

R. K. Narayan

Emden

WHEN HE CAME to be named the oldest man in town, Rao's age was estimated anywhere between ninety and one hundred and five. He had, however, lost count of time long ago and abominated birthdays; especially after his eightieth, when his kinsmen from everywhere came down in a swarm and involved him in elaborate rituals, and with blaring pipes and drums made a public show of his attaining eighty. The religious part of it was so strenuous that he was laid up for fifteen days thereafter with fever. During the ceremony they poured pots of cold water, supposedly fetched from sacred rivers, over his head, and forced him to undergo a fast, while they themselves feasted gluttonously. He was so fatigued at the end of the day that he could hardly pose for the group photo, but flopped down in his chair, much to the annoyance of the photographer, who constantly withdrew his head from under the black hood to plead, "Steady, please." Finally, he threatened to pack up and leave unless they propped up the old gentleman. There were seventy-five heads to be counted in the group—all Rao's descendants one way or another. The photographer insisted upon splitting the group, as otherwise the individuals would be microscopic and indistinguishable on a single plate. That meant that after a little rest Rao had to be propped up a second time in the honoured seat. When he protested against this entire ceremony, they explained, "It's a propitiatory ceremony to give you health and longevity."

"Seems to me rather a device to pack off an old man quickly", he said, at which his first daughter, herself past sixty, admonished him not to utter inauspicious remarks, when everyone was doing so much to help.

By the time he recovered from his birthday celebrations and the group photo in two parts could be hung on the wall, the house had become quiet and returned to its normal

strength, which was about twenty in all—three of his sons and their families, an assortment of their children, nephews and nieces. He had his room in the right wing of the house, which he had designed and built in the last century as it looked. He had been the very first to buy a piece of land beyond Vinayak Street; it was considered an act of great daring in those days, being a deserted stretch of land from which thieves could easily slip away into the woods beyond, even in daylight; the place, however, developed into a residential colony and was named Ratnapuri, which meant City of Gems.

Rao's earlier years were spent in Kabir Street. When he came into his own and decided to live in style, he sold off their old house and moved to Ratnapuri. That was after his second wife had borne him four daughters, and the last of them was married off. He had moved along with his first wife's progeny, which numbered eight of varying ages. He seemed to be peculiarly ill-fated in matrimony—his uncle, who cast and read the stars for the whole family, used to say that Rao had Mars in the seventh house, with no other planet to checkmate its fury, and hence was bound to lose every wife. After the third marriage and more children, he was convinced of the malevolence of Mars; he didn't keep a record of population at home—that was not his concern—his sons were capable of running the family and managing the crowd at home. He detached himself from all transactions and withdrew so completely that a couple of years past the grand ceremony of the eightieth birthday he could not remember the names of most of the children at home or who was who, or how many were living under his roof.

The eightieth birthday had proved a definite landmark in his domestic career. Aided by the dimming of his faculties, he could isolate himself with no effort whatever. He was philosophical enough to accept nature's readjust-

ments: "If I see less or hear less, so much the better. Nothing lost. My legs are still strong enough to take me about, and I can bathe and wash without help. . . . I enjoy my food and digest it." Although they had a dining table, he refused to change his ancient habit of sitting on a rosewood plank on the floor and eating off a banana leaf in a corner of the dining hall. Everything for him went on automatically, and he didn't have to ask for anything, since his needs were anticipated; a daughter-in-law or niece or granddaughter or a great-grand someone or other was always there to attend him unasked. He did not comment or question, particularly not question, as he feared they would bawl in his left ear and strain their vocal chords, though if they approached his right ear he could guess what they might be saying. But he didn't care either way. His retirement was complete. He had worked hard all his life to establish himself, and provide for his family, each figure in the two-part group photograph owing its existence to him directly or indirectly. Some of the grandchildren had been his favourites at one time or another, but they had all grown out of recognition, and their names—names! they were the greatest impediments to speech—every name remains on the tip of one's tongue but is gone when you want to utter it. This trick of nature reduces one to a state of babbling and stammering without ever completing a sentence. Even such a situation was acceptable, as it seemed to be ordained by nature to keep the mind uncluttered in old age.

HE REFLECTED and introspected with clarity in the afternoons—the best part of the day for him, when he had had his siesta; got up and had his large tumbler of coffee (brought to his room exactly at three by one of the ministering angels, and left on a little *teapoy* beside the door). After his coffee he felt revived, reclined in his easy-chair, placed to catch the light at the northern window, and unfolded the morning paper, which, after everyone had read it, was brought and placed beside his afternoon coffee. Holding it close enough, he could read, if he wiped his glasses from time to time with a silk rag tied to the arm of his chair; thus comfortably settled, he half-read and half-ruminated. The words and acts of politicians or warmongers sounded stale—they spoke and acted

in the same manner since the beginning of time; his eyes travelled down the columns—sometimes an advertisement caught his eye (nothing but an invitation to people to squander their money on all kinds of fanciful things), or reports of deaths (not one recognisable name among the dead). On the last page of the paper, however, half a column invariably gripped his attention—that was a daily report of a religious or philosophical discourse at some meeting at Madras; brief reports, but adequate for him to brush up his thoughts on God, on His incarnations and on definitions of Good and Evil. At this point, he would brood for a while and then fold and put away the paper exactly where he had found it, to be taken away later.

When he heard the hall clock chime four, he stirred himself to go out on a walk. This part of the day's routine was anticipated by him with a great thrill. He washed and put on a long shirt which came down to his knees, changed to a white dhoti, wrapped around his shoulder an embroidered cotton shawl, seized his staff and an umbrella and sallied out. When he crossed the hall, someone or other always cautioned him by bellowing, "Be careful. Have you got the torch? Usual round? Come back soon." He would just nod and pass on. Once outside, he moved with caution, taking each step only after divining the nature of the ground with the tip of his staff. His whole aim in life was to avoid a fall. One false step and that would be the end. Longevity was guaranteed as long as he maintained his equilibrium and verticality. This restriction forced him to move at snail's pace, and along a well-defined orbit every evening.

Leaving his gate, he kept himself to the extreme left of the street, along Vinayak Street, down Kabir Lane and into Market Road. He loved the bustle, traffic and crowds of Market Road—paused to gaze into shops and marvel at the crowd passing in and out perpetually. He shopped but rarely—the last thing he remembered buying was a crayon set and a drawing book for some child at home. For himself he needed to buy only a particular brand of tooth-powder (most of his teeth were still intact), for which he occasionally stopped at Chettiar's at the far end of Market Road, where it branched off to Ellaman Street. When he passed in front of the shop, the shopman would always greet him from his seat, "How are you, sir? Want something to take home today?" Rao would shake his head and cross over to the other side

of the road—this was the spot where his orbit curved back, and took him homeward, the whole expedition taking him about two hours. Before 6:30, he would be back at his gate, never having to use his flashlight, which he carried in his shirt pocket only as a precaution against any sudden eclipse of the sun or an unexpected nightfall.

The passage both ways would always be smooth and uneventful, although he would feel nervous while crossing the Market Gate, where Jayaraj the photo-framer always hailed him from his little shop, “Grand Master, shall I help you across?” Rao would spurn that offer silently and pass on; one had to concentrate on one’s steps to avoid bumping into the crowd at the Market Gate, and had no time for people like Jayaraj. After he had passed, Jayaraj, who enjoyed gossiping, would comment to his clients seated on a bench, “At his age! Moves through the crowd as if he were in the prime of youth. Must be at least a hundred and ten! See his recklessness. It’s not good to let him out like this. His people are indifferent. Not safe these days. With all these lorries, bicycles and auto-rickshaws, he’ll come to grief someday, I’m sure. . . .”

“Who’s he?” someone might ask, perhaps a newcomer to the town, waiting for his picture to be framed.

“We used to call him ‘Emden’.”¹ We were terrified of him when we were boys. He lived somewhere in Kabir Street. Huge, tall and imposing when he went down the road on his bicycle in his khaki uniform and a red turban and all kinds of badges. We took him to be a police inspector from his dress—not knowing that he wore the uniform of the Excise Department. He also behaved like the police—if he noticed anyone doing something he did not like, he’d go thundering at him, chase him down the street and lay the cane on his back. When we were boys, we used to loiter about the market in gangs, and if he saw us he’d scatter us and order us home. Once he caught us urinating against the school wall at Adam’s Street, as we always did. He came down on us with a roar, seized four of us and shook us till our bones rattled, pushed us up before the headmaster and demanded, ‘What are you doing, Headmaster?’

¹ A German warship that shelled Madras in 1916; ever since, the term indicates anyone who is formidable and ruthless.

Is this the way you train them? Or do you want them to turn out to be guttersnipes? Why don’t you keep an eye on them and provide a latrine in your school?’ The headmaster rose in his seat, trembling and afraid to come too close to this terrible personality flourishing a cane. Oh, how many such things in his heyday! People were afraid of him. He might well have been a policeman for all his high-and-mighty style, but his business was only to check the taverns selling drinks—And you know how much he collected at the end of the day? Not less than five hundred rupees, that is, fifteen thousand a month, not even a governor could earn so much. No wonder he could build a fancy house at Ratnapuri and bring up his progeny in style. Oh, the airs that family give themselves! He narrowly escaped being prosecuted—if a national award were given for bribe-taking, it would go to him: when he was dismissed from service, he gave out that he had voluntarily retired! None the worse for it, has enough wealth to last ten generations. Emden! Indeed! He married several wives, seems to have worn them out one after another; that was in addition to countless sideshows, ha! ha! When we were boys, he was the talk of the town: some of us stealthily followed and spied on his movements in the dark lanes at night, and that provided us a lot of fun. He had great appetite for the unattached female tribe, such as nurses and school-mistresses, and went after them like a bull! Emden, really! . . .” Jayaraj’s tongue wagged while his hands were cutting, sawing and nailing a picture frame, and ceased the moment the work was finished, and he would end his narrations with: “That’ll be five rupees—special rate for you because you have brought the picture of Krishna, who is my family god. I’ve not charged for the extra rings for hanging. . . .”

RAO KEPT his important papers stacked in an *almirah*, which he kept locked, and the key hidden under a lining paper in another cupboard where he kept his clothes and a few odds and ends, and the key of this second cupboard also was hidden somewhere, so that no one could have access to the two cupboards, which virtually contained all the clues to his life. Occasionally on an afternoon, at his hour of clarity and energy, he’d leave his easy-chair, bolt the door and open the first cupboard, take

out the key under the paper lining, and then open the other cupboard containing his documents—title-deeds, diaries, papers and a will.

Today he finished reading the newspaper in ten minutes, and had reached his favourite column on the last page—the report of a discourse on reincarnations, to explain why one was born, what one was, and the working of the law of *karma*. Rao found it boring also: he was familiar with that kind of moralising and philosophy. It was not four yet; the reading was over too soon. He found an unfilled half-hour between the newspaper reading and his usual time for the evening outing. He rose from the chair, neatly folded the newspaper and put it away on the little stool outside his door, and gently shut and bolted the door—noiselessly, because if they heard him shut the door, they would come up and caution him, “Don’t bolt”, out of fear that if he fell dead they might have to break the door open. Others were obsessed with the idea of *his* death as if they were all immortals!

He unlocked the cupboard and stood for a moment gazing at the papers tied into neat bundles—all the records of his official career from the start to his “voluntary retirement” were there on the top shelf, in dusty and yellowing paper: he had shut the cupboard doors tight, yet somehow fine dust seeped in and settled on everything. He dared not touch anything for fear of soiling his fingers and catching a cold. He must get someone to destroy them, best to put them in a fire; but whom could he trust? He hated the idea of anyone reading those memos from the government in the latter days of his service—he’d prefer people not to know the official mess and those threats of enquiries before he quit the service. The Secretary to the Government was a demon out to get his blood—inspired by anonymous letters and backbiters. Only one man had stood by him—his first assistant, wished he could remember his name or whereabouts—good fellow; if he were available he’d set him to clean and arrange his *almirah* and burn the papers: he’d be dependable, and would produce the ash if asked. But who was he? He patted his forehead as if to jerk the memory-machine into action. . . . And then his eyes roved down to the next shelf; he ran his fingers over them lovingly—all documents relating to his property and their disposal after his death. No one in the house could have any idea of it or dare come near them. He must get

the lawyer-man (what was his name again?) and closet himself with him some day. He was probably also dead. Not a soul seemed to be left in town. . . . Anyway, must try to send someone to fetch him if he was alive, it was to be done secretly. How? Somehow.

His eyes travelled to a shelf with an assortment of packets containing receipts, bills and several diaries. He had kept a diary regularly for several years, recording a bit of daily observation or event on each page. He always bought the same brand of diary, called “Matchless”—of convenient size, ruled pages, with a flap that could be buttoned so that no one could casually open its pages and read its contents. The Matchless Stationery Mart off the main market manufactured it. On the last day of every December he would stop by for a copy costing four rupees—rather expensive but worth the price . . . more often than not the man would not take money for it, as he’d seek some official favour worth much more. Rao was not the sort to mind dispensing his official favours if it helped some poor soul. There was a stack of thirty old diaries in there (at some point in his life, he had abandoned the practice), which contained the gist of all his day-to-day life and thought: that again was something, an offering for the God of Fire before his death. He stood ruminating at the sight of the diaries. He pulled out one from the stack at random, wiped the thin layer of dust with a towel, went back to his chair and turned over the leaves casually. The diary was fifty-one years old. After glancing through some pages, he found it difficult to read his own close calligraphy in black ink and decided to put it back, as it was time to prepare for his walk. However, he said to himself, “Just a minute. Let me see what I did on this date, on the same day, so long ago. . . .” He looked at the calendar on the wall. The date was the twentieth of March. He opened the diary and leafed through the earlier pages, marvelling at the picture they presented of his early life: what a lot of activities morning till night, connected with the family, office and personal pursuits! His eyes smarted; he skipped longer passages and concentrated on the briefer ones. On the same day fifty-one years ago—the page contained only four lines, which read: “Too lenient with S. She deserves to be taught a lesson. . . .” This triggered a memory, and he could almost hear the echo of his own shouting at somebody, and the next few lines indicated the course of

action: "Thrashed her soundly for her own good and left. Will not see her again. . . . How can I accept the responsibility? She must have had an affair—after all a D.G.² Wish I had locked her in before leaving." He studied this entry dispassionately. He wondered who it was. The initial was not helpful. He had known no one with a name beginning with S. Among the ladies he had favoured in his days, it could be anyone . . . but names were elusive anyway.

With great effort, he kept concentrating on this problem. His forehead throbbed with the strain of concentration. Of course, the name eluded him, but the geography was coming back to him in fragments. From Chettiar Stores . . . yes, he remembered going up Market Road . . . and noted the light burning at the shop facing him even at a late hour when returning home; that meant he had gone in that narrow street branching off from Market Road at that point, and that led to a parallel street . . . from there one went on and on and twisted and turned in a maze of by-lanes and reached that house—a few steps up before tapping gently on the rosewood door studded with brass stars, which would open at once as if she was waiting on the other side; he'd slip in and shut the door immediately, lest the neighbours be watching, and retrace his steps at midnight. But he went there only two days in the week, when he had free time. . . . Her name, no, could not get it, but he could recollect her outline rather hazily—fair, plump and loving and jasmine-smelling; he was definite that the note referred to this woman, and not to another one, also plump and jasmine-smelling somewhere not so far away . . . he remembered slapping a face and flouncing out in a rage. The young fellow was impetuous and hot-blooded . . . must have been someone else, not himself in any sense. He could not remember the house, but there used to be a coconut palm and a well in the street in front of the house . . . it suddenly flashed across his mind that the name of the street was Gokulam.

HE ROSE AND LOCKED AWAY the diary and secreted the key as usual, washed and dressed, and picked up his staff and umbrella and put on his sandals, with a quiet thrill. He

² Dancing Girl, a term denoting a public woman in those days.

had decided to venture beyond his orbit today, to go up and look for the ancient rosewood, brass-knobbed door, beside the coconut tree in that maze. From Chettiar Stores, his steps were bound to lead him on in the right direction, and if S. was there and happened to stand at the street door, he'd greet her . . . he might not be able to climb the four steps, but he'd offer her a small gift and greeting from the street. She could come down and take it. He should not have slapped her face . . . he had been impetuous and cruel. He should not have acted on jealousy . . . he was filled with remorse. After all, she must have shown him a great deal of kindness and given him pleasure ungrudgingly—otherwise, why would one stay until midnight?

While he tap-tapped his way out of his house now, someone in the hall enquired as usual, "Got your torch? Rather late today. Take care of yourself." He was excited. The shopman on the way, who habitually watched and commented, noted that the old man was moving rather jauntily today. "Oh, Respected One, good day to you, sir", said Mani from his cycle shop. "In such a hurry today? Walk slowly, sir, road is dug up everywhere." Rao looked up and permitted himself a gentle nod of recognition. He did not hear the message, but he could guess what Mani might be saying. He was fond of him—a great-grandson of that fellow who had studied with him at Albert Mission School. Name? As usual Mani's great-grandfather's name kept slipping away . . . he was some Ram or Shankar or something like that. Oh what a teaser! He gave up and passed on. He kept himself to the edge as usual, slowed down his pace after Mani's advice; after all, his movement should not be noticeable, and it was not good to push oneself in that manner and pant with the effort.

At Jagan's Sweets, he halted. Some unknown fellow at the street counter. Children were crowding in front of the stall holding forth money and asking for this and that. They were blocking the way. He waited impatiently and tapped his staff noisily on the ground till the man at the counter looked up and asked, "Anything, master?" Rao waved away the children with a flourish of his stick and approached the counter and feasted his eyes on the heaped-up sweets in different colours and shapes, and wished for a moment he could eat recklessly as he used to. But perhaps that'd cost him his life

today—the secret of his survival being the spartan life he led, rigorously suppressing the cravings of the palate. He asked, “What’s fresh today?” The man at the counter said, “We prepare everything fresh every day. Nothing is yesterday’s. . . .” Rao could only partly guess what he was saying but, without betraying himself, said, “Pack up *jilebi* for three rupees. . . .” He counted out the cash carefully, received the packet of *jilebi*, held it near his nostrils (the smell of food would not hurt, and there was no medical advice against it), for a moment relishing its rose-scented flavour; and was on his way again. Arriving at the point of Chettiar Stores, he paused and looked up at his right—yes that street was still there as he had known it. . . .

Noticing him hesitating there, the shopman hailed from his shop, “Oh, Grand Master, you want anything?” He felt annoyed. Why couldn’t they leave him alone? And then a young shop assistant came out to take his order. Rao looked down at him and asked, pointing at the cross street, “Where does it lead?”

“To the next street”, the boy said, and that somehow satisfied him. The boy asked, “What can I get you?”

“Oh, will no one leave me alone?” Rao thought with irritation. They seemed to assume that he needed something all the time. He hugged the packet of sweets close to his chest, along with the umbrella slung on the crook of his arm. The boy seemed to be bent on selling him something. And so he said, “Have you sandalwood soap?” He remembered that S., or whoever it was, used to be fond of it. The boy got it for him with alacrity. Its fragrance brought back some old memories. He had thought there was a scent of jasmine about S., but he realised now that it must have been that of sandalwood. He smelt it nostalgically before thrusting it into his pocket. “Anything else, sir?” asked the boy. “No, you may go”, and he crossed Market Road over to the other side.

TRUSTING HIS INSTINCT to guide him, he proceeded along the cross street ahead of Chettiar Stores. It led to another street running parallel, where he took a turn to his left on an

impulse, and then again to his right into a lane, and then left, and then about-turn—but there was no trace of Gokulam Street. As he tap-tapped along, he noticed a cobbler on the roadside, cleared his throat, struck his staff on the ground to attract attention and asked, “Here, which way to Gokulam Street?” At first, the cobbler shook his head, then, to get rid of the enquirer, pointed vaguely in some direction and resumed his stitching. “Is there a coconut tree in this street?” The other once again pointed along the road. Rao felt indignant. “Haughty beggar”, he muttered. “In those days I’d have. . . .” He moved on, hoping he’d come across the landmark. He stopped a couple of others to ask the same question, and that did not help. No coconut tree anywhere. He was sure that it was somewhere here that he used to come, but everything was changed. All the generation of men and women who could have known Gokulam Street and the coconut tree were dead—new generations around here, totally oblivious of the past. He was a lone survivor.

He moved cautiously now, as the sun was going down. He became rather nervous and jabbed his staff down at each step, afraid of stumbling into a hole. It was a strain moving in this fashion, so slow and careful, and he began to despair that he’d ever reach the Market Road again. He began to feel anxious, regretted this expedition. The family would blame him if he should have a mishap. Somehow he felt more disturbed at the thought of their resentment than of his own possible suffering. But he kept hobbling along steadily. Some passers-by paused to stare at him and comment on his perambulation. At some point, his staff seemed to stab through a soft surface; at the same moment a brown mongrel, which had lain curled up in dust, in perfect camouflage, sprang up with a piercing howl. Rao instinctively jumped, as he had not done for decades, luckily without falling down but the packet of *jilebi* flew from his grip and landed in front of the mongrel, who picked it up and trotted away, wagging his tail in gratitude. Rao looked after the dog helplessly and resumed his journey homeward. Brooding over it, he commented to himself, “Who knows, S. is perhaps in this incarnation now. . . .”

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Martin Esslin

The Bitter Bread of Exile

Brecht between the Soviet Union & the USA

*Tu lascerai ogni cosa diletta
Più caramente, e questo è quello stralo
Che l'arco dello esilio pria saetta.*

*Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
Lo pane altrui, e com'è duro calle
Lo scendere e il salir per l'altrui scale.*

*E quel che più ti graverà le spalle
Sarà la compagnia malvagia e scempia
Con la qual tu cadrai in questa valle,*

*Che tutta ingrata, tutta matta ed empia
Sì farà contro a te. . . .*

DANTE, *Paradiso*, XVII. 55-65*



THE EXODUS of the German intellectuals from Hitler's *Reich* after his advent to power on 30 January 1933—almost half-a-century ago—was one of the most momentous shifts in the cultural centre of gravity the Western world has known, comparable perhaps only with the effects of the influx of Byzantine scholars to Italy

after the collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire.

* You will leave everything that you love/most dearly, and that is the arrow/that first the bow of exile aims at you.

You will experience how much tastes of salt/the bread of others and how hard a path/is going up and down on others' stairs.

But what will heaviest weigh upon your shoulders/will be the vile and worthless company/with whom you will plunge into that vale.

Who, all ungrateful, crazy, impious/will turn against you. . . . (trans. M.E.)

The plight of the many writers among these exiles was particularly tragic. They lived by their language; and even before the outbreak of war the area where German books, newspapers, and periodicals could still be freely produced was shrinking: at first Switzerland, Austria, the German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia remained more or less open to them, while these countries were still free from Nazi domination. And, of course, the growing colonies of refugees in Holland, France, Belgium and other countries where German intellectuals had found refuge provided additional, if restricted, outlets for the work of the German writers.

I still remember—I was a schoolboy at the time—the stream of melancholy, somewhat bedraggled if still genteelly dressed figures that passed through my father's house in Vienna in the early months of 1933. These writers and journalists talked about their achievements, the fine positions they had occupied, the books they had written: they were all looking for regular work. Each had a plan for a new periodical he wanted to edit, or for a new world-shaking book that would expose the Nazi sham to a world as yet unaware of the dangers that régime of unscrupulous gangsters represented. (As though the Western world were interested in those warnings that later turned out to be only too well founded!) And I recall among these visitors the grave, swarthy features of Julius Hay, the Hungarian dramatist who had established himself as one of the leading playwrights in pre-Hitler Berlin: soft-spoken, with deeply melancholy eyes. His latest play had just been directed by Max Reinhardt at the *Deutsches Theater*—the last production before it was taken over by the Nazis. A Communist, Hay fell foul of the Austrian authorities after the brief civil war in February 1934 (when the Social Democrats were suppressed by the Austrian Catholic-Fascist party). He spent some months in prison, and after his release emigrated to the Soviet Union.

Julius Hay figures prominently in a book which, for the first time, gives a detailed account of the