in the morning); nice sunshine on the roads and the unintelligible language. I could not detect any difference between the place and its people with any typical, small English town and its people. No, I should not attempt to describe Rotterdam, which I had not seen properly even for half-an-hour. Biman would not love to read such an account. It would appear quite incongruous.

I wrote: You were probably right; our ambitions, our efforts to become writers could be weighed down by the pressure of the 'practical' realities of life. This is true of Assam, of India, and in fact, it is valid practically in so many other places in the world. So you did not discover any 'profound truth'. So many others already knew about it; so did I. I guess being weighed down does not perhaps mean death. There is scope for yet another attempt. I have been out of the country for a very long time. I have almost forgotten the sorrows and the happiness, the tears and the laughter of my own people. Now, everything seems to be a curious medley of feelings of my own country and those of some foreign land. Moreover, there has been a lack of practice in writing. There will be some initial difficulties, perhaps there will be a thorough violation of Paresh's ideas of 'style', 'technique' and 'form' in every paragraph I write....

The coffee was horrible. Station quality coffee; that too at sixty-five pfennigs a mug, the rate seemed a bit too high. I had very little money in hand. My mood turned sour. I lit a cigarette and began again.

"I shall not be able to send you a gift for your wedding. First, I have no time to go shopping. Secondly, my finances are not quite good now—you know that I came here in search of a livelihood. For the time being I shall try to send you a 'gift' of some sketches — if you find them boring, go through them after your marriage when you have time to spare. This is my 'gift' to you for the time being. It has two intentions: Number one, so far I have always outsmarted you. I want to prove that the situation cannot be reversed just because you have become a doctor and settled down in life with a wife. Number two, I shall try to prove that we can still try to create an independent (or mutually inter-connected) story out of each of these sketches when developed—whether we succeed or not is a different matter. Paresh is lucky in this regard, but I am forced to take pictures of strange people (not of totally strange feelings, of course). These are the images of the people I met after I left London last night, which means it is a collection of a very limited number of characters; comparatively a simple and brief job. We can certainly once again examine this limited mobile population from the point of view of a story-teller, can't we?"

However, the task did not seem so easy as I sat down to write. Biman went to Dibrugarh Medical College after his second year. I went to Banaras to study engineering. Afterwards I went to Shepherds Bar. It had been quite a long time. We had no communication with each other in this period. There was no certainty whether today's doctor would like a letter in the same old 'style' in which I used to write to him long back. Perhaps, I too, might not like Paresh's style today — the last story by him I read was in the *Cottonian*. Today, in retrospect, the story seemed the work of an inexperienced writer (by the way, what style does the *Cottonian* follow nowadays?). Still I tried to neatly arrange the scattered, noisy pictures one by one, sitting quietly in the stall. I lit another cigarette. Yes, first of all Pat MacGragor....

Pat MacGregor

Miss Patricia N. MacGregor, 19, slightly blunt-nosed, blonde hair, with rouge and lipstick, not bad to look at, slightly shortish, looked like any other East End girl. Cheap Woolworth dress, and an old coat on top of it all, the handbag white and cheap. She smoked (Weights). Since smoking was not allowed inside compartments, I went out to the corridor and smoked after the train had pulled out of Liverpool station. She came out and struck a conversation. 'A bit windy here, isn't it?' she said.

Her uncle was some sort officer of the British Army (I forgot what his rank was) at Frankfurt. She had come on a holiday with him. She was a typist in an office in Chancery Lane. She lived with her mother. Her parents were separated. I started perspiring after a few minutes of conversation with her. Pure Cockney. An out and out 'refined *laydee*' type (her name seemed to imply she was a Scottish; perhaps she had grown up in London). I guessed she used to dance in Hammersmith Palais on Saturday evenings, all dressed up (but I learnt, when I asked her, that she used to go to the local 'Palais'; and stayed in Kilburn). I partook of chocolate, which she fished out of her bag. 'Could I sit near you at the dining table when we are on the ship?' she asked. 'Certainly; why not?' I said, 'I shall be delighted...' She also helped me put on my overcoat while getting down from the train. However, there was no trace of 'my *laydee*' in the ship. I was in the 'bar'; and there she appeared from nowhere. I asked her, out of courtesy, what she would prefer. I reasoned that since she was an ordinary typist from Kilburn, her order, in the form of a cheap beer, would be a tiny dent on my purse. But I was struck by a bolt. 'A Martini or a gin and lime, if I may' (I myself had not yet mustered enough courage to give myself the pleasure of a drink; and this was what I got as reward). I could understand that the lady had expensive tastes. There was no dearth of fools in the ship even if I shunned her! Later I saw her go out with a young man after she had finished two pegs of rum. They walked up to a dark corner on the deck....

Hans Wilhelms

A huge violin — double bass—and the perspiring man, who carried it on his back, entered the cabin. He was my cabin-mate. He was around 35, wavy hair, duffle coat, an 'artiste' sort of a man. He spoke flawless English. Introductions over, I felt the need to say something, "You play this 'thing'?" "Oh no, I only carry it on my back," Hans said dryly, and made such a grimace that both of us broke into laughter. Then he said, "Yes, of course, I play it. Would I carry this damn thing on my back for fun had my life not been dependent on this?" I couldn't help pitying him — the double bass was as big as the man.

Hans lived in Stuttgart. A bachelor, he was trained in music in the Leipzig Music School (he was a disciple of the famous accordion player Bergman). Now he played double bass in Stuttgart Symphony Orchestra. He had to come back, due to some personal business, alone, on the return journey. His troupe had a performance the next day at Utrecht; and he would go alone. "I enjoyed the Stuttgart Symphony at Manchester," I informed him. My praise inflated Hans; but he maintained sham modesty. Did I live in Manchester? No, not that. I was in a nearby town — Shepherds Bar — Reiroll & Reiroll has a factory there; and I was undergoing practical training at that place. They manufacture piston rings and such things.

'It seems there is not a single pretty girl on this damned ship," Hans observed sadly. It was indeed sad. 'Let's see — so long.' He took off his coat and went out. After that I met Hans only once — at the bar. He was with a tall woman. She did not know English. I could not strike up a conversation with her. (Perhaps Hans would also not have appreciated if I remained there too long). He bought me two whiskies. I had a mind to lecture Hans on the Stradivarius violin, but decided against it since the situation was not appropriate. So I rose and climbed up.

When I went to bed at around 2-30 in the morning Hans's bed was still empty. I found him rubbing his eyes when it was time for the morning cup of tea. He told me that he had entered the cabin at around 5 in the morning. 'I met another woman at the time of dinner. French. She started getting amorous after we spent some time together,' Hans forced a dry smile. 'So we went up to the deck. Spent the whole night there... believe me, hot stuff....'

There was no question of doubting him. Who was the blonde with you at the bar, he asked; and he told me that he had spoken to her, too. 'However, I somehow managed to flee from her, believe me, a narrow escape.' Why, did he not like her? 'Like her! Take my word, she is a regular dark horse....'

I was putting on my shoes, and he noticed the holes on the heels of my worn out socks. 'Socks are real nuisance... though I am free from this trouble — Mom stitches them for me. She takes them to wash after every couple of days... they never reach the stinking stage like yours....Mom has become a cause of concern for me — she tries to keep me confined to home, as if I am a baby. I planned to use this opportunity to spend a few days with a few women friends in Holland, but no, Mom has given me strict orders. I have to return home as soon as the concert is over. Believe me, this is a real pain....'

Shutting the violin case he started to get ready like a beast of burden.

Pietro Fabritchi, **Leo Wigner,**
Dhananjay Chattopadhyaya, **B. B. Singh**

My encounters with these people were brief. Pietro lived in a village named San Antonio near Milan. He was a lean man of 40; sunken eyes, bony cheeks. Went to work in the coal mines of Yorkshire due to lack of jobs in Italy; has a wife and three children at home. There had recently been a lay-off in Yorkshire, and Pietro was forced to return

home. We took leave of each other after shuttling a bottle of beer between us, since Patricia arrived there at that moment. Leo Wigner was a Hungarian evacuee. He knew neither English nor German. I could not strike up a conversation with him. I could not understand why he returned from England, or where was he headed. He simply sat there silently with immense boredom writ large on his face. Could I still try to write a story about him? However, I gave up the idea and slipped away from him.

Dhananjay Chattopadhyaya was decked in a Hector Powe suit, studied law in London (Gray's Inn). Undoubtedly a "*boroloker chele*." 'Namaskar, are you Bengali?' I was enraged. I had a mind to reply back in English, but he had paid for two bottles of beer. So I could not express my mind. '*Bhaabchi ektu Hollandta ghure dekhe aasi, aar Germanyr ektu aadhtu. Sob kichchu ektu adhtu dekhe rakha bhalo, aar eto kaachei jokhon thaaki, bujlen na moshai....*' (I am planning to have a look at Holland, and a bit of Germany. Since I stay so close, it is wise to see a bit of these places. You get what I mean I am sure?)

It was all too logical, there was no doubt about it, but I did not plan to take any snap shots of India. So It was better to stop the story of the Bengali gentleman (and that of the *Sardarji* who, holding the railings, was counting waves on the sea).

A 'Double Dutch'

The man was around twenty. Name: Van Holst, or something sounding like that. He was walking unsteadily on the deck downstairs. I could not make out whether it was the result of the turbulence in the ship (the sea was rough that day) or an excess of beer. After several beers and whiskies I also walked down unsteadily to the deck to have some fresh air; and since I was myself not very steady, so I did not remember much about the man. I could recollect only this much: he was Dutch and a student of economics. He had gone to England to work as a farm-hand in an apple orchard during his vacation. He used to earn money doing odd jobs to fund his education. He knew only this much about India: Nehru, poverty, Indian students consider it below their dignity to do odd jobs, the cows are some sort of deity, Indian women wear black spots on their foreheads, 72 per cent illiteracy, untouchability and 'curry'. I tried to explain to him after some time — that there were a lot of stupid young men on the ship and that I was slowly getting to know the meaning of double Dutch. I was fortunate that my exposition did not lead to a scuffle....

A. V. Yernart, His Wife and Friend

Denmark is a small country, only this many square kilometres in area, he told me, but it is modern and tidy. I must visit it if I could. In reply I said, Assam is also this many square kilometres (a conjured up figure); and I shall certainly pay a visit to Denmark. I have always longed to visit Hans Anderson's Copenhagen and Neils Bohr's native land. When he heard that I knew about Bohr his chest was inflated with national pride. He paid for two pegs of rum for me, asked what I did for a living, why I was there and where I was going. I said I was heading towards Kassel to get practical training. The gentleman was the owner of a wire manufacturing factory. He knew the place in Kassel that I mentioned. Frederick Shumacher G.m.b.H. was the name of the place. "Aha, Shumacher, I know, I know it, *gasturbinen, dampfturbinen ount papiermaschinen... my best wishes... would you like to have another rum?*" The lady enquired about my brothers and sisters back in home. Uncivilized, though it appeared, I had no money to reciprocate them with even a single round of drinks. Nevertheless, we went out to the deck for a whiff of fresh air. I could not recollect anything afterwards about my cabin-mate since I had, by then, already guzzled six or seven bottles of beer, four or five pegs of whisky and two pegs of rum. Inebriated as I was, I could not recollect what I had seen or heard. I vaguely remembered that I saw the couple in double. (Perhaps I had left a bad impression on them, and the knowledge made me feel ashamed of myself.) The sea was getting rough, I recollected. I had heard the sounds of the ship's engine and those of the waves, the dark sky of the North Sea. occasionally lighthouses appeared to my right and left, and then they disappeared. I remembered myself explaining, businesslike, the atomic theory of Neils Bohr to the couple; and I also remembered the gentleman, along with my friend, helping me to bed in my cabin.

Karl Stein (?), Haruhiko Kubayashi

I took the gentleman to be a writer since he carried a typewriter; and he had the looks of a writer on his face. Moreover, he wore corduroy trousers and a high neck, full-sleeved purple overall. He looked like a Slav, his moustache French and on his bag there were labels of Bucharest and Dublin. So we called him Karl Stein since the name could be found in many nationalities. He used to sit at a corner of the bar; smoked occasionally, fished out a sandwich now and then from his pocket, munched on it, and remained engrossed in a German book (*Trends in Russian Novels after Stalin*). The bar used to become empty around two in the morning. Some of the lamps were put off, only a few young couples remained busy in each other in the dim lights; and Karl Stein still absorbed in the book....

American suit, garishly decorated tie and a camera hanging from the shoulder... this shortish gentleman must be from America. Indeed, Dr. Haruhiko Kubayashi had completed his works on beta disintegration of nuclei in Massachusetts, and was returning to Japan via Europe. I missed my train at Hook of Holland and boarded the train he was travelling. I was not sure where I should change the train. Dr. Kubayashi pulled out an international time table of trains and ships. All necessary information instantly emerged from the book. It contained short accounts of all countries, their history and geography, and the routes of the trains, ships and flights were drawn on maps. Studying the maps he concluded that we would be able to enjoy better scenery if we took the left windows of the cabins. We went to the left side of the rooms. I was surprised to find that the book was written in Japanese.

Karl Stein was writing about his own people, and Dr. Kubayashi had faith in the articles and the written materials of his country.

'Mr Scotch Whisky'

I was startled out of sleep by the sound of a thud on the floor at around 4 in the morning. A passenger, while in sleep, had accidentally fallen on the floor from the upper bunk. I could not understand how could one fall from a bunk which had safety railings around. The puzzle appeared solved when the steward came in with the morning tea. The man in the upper bunk slid out a bottle of whisky from the pillow and lavishly poured its contents in the tea. I noted he had bottles tucked wherever he had pockets in the trousers and the coat. It was beyond my capacity to know about his presence when I returned to my cabin last night. Now I understood his incapability far surpassed mine since the only liquid he partook from morning till evening was scotch and scotch alone.

He offered the bottle to us, too. Hans winked at me and said, no, thanks, I do not have the habit of drinking in the morning. But the man was persistent with me. So I had to digest whisky with morning tea just to ensure his sentiments were not hurt. I figured out that he had assumed a special privilege over me, an Indian, since he said he was an Irish, and that our enemy was the same. Moreover, he was much obliged towards me since I had helped him get to his bed after the fall last night. In the morning, at the beginning of the day itself, he was walking unsteadily, and was speaking in a raw, unintelligible voice. He gave two or three names, and I could not make out which was his actual name. It was also not clear where he was going. Once he said Bremen, and next he said Genoa. It appeared he worked in an Italian ship, but it was not clear whether he was a porter or the captain of the ship. He was dressed like a gentleman, had an unusually crimson face; a huge body, and the sharp whisky fume in mouth made it a pain to speak facing him. He had opened the bottle four or five times more before we left the ship. When the gentleman was taking leave of Hans, while exchanging pleasantries and wishing the gentleman a happy journey had to take a gulp, with his face contorted. Hans said, '... and pray the Lord takes you to the right train at the right time. Hope you change trains at the right station, and let the good Lord guide you to your destination without any involvement of the police. Cheers!'

Oh no, the number of snapshots are increasing. It is better to stop here; this is enough. Let me give up the story of the Dutch woman and also that of the bespectacled Englishman. Was there anybody else? Oh yes, that railway employee in blue uniform. But let me not bring him here now. I could hardly make out what he said, and the kind of language he spoke. I could understand only this much: he cracked a long, tortuous and incomprehensible joke in a tongue which was a mixture of Dutch, German and English, and broke into a hearty laughter. So I, too, followed suit.

All of a sudden I saw Hans, with his burden on his back, appearing in front of me. He smiled abashedly, and told me that he was somewhat busy with his girl friend in the ship. Believe me, the train, he said, left all of a sudden, without a warning. So he had to take some other transport to come here. No comments. We sat down for coffee. Hans said, 'Is that not our friend?' 'Which friend?' 'Scotch Whisky,' Hans said. We rushed out. There he was, on the platform. His face had turned excessively crimson, and the eyes even more so. He dropped the box with a thud on the platform and stretched himself on the bench. A group of curious children gathered around him, and the grown-ups looked at him, amazed. Hans and I somehow managed to make him get up. He muttered something. With some effort we dragged him through the curious mob into the stall. Hans said, "Black coffee, strong black coffee...."

The Den Haag train pulled up at the station.

Countless kilometres of irrigation canals stretched before my eyes; and countless picturesque fields, with windmills punctuating the landscape here and there. Lovely country, Holland. The whisky-thirsty Irishman sat on the bench in front of me, snoring all the while. The strong black coffee had made him feel a little better. He vomited once. We felt embarrassed in front of the other passengers. Yet, we hoped he would sleep peacefully till we reached the Holland-Germany border.

The low power lights were on inside the train. Evening was descending. We would very soon reach the border. It was getting dark outside. I could vaguely discern the people in the compartment in front of us. I was feeling somewhat sleepy. Fatigue. Amid the irritating sound of the train and the gloomy ambience we were oscillating with the shaking and the shivering of the speeding train. I could understand that my efforts had failed. The

characters, my snapshots, now appeared lifeless, two dimensional. Some hesitant portraits. Where were their voices, what happened to their feelings, their mutual relationships, the associations and the harmony of such relationships, and the conversation, their motive and movement? What I had crafted were not the movements and sounds of the main movie, but a collection of some disjointed, incomplete still pictures hung in front of the theatre. In the midst of the hazy light, amidst some unfamiliar faces I am now inserting my final picture:

Me

Place of birth: Assam. Around 25. Education □ Bhairab Kataki's primary school, Cotton Collegiate School (Guwahati), Cotton College. Performances at examinations were not bad, (tried to write short stories in magazines), engineering in Banaras. Could not cobble together two square meals in motherland, so left for England after managing a job (practical training in Shepherds Bar near Manchester). As a consequence, had to leave aside the acts which associate one with one's own country. The job in England was not exactly 'in line' with his own educational career. So, after some applications and communications left for Kassel in Germany to acquire some practical training. He knew his country needed him, and he needed his own country (be it engineering or literature), but out of compulsion □ or due to lack of courage to fight □ he had to roam around in distant lands □ dearth of jobs, lack of enthusiasm, limitations in the fields of activity. He failed once again, trying to write. Future plans □ after returning to the native land he would say, 'I have come back trained abroad. My value is far more than that of the local talents. I have no business worrying about them. Look, I have the stamp of a foreign degree on me. I demand this many thousands of rupees as my salary....'

The fatigue gradually crept from body into mind. I fell asleep with my head on the window sill. I saw a dream. The Irishman and I were walking through a subway. A corner of a station. Lot of people. All were German. Did not know when we crossed the border, nor when we entered Germany. Stretches of advertisement posters on the walls of the subway. At a place on the wall I could see the words: Hannover and Zum Bahnsteig 6. Perhaps we had already reached Hanover. There were no smells of whisky fumes in the Irishman's mouth. He was trying to explain that he was now completely well. Everything was fine. Such aberrations were normal in a man's life, but things become normal after a while. Nothing much to worry. Come, let me offer you a German scotch since the occasion needed to be celebrated.... Under the series of lights, and pushing our way through the crowd we walked forward spiritedly. My companion told me that after reaching Dublin, this time, he would promise his mother he would not overdo whisky anymore. Yes, he knew his mother would be waiting for him in Dublin.... The passage ended abruptly. We stepped on a metalled road. It was dimly lit. The number of vehicles on the road was thin. So was the number of people on it. The road appeared familiar. I reached a dark corner. Now I could recognize the road. The Shillong road. A young man wearing a checked shirt was standing at a place holding a bicycle. I said, why it's Paresh. You're still waiting for us! Please don't mind Buddy, I've been delayed due to a problem. But you know pretty well I'd return as soon as I could.

The train rolled into Bentheim station blowing a long whistle. So, we had entered Germany. I had to wake up my companion— the border police would now come in to examine our passports. I hurriedly wrote the postscript to the letter meant for Biman: I am sorry, it did not turn out to be a story!

Did it not?