| Chapter 4

Gallimaufry

McKinnon McKenzie of Ballard Estate in downtown Bombay, the ticketing agents for the British India Steam Navigation Company, had informed me, late in October of 1955, that the m.s. 'Amra' would sail on the 20th of November for Dar es Salaam. A berth had been booked for me on that boat. I had earlier accepted the offer of a teaching position by the Aga Khan Schools Administration of Tanganyika. However, my prospective employers had not thought of allowing me enough time to give notice to my employers then to find a replacement for me so that I could leave them with a clear conscience. At the time, I was a lecturer in English at St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry. The college, however, was generous enough to let me go without their docking my salary, for what it was worth, in lieu of notice. Ten days or so before I was to embark, I was seen off at Kottarakara– the nearest railway station for us in those days- to begin my train journey to Madras en route to Bombay. Earlier in the year I had married, and my wife Ammu was then hugely pregnant with our first child. The modest salary that I had been earning as a college teacher would hardly have been enough to make ends meet, considering that there would soon be a new mouth to feed. That was what had prompted me to look for teaching opportunities outside India.

I broke my journey in Madras to fetch some articles of clothing that I had got made to order by a well-known gentlemen's tailor in China Town as there were no skilled craftsmen to speak of in our neck of the woods, Kumbanad that is. I had earlier been to Madras to be measured for my suits and shirts and had stayed on for a week or so to take a fitting as well. In those days, as far as I could remember, buying clothes off the peg was not common in South India. The latter-day Raymonds or Park Lane or Louis Philippe outlets were still many years in coming. I stayed with my paternal aunt Thankamma Memi in Madras. Her husband, T.L. John was the aviation superintendent for Standard Vacuum at the Meenambakkam airport. The second time round, I stayed with them only for a day or so. I left Madras on 14th November. I remember Banglaavil Sunnychayan, his cousin P.S. George (later to become Air Marshal in the Indian Air Force), Ammu's cousin Leela and Thoppil Georgekutty pitching up at the Central Station to see me off. I reached Bombay a day and a half later to be received at the Victoria Terminus –since renamed Chatrapathi Shivaji Terminus- by my maternal aunt Madeline's eldest son George (affectionately called Das) who was living on Standard Batteries Road, Santa Cruz, a suburb to the north of downtown Bombay.

The four-day break there gave me some time to explore the more interesting parts of Bombay. The city in those days, whenever seen under a canopy of bright skies, revealed pastel-shaded low-rise buildings, in whichever direction you looked, with the odd high-rises incongruously sticking out here and there

Sadly, a pall of grime has since descended on the city and its new skyline. The acrid exhaust fumes that assail your nostrils in Bombay, now re-christened 'Mumbai', were not as overpowering then; there were fewer cars on the streets in those days, mostly

Ambassadors and Fiat *Millicento*. Nor was the compulsive honking of horns as ear-shattering then. The urban sprawl that we now see had not begun its unplanned foray into rural Bombay, either. In those days you did not have to hold your nose all the time for fear that a powerful stench might assail your nostrils, as you are compelled to do now when your train slows down and chugs past the seedier quarters of the city like Dharaavi, the largest slum in Asia, for instance. The hovels and the shantytowns with its squalor and deprivation we see now had not begun to pockmark the face of Bombay at that time. Let me hasten to add that for all that, there is a hidden vibrancy that you can feel in present day Dharaavi as a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit that transcends the misery of their milieu. Then there was gentrified Bombay.

Marine Drive, also called the Queen's Necklace, with its largely art-deco architecture that was then in vogue in Bombay, as also its esplanade along the seafront, revealed the city's genteel charm especially at night to viewers from Malabar Hill. Gazed at from a distance, the glowing street lamps, arcing along the curve of the drive that hugged the shingled beach, looked like a double strand of pearls setting off a well-bred neckline. That distance lends enchantment to the view is an old, but handy cliché.

It is also a self-evident truth; up to a point, that is. Viewed from the top of a hill, any landscape or seascape would present the beholder a sweeping canvas that shows only the broad strokes, which effectively mask the flaws that would become increasingly visible only as he approaches it. As he comes closer and closer to the bottom, he sees more and more of the 'freckles and the warts' that take away from the picture-perfect prospect that was before him from a distance. And, so it is with the profile of the Marine Drive and its 'necklace'. At close quarters the buildings look positively squat. Some of them also look distinctly squalid, with the paint peeling off in places and the wet patches in the concrete predictably spreading their mouldering tentacles along the cornices. And the esplanade, strewn with litter, sadly stands witness to the ambivalent civic sense of at least some of Mumbai's citizens.

So, a hill, depending on whether you are on top of it or at the bottom, gives you two different perspectives. There is that of the man, now coming down, becoming painfully aware of the blemishes that mar the uninterrupted sweep of the landscape that had captivated him from afar a while ago. He now sees the bald patches in the greenness, the blighted palm trees with their curled-up fronds that no more sway in the breeze, the sewers that overflow with waste, the houses left derelict, the odd dead stray or two run over and left to rot by the wayside and the sacred cows, -run them over if you dare at your own peril! - which leave their splattering signature behind as they loiter the streets. In contrast, there was the earlier vista from the hilltop which gave it a gloss that hid all these flaws.

However, to express a prejudice in favour of or against any one view is to miss the point of the human condition. The differing 'points of view' is in fact an allegory of the inherent contradictions typical of man and of the environment he creates. They show a yoking together of the good and the bad, of the pretty and the ugly, of the wretched and the brave. You cannot see one unless it is juxtaposed with the other.

Having seen both, the observer may then highlight the virtues and underplay the flaws depending on his particular predilections. Or turn a blind eye to what is good or pretty and focus only on the bad and the ugly, as many a writer or filmmaker on a journey of discovery to India has often shown a penchant for. V. S. Naipaul, the Nobel-laureate, for instance, was unsparing in his largely negative observations about India in his book titled 'An Area of Darkness' published some forty years ago. It was clearly a blinkered view. A sweeping statement he made at the beginning of the book is still etched in my memory. "Indians defecate everywhere". The last thing one would expect of a cultured person is crassness. To that extent, therefore, his statement is jarring. Since those insensitive days, happily, he has mellowed and has plumped for the broader, more even-handed approach in dealing with India. He is now wary of making sweeping generalisations.

If you are too fastidious, you fail to see the wood for the trees. It was this failing on the part of those nit-picking observers that prompted Ashok Mehta, the prominent Indian socialist leader of the fifties and the sixties, to expostulate gently with a western journalist who had made certain facetious remarks about India. It was made at a press conference, which took place at the Indian High Commissioner's residence in Dar-es-Salaam, in 1962 as I recall. And he said, "Visit India by all means, but it should not be just to see its sewers and the night soil or its squalor and its grinding poverty; there is so much else to see that is idyllic and heart-warming in India" or words to that effect. Sadly, such counsel notwithstanding, travel writers gleefully continue to project their lop-sided views as fancy takes them. This dichotomy is thus a paradigm for man's conflicting perceptions of what is wholesome or unwholesome in the selfsame object, each point of view having stemmed from the preconceptions of the beholder.

An observer's ossified notions about people and places often distort his vision. A land of contradictions such as India quite easily lends itself to this. It is therefore not always easy for a visitor to India to observe things with cool detachment. It is either the inane romanticism that its fabled snake charmers, rope tricks and caparisoned elephants and its ancient palaces, temples and mausoleums evoke, or the revulsion that the dirt and squalor and the scenes of human degradation, equally macabre and the grotesque, generate.

A person or a place is not carved in stone and does not stand for one thing and one thing only. It is not just 'what you see is what you get'. A place, or even a thing, for instance, may mean different things to different people. It may also appear different to the same people at different times. Take places for instance. The Chowpatty and Juhu beaches of Bombay were and still are popular haunts for Bombayites –Mumbaikars as they are labelled these days- out for an enjoyable evening stroll. The pickpockets too, out looking for suckers, have a field day there in the evenings especially during the festival seasons. The beaches are also meeting points for clandestine lovers whose 'close encounters of the earthy kind' often offend the sensibilities of the more prudish among the strollers.

Ammu tells me of an amusing cameo that was acted out when she halted in Bombay for a few days in 1957 *in transit* to Tanganyika to join me. She was put up at her Uncle George and Aunt Sam's apartment. One evening, they drove to Juhu for an evening out. As they were ambling along the beach to choose a secluded spot to sit down, Uncle George suddenly broke away and sped ahead for a few yards and then doubled back just as quickly and hissed between his clenched teeth, with alarm writ large on his face, 'Let's

go back! Let's go back!' Aunt Sam did not oblige, but merely smiled knowingly, and turning to Ammu, said something *sotto voce* in her ears. She was still smiling. Apparently, the uncle had wanted to protect her 'innocent' niece from the 'offending spectacle' of a youthful couple who were even at that moment entwined in a deep embrace. What is sauce for goose is not sauce for gander!

Again, different folks react differently when they visit places of interest, like for instance some of the temples of India. The eroticism of *Khajuraho* sculptures has unfortunately attracted undue attention all over the world. The temple sculptures there, *in flagrante delicto* (?), doubtless tend to arouse the prurient interest of the leering voyeurs. The connoisseur of art, on the other hand, is captivated by the aesthetic curves and the clefts of the disrobed gods and goddesses. To the devotees, in contrast, the sculptures are objects of veneration and worship. This has often raised an interesting question. Is the line between fascination for erotica and veneration of a female deity a thin one?

Incidentally, the rituals in some temples of Kerala throw an interesting sidelight on the form of worship that has been conjured up there by man's creative genius. As an interesting departure from most other temples, the worshippers there celebrate the erogenous zones of the reigning deity through songs that border on the irreverent to the uninitiated. The temple at Kodungalloor continues this practice to this day. Heaven forbid if anything even remotely physical, leave alone the prurient, finds expression in a strait-laced evangelical Christian congregation! One cannot help but admire the refreshingly unselfconscious approach of the Hindus in general in so naturally yoking together the 'sacred' and the 'profane', for want of a better term, in a temple. Witness the fervour of piety and the ardour of love meeting and merging in their singing the glory of the dark and handsome Krishna the ever-youthful cowherd, his flute on his lips, in the company of his Gopikas for all time!

A place of Christian worship has always evoked mixed feelings in me. When I was under the care and protection of my parents, especially in my pre-teen years, I had no option but to obey my father's promptings and attend Sunday worship at the Brethren assembly. With their unstructured pattern of service, there were times when I would start fretting and fidgeting if the service stepped over my threshold of patience. That was not infrequent, either. On one such occasion, Mrs. Noel, the local white missionary's redoubtable wife, spotted me roving my restless eyes over the congregation. In the meanwhile, a believer's impromptu prayer, increasing in zeal with each passing minute, had been winding its way through a maze of supplications and hallelujahs with no immediate end in prospect. She gave me a stern glare and then flicked her right index and middle fingers over her batting eyelids to signal me to close my eyes. That I was tempted to pay her back in the same coin is another matter.

As every teacher knows, the span of attention of a growing child is limited. And, sources of distraction are aplenty all around you. When I became a teenager, given the freedom to choose between the Plymouth Brethren, the pietistic Christian sect with no formal creed, and the Episcopal Mar Thoma Church, I chose the latter.

For one thing, the tremulous cadences of its structured liturgy appealed to me, as did the elaborate vestments worn by the bishops; their copes, their black caps embroidered with

crosses as also their croziers. I must admit though that even a bishop dressed up in all that regalia, but if he were tone-deaf, could still turn the customary resonance of the chants into dissonance. In spite of this episcopal aberration, the image of the swirling fumes that rise from the censer and always fill the nave with fragrance –even as the sexton, head bowed, left hand on heart and right hand all atremble was swinging it- was all that I needed to expereince the indefinable mystique of the Eucharist.

In the years that followed, with the benefit of hindsight, I have become increasingly disillusioned with the mechanical repetitiveness of the set patterns of the prayers, canticles and antiphonal chants. And the pomp and panoply of the Episcopal regalia too has lost some of its sheen in my eyes with the passage of time. Clearly, the same things can appear different to the same person at different times in his life, measured against the changing yardstick of his growing experience. But at the time, the resounding resonance of the sung liturgy muted the 'still small voice' of caution that might have troubled my mind wavering between love of form and of substance. Or, perhaps, as an adolescent, I may not have had the nerve to resist peer pressures then.

For another, the duration of a church service was largely predictable. It would last two hours and no more, generally. And, that too helped to determine my choice. True, there was always the likelihood of the parish priest delivering a particularly tedious homily on a Sunday or of the lay secretary ploughing through pastoral missives, of which sometimes there would be a veritable avalanche. But, what came after such a tedious imposition compensated for your patience having been earlier tested. The boys and girls eagerly poured out of the church and stood around in the open and discreetly flirted through the fifteen minute break before the informal and enjoyable meeting of the Youth League that followed. It was intended more to initiate the youth into the church-centred community service than to stuff their minds with doctrinal matters, lest they lost their interest in Christian faith by being fed with more of the same thing on the same day.

The youth could also look eagerly forward to the festivals of Christmas and Easter in the Christian calendar. Especially Christmas, aptly called the festive season, was a time of joyful reunion for the family and in particular for the children back home on break from school. That was also a time when the young ones of the parish would go carolling from house to house during the week before Christmas. No doubt, it was all great fun. The carol service itself on the eve of Christmas came after weeks of preparation, a time of camaraderie and enjoyment. Christmas day like no other day held out the delectable prospect of a homely table weighed down with goodies. In my growing-up years, I was able to see how all this was denied to the young ones in the name of doctrine by the elders of the stiff-necked Brethren sect that the likes of old Mrs. Noel, with the forbidding manner, represented.

But, let me hasten to add that my impression about her was somewhat softened when, years later, she invited us over, that is, Ammu and me, just after our marriage, to her bungalow for tea. She played the perfect hostess on that day and engaged us in small talk, interspersed with banter, before serving us steaming pieces of boiled cassava (*chendamuriyan kappa puzhungiyathu)*, with country butter dribbling down the sides, and home-baked sponge cakes. Not for her the fancy pastries from the bakery. Her hospitality

was unpretentious and sincere. She rose in my estimation all of a sudden. Again, this goes to show how first impressions can be misleading.

I fear I have strayed very far, too far in fact, from hilltops to optical illusions to conflicting perceptions or precepts born of preconceived notions and flexible spans of attention. For those who read this, the mental twists and turns taken to negotiate this winding stream of consciousness indeed must have been trying. My earlier intention was only to show how much of an eyesore Bombay has since become and how its former 'glory has departed' or '*Ichabod*' as some would declaim. Yes, I have gone off at a tangent for far too long. I have been carried away. I have rambled. I must, therefore, once again 'lift up mine eyes unto the hills', the Malabar Hill that is, and resume where I left off.

But bear with me for a little more. It is odd, isn't it, that this hill should assume a name like 'Malabar' when it is situated hundreds of miles to the north of what is called the Malabar Coast. It is stranger still that most of what is the Malabar Coast, now shown as Kerala on the political map of India, is known as 'God's Own Country' in the tourist brochures that have, of late, been insistently touting for business.

Anyone who knows Kerala's present social history firsthand would find it difficult to believe that this state, which is forever in the business of manufacturing political dissent, can claim to have anything that is even remotely endearing as a saving grace. What with a largely lazy workforce of malingerers and freeloaders who hold the state to ransom from time to time, ours is a lost cause for divine grace. Again, how can God lend His name to this state which has the highest rate of suicides in the world? It may all be symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Yet, oblivious of all this, tourists descend on Kerala in droves to enjoy its scenic beauty, its fresh beaches, its inland waterways, its perpetual greenery, its wild life. God has endowed the place with these natural attractions though the people themselves have obstinately set their faces against fresh ideas. Tourists with money to splurge may want to turn a blind eye to these human failings, regardless! Enough said of illusory attractions.

The Malabar Hill, also a favourite destination of tourists, has its idyllic charm in its hanging gardens and the Kamala Nehru Park and its general layout. Juxtaposed, it also has the Zoroastrian Towers of Silence where the resident vultures customarily pick clean the bones of the Parsi dead. The Parsis of Bombay ritually leave their dead there wrapped in a shroud for the vultures to make a meal of. That such a macabre sight can be touted, as a tourist attraction, side by side with the idyllic is rather odd, though. Let me hazard a guess and say that a facetious travel writer must have originally coined the now-familiar expression 'culture-vulturing', following his visit to the Malabar Hill and the Tower of Silence. I saw only the hovering vultures there. Even if one were curious, there did not seem to be any way one could see the bodies of the dead laid out for the bald-headed scavengers to have their grisly repast.

Almost a quarter of a century later, quite by accident, I attended the funeral ceremony of a Parsi acquaintance who had just passed away. I happened to be in Madras at the time doing the voice-over for a documentary film on the Lawrence School, Lovedale, where I was teaching at the time. The person in question was the stepfather of two of my students

at the same school: Gillian and Michael Mehta. The man had died in a plane crash. As far as I know, Madras did not have then, and has not had to this day, a tower of silence to dispose of the Parsi dead. What was the alternative mode of disposal; burial or cremation, either of which I am told is anathema to the fire-worshipping Zoroastrians?

What intrigued me more on this occasion, however, was the use of a dog on a leash, men in white masks leading it to the dead body where it was laid out on a bier, to let the dog sniff at the body and 'certify' that the person's soul had left it. At the time, I remember feeling queasy about the role given to a canine to signify that the 'soul' had indeed left 'this mortal coil' behind. How did it do it? Nod its head? Let out a howl? I neither saw nor heard anything. To be facetious on such occasions was I knew in poor taste. Unbeknown to man, had discernment indeed fled to animals I ventured to ask with a straight face. In matters of faith, I should have known that wisecracking is an ill-considered exercise that can provoke even the sanest of people to react strangely. My interlocutor parried my query silently with a pained expression on his face. But I am digressing again from my sightseeing in Bombay.

The Gateway of India is a monument that was erected in 1911, if my memory is right, to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary to the so-called Jewel in the Imperial Crown. This is a popular spot on the seafront for promenading. The perennial presence of large flocks of pigeons in the pedestrianised public square that the Gateway opens into draws large numbers of people, somewhat similar to what the pigeons of Trafalgar Square used to do for Londoners until not too long ago. For better or for worse, the new millennium's first Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, has since driven the pesky birds away from Trafalgar Square. It may or may not be true that he used kestrels to frighten them away. Along with the pigeons, the vendors of birdseed too had to move away. The Nelson Column and the lions around the pedestal, however, have since looked less dropped upon. However, when I was in London in 2006 the pigeons were back with a vengeance!

The Indo-Saracen architecture of the Gateway is typical of the many surviving architectural wonders that give Bombay, the carbuncle that it has now erupted into, its remaining traces of refinement and culture. The British had built them on a grand scale, no doubt, as part of their grandiose design to flaunt their imperial power. The Taj Mahal Hotel is one such and still stands proudly overlooking the esplanade not far from the Gateway. When, years later, I saw for the first time the St. Pancras Railway Station at King's Cross in London, my mind went back to the time I gazed at the splendid Railway Headquarters in Bombay not far from Flora Fountain. The architectural similarity is striking. Then beyond the traffic in Hornby road there is the Victoria Terminus, which is perhaps the most majestic landmark in Bombay. It is an example of the Italian Gothic revival architecture. It is vast and ornate, with a tower on top of it and scores of covered passages and elaborate windows all round. It has since been declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations.

Again, further away, in Cumballa Hill, in those days there used to be the gracious colonial bungalows that had been built with old money. Most of them have since fallen under the wrecker's balls to satisfy the ever-growing greed of the 'sky-scraping' builders of Bombay. From being a fishing village some three hundred and fifty-odd years ago

when the island that it was had come to the Crown as Catherine of Braganza's dower, now it sits straddling the surrounding waters to become a part of an infinitely larger concrete jungle that modern Bombay is, a standing monument to philistinism and the power of wealth.

Many of my impressions of Bombay in 1955 have faded with the passage of time. However, my visit to the social club of which my cousin George was a member still lingers vividly if only for my fortuitous involvement in an incident on the dance floor there. The club in question was I believe on St. Andrews Road and was jointly patronized by the Goan and East Indian communities of Bandra in Bombay. It was a Saturday night and I had tagged along with George, who had earned a reputation of being a bit of a lad in his salad days.

Not wanting to take the floor, for fear of making a spectacle of myself, I sat out while most of the others started dancing as the band struck up. Things swung along smoothly for those who were waltzing or quickstepping round the floor one dance after another. After the first few dances, a tag dance was announced. It was while the dance was going on that the trouble started. I was to learn later that one of the dancers had refused to yield his partner to a 'tagger' because the latter had appeared completely sozzled and hardly able to stand even as he tentatively tapped the 'quarry's' shoulder in the customary manner. It would appear, the dancer did not respond. In a drunken stupor, the new arrival persisted and when the desired response was still not forthcoming, he began pawing the lady. She remonstrated and her partner angrily pushed the man away. When the man attempted it again, he pushed him down and sitting astride him started pummelling him. The 'victim' was in no state to find his feet or defend himself. That was when I realized that something was seriously amiss.

Strangely, no one had made a move to separate the contenders. The band then stopped playing. The dancers stopped in their stride and were now gawking at the sight, their hands momentarily freeze-framed but still clasped in mid-air, as though ready to swing back into the stride as soon as the band struck up again. It looked no more than a momentary distraction to them, but the whole scene made a funny little tableau while it lasted. This kind of unconcern is symptomatic of our times. True, most people do not like to get involved in a situation such as this for fear that their own dignity may be at risk of being ruffled, let alone the very real danger of their persons being roughed up in a fracas that might ensue. Dishevelled hair, a black eye or a torn shirt on your back is not a pretty sight. Play it safe and keep your distance, the prudent always say. Or jump in and seize the moment, as the not so prudent would do.

Being a creature of impulse, I sprang up from my seat, strode across the floor and plucked up the 'top dog', stood him up and pinioned him against the wall until he stopped resisting. The 'underdog' staggered to his feet and lurched away without saying so much as a 'thank you' to his honorary saviour. This was just as well. I was no less surprised than the others present there at what I had found the gumption to do. Gratuitous intervention is often unthinking. If it succeeds, others look at you with interest or even respect. It was not unlike the 'admirable Creighton' situation: 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man!' The upshot of it was that I was offered a drink 'on the house' for my well-intentioned meddling.

However, life has since taught me that acting impulsively in order to right a perceived wrong does not necessarily earn you anyone's admiration, and in particular that of your family. On the contrary, things could go woefully awry, however justified your effort might have been to set things right, and instead of your winning praise for your timely intervention you take stick. You are fingered as the wrongdoer. Sometimes, you sense that discretion is the better part of valour and, although it goes against the grain, you learn to grin and bear the dent on your self-esteem silently.

The m. s. Amra was berthed alongside at the Ballard Estate Wharf. It weighed anchor on schedule in the afternoon of 20th November. Leaning on the railings, I stood on the deck as I watched the shore receding in the distance until the figures on the waterfront appeared no bigger than mere specks on the shoreline. I felt I was moving away, I did not know for how long, from a world that I was familiar with to one that I knew little about except for what I had learned from books or by word of mouth. And, that was hardly complimentary. I suppose it was natural, therefore, that my enthusiasm at the prospect of seeing new places and meeting new people was somewhat dampened by a certain kind of uneasiness about what lay in store. It also brought back to mind what a friend of mine, a self-professed palm-reader, had said, half in jest, not long before I left India: 'You are consumed by a strong desire to be always on the move, you will drift from continent to continent and you will die away from home'. Could that mean, away from Iraq where I was born? However much of a rationalist one may claim to be, the prognostications of a clairvoyant, even those of a charlatan, could be disquieting. When you see how the occult was always blended with the obvious in every aspect of life in Africa, let alone India, you begin to wonder if there are 'more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

The ship was soon out in the open sea. It was an 8000-ton motor vessel that had seen service during World War II and was refitted after the war for carrying passengers. It was by no stretch of imagination a luxury liner, but it was comfortable enough for those who had known nothing better. November is the time of the year when the sea is calm, the monsoons having spent all its passions on the Arabian Sea earlier in the year. The voyage was a new experience for a landlubber like me. I was travelling out of the country for the first time. In those days, there was no direct air-link between India and Tanganyika.

I have travelled from continent to continent many times since and mostly by air, but have never since enjoyed a journey as much as I did that first voyage. It was the time of the year when the Arabian Sea did not seethe. Even so, the gentle swell of the ship beneath my feet as it cleaved through the sea made me feel slightly out of sorts for some time, but, as I learned to bob with the mild heave of the deck, I soon began to feel less and less queasy. Before I retired to my cabin below, I would spend some time gazing out into the sea.

In the evenings, one is bewitched by the sea, quietly shimmering all around you, under the pale light of the moon, as if it were a sequined skirt, its hemline let down to spread out around you as far as eye could see. And sometimes a shoal of flying fish would fling themselves out of the shimmering waters and momentarily arch across your eyes and splash down in a silvery drizzle, before being sucked in by the sea. There were, too, the luminescent jellyfishes that floated by, occasionally winking like fireflies. Once in a long

while a ship would pass by in the distance sounding its siren in greeting, which would be acknowledged in like manner by the captain from the bridge. Thus with your mind full of the sights and sounds of the open sea and feeling at ease with yourself, you retire to your cabin and soon fall asleep lulled by the constant creak of the ship and the distant hum from the engine room below decks.

I was not entitled to first-class passage. I was given the more modest second-class passage. Yet, what with only another person to share my cabin with and his spending most of each day with his Gujarati relatives travelling steerage between decks, I had the cabin to myself for most of the time almost until it was time for him to retire.

For seven days, until we drew alongside at Mombassa, the first port of call, I took part with youthful eagerness in all the activities on offer on board. During the day, there were all kinds of deck games one could play. My game of choice was table tennis, which I played for hours on end. It kept me fit and helped me make friends. Dr. Firoze Allidina and his charming Ismaili bride, Yasmin –they were still honeymooning- were on board and both could hit a pretty ball across the ping-pong net. Then there was Nargis Moolah, a petite Parsi girl on her way to Uganda to join her folks. And, there was also a Goan girl shorn of all hair, her having only just recovered from a bout of typhoid. Her name escapes me now. Perhaps, her homely looks were not as reinforcing. She was still convalescing and looked too fragile for anything as vigorous as ping-pong or deck quoits, but that did not stop her from eagerly joining us for a game of gin rummy when we were not otherwise busy. The rest of the passengers were older people returning to Africa after their holidays.

After the exertions of the games played on deck, the ship's watering hole, the bar, was a cosy corner to make a beeline for. To the teetotallers, there was an assortment of lemonades and colas and fruit juices on offer. To those who indulge in something more stimulating, there were all kinds of spirits and cocktails to be had. The stewards on board were old hands at the fine art of mixing cocktails to the nodding approval of the cognoscenti. Being one who had only snatched the occasional swig, and that too not openly until then, naturally I was not one of that select band of epicureans.

Even talking 'drinks', let alone tasting them, would have been a big 'no-no' in a priggish society such as was ours. It was not surprising therefore that it was to take me many more years before I learned that a single-malt whisky with plain water was the preferred drink of the connoisseur or that you have to have your vodka shaken or stirred or that it was angostura bitters not cochineal that turned gin pink or that wine could be fruity, full-bodied or dry. By the time I got to know enough about the cocktails they served on board and made bold to order my first hesitant cocktail, the voyage was nearly done. Until that part of the voyage, I had chosen to make do with a shot of gin and lemon before midday or a whisky and soda after the sun was over the yardarm and all that. And instinctively, I would look over my shoulders before I took my first sip.

I go back in time to 1945-'46 the year I spent at the M. T. Seminary High School when my classmate and friend K. C. Chandy Junior (son of K. C. Chandy Senior, a well-known lawyer of Kottayam at that time) would pilfer gin or whisky from time to time from his old man's liquor cabinet and smuggle it in using an empty inkbottle with its label still

intact, for his close friends to take a furtive sip or two from, heads bent over the bottle, almost like drinking communion wine from a chalice; only, this time round the 'chalice' would be passed round during recess more than once, away from prying eyes. That was my first 'spiritual' rite of passage.

Again, I think it was in that very same year that I had my first tentative taste of coconut toddy, known in our part of the world as *Kallu*. It is the fermented sap of the coconut palm. Taken in moderation, it is only a mildly intoxicating drink that would do no more harm than giving you a sense of well-being, except that it would 'thicken' your tongue and slur your speech somewhat if taken on an empty stomach. So, unless you throw caution to the winds, your motor nerves would almost always yield to your will to 'uphold' your locomotive dignity after just a quick swig or two of this 'home-brewed' elixir.

I had tried it for the first time on the day of the annual inter-school boat race at the Kodimatha stretch of the Meenachil River. I was one of the paddlers on the '*Iruttukuthi*' (very like the eponymous boat that river pirates of yore used under cover of the dark and was appropriately named 'stabber of darkness') representing the M.T. Seminary High School at the race. It was one of those rare occasions when we were not under the watchful eyes of our preceptors or housemasters. We had left early under the pretext of doing a dummy run before the actual race. We did practise, no doubt, but, halfway down the river stretch, we also dived into a riverside toddy shop to partake of the pick-me-up on offer. The regulars looked curiously at us and then grinned knowingly. A few, who were already long into their cups, merely grunted their disapproval at our cheeky intrusion into this adult preserve. Now, where was I? Oh yes, the watering hole on board the ship.

There were other diversions too on board. Movies were shown on alternate evenings. The ship 'boasted' of a 16mm projector. We assembled after dinner on the covered deck and sat in front of a rolled-down screen to watch what was on offer. I cannot recall having seen any film that made an impression, but the evenings were pleasant enough, nonetheless, if only as a social occasion. The ship also had a band of a sort; a percussion instrument, a double bass, a violin, a horn and a saxophone, all played by the Goan crew on board as far as I could tell. We had after-dinner social dance on three nights. And, I took my first hesitant step at learning the Waltz. The Quickstep, however, did not yield as readily to my will. Anything more than a 'one two three' would time and again upset my sense of timing. Looking back at the years since then, I must confess my footwork never did manage to yield to the beat of music. Sure, I would muck in for a cha-cha-cha or a rock 'n roll more for a bit of fun than from any great narcissistic desire to impress. I did make an effort to learn it formally at the University of London Union, but soon realised it was too much pain for too little gain.

Seven days after the m. s. Amra had left Bombay, it drew alongside the quay, its cranes waiting, somewhat like their wading namesakes of the avian kind, with their 'beaks' at the ready to hook and lift. Mombassa was the first port of call. The ship would remain moored overnight before sailing onward to its final destination. As I stood leaning on the upper deck railing before going ashore, what accosted my eyes first was the gaggle of chattering African stevedores lining the quay in anticipation. I had not seen Africans

before except for the Arabised African sailors, Sudanese most likely, dressed in their white caftans and their turbans, seasonally plying their traditional dhows between the Gulf States and the west coast of India. And those were only fleeting sightings.

The stereotype of the kinky hair, the wide nostrils, the broad bridge of nose and the thick lips of the 'negro' was already etched in my mind, but I was not prepared for the magnificent specimens of men, their huge torsos bulging through their threadbare shirts, that met my eyes. Their broad shoulders tapered into compact waistlines, not an ounce of fat showing anywhere on their bodies. They all looked the same to me. I suppose this is true of all foreigners when you see them for the first time. It takes some getting used to before you can tell one from the other. Anyway, to get back to my story, their sparkling white teeth were set off against the ebony of their skin when they opened their mouths to speak or to smile. Having since spent the best part of a quarter of a century in Africa, I venture to say that the Africans have the most perfectly formed teeth in the world. And also their smile is so infectious! This could well be one reason why Africa has a way of growing on you. At least, that was the Africa I came to know and fell in love with.

On the 28th of November, the m. s. Amra came to anchor, out at sea off the Dar-es-Salaam port. Docks had not been built there at the time. We had to disembark down a gangplank on to a gently bobbing floating pontoon. Soon we were ferried to the shore in boats. After passing through immigration and customs, I took my first uncertain step into the landmass of Africa, that great continent of distances, of the sweeping horizons and the outsize sun, of the Savannahs and the baobabs and of much else besides that was soon to take my breath away.

The old colonial Tanganyika had its share of Indians working as clerks in the civil service or the East African Railways or as teachers in schools in the urban areas of the territory for the most part. The sisal estates strewn all over the territory also had its share of *Bwana Shaamba* (supervisors)and *Bwana Fedha* (book-keepers) or storekeepers of Indian stock. Then again, there were Hindu and Shiite Muslim settler traders, largely of Gujarati or Kutchi extraction, who had their *duukaanis* or little groceries or general stores dotting the country, along highways and byways. The ubiquitous Malayalees, regardless of their enterprise in other spheres, had not been able to make inroads into this settler preserve, especially in Africa.

Panjikutty, a civil servant, and his wife Marykutty met me and took me to their place. On reaching there, the first thing that I did was to take a prophylactic dose of an anti-malarial drug, Paludrine, if I remember correctly, (or, was it Daraprim?) to help me ward off that dreaded disease transmitted by the infamous Anopheles mosquito. African mosquitoes can be bloodthirsty with a vengeance. If your guard is down, these nocturnal marauders would buzz and plunge like midget bombers, swooping down to bombard your exposed flanks and score hits. The delayed sequel to the onslaught was far worse than the onslaught itself.

For the next nine years, I would religiously take my pre-emptive dose of the drug without fail. Anyone who dared the humble mosquito to do its damnedest did so at his own peril. I remember my cousin Rajan, on being warned of mosquito bites, having quipped, 'Come now, it would be unfair not to give them their daily bread' and getting his just deserts

soon after. On my first night in Africa, for the first time in my life, I slept under a mosquito net.

The next day, I was to meet the Administrator of the Aga Khan Schools, Al Noor Kassam, a barrister by profession. [Incidentally, he was to venture into politics later, become a member of the TANU, an acronym for the Tanganyika African National Union, with the now legendary Julius Nyerere as its founder, and rise to be a minister in the government some eight years or so after the territory had achieved independence.] I turned up at his office bright and early to see him. In the event, I did not get beyond his secretary's office. Peerwani, that was his name, briefed me on what the job entailed and handed over a train ticket for my journey from Dar es Salaam to Morogoro where I was to be for the next three years.

The journey overnight by train was quite comfortable. As it turned out, there was no one to share the coupe in which my berth was. The cabin attendant advised me to sleep under a mosquito net, which I dutifully did. In the confined space of a coupe, you are more than likely to feel 'cabin'd and cribb'd', especially when you find yourself inside a net as if in a cocoon. The railway carriages in Tanganyika those days were smaller than their broad-gauge counterparts elsewhere, but they were well-appointed nonetheless. The East African Railways that formed a grid connecting Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika was the main means of transport between these British colonies. The trains ran on time and each had a dining car that served you wholesome food, which was good value for the money you paid.

One could fly between the larger towns, but flights were infrequent and the prospect of having to do it in the venerable old DC 3's, the only craft on offer then, as noisy as it was un-pressurized, was not something that one relished. A long journey by road, except along the few asphalt highways, was not a particularly attractive proposition, either, what with having to travel along narrow gravel roads that were often rutted and pot-holed. In summer, the clouds of dust that you kicked up in your wake made matters miserable for the passers-by, both on wheels and on foot. And in the rainy season, long stretches of roads turned into quagmires that were positively impassable. You were, however, likely to find waiting villagers who having shrewdly positioned themselves along the way were only too glad to extricate your cars, but always for a hefty baksheesh. As your wheels got bogged down deeper and deeper in the mud with each frantic revving up, they rubbed their hands with rising glee without so much as hinting that they could offer help until you had exhausted all options. And, only when you sought their help with imploring eyes would they descend on you and name their 'ransom'.

Once, as we were returning from Morogoro to Dar, sure enough we became one more proof of Murphy's Law: 'If things can go wrong, they will'. The car got stuck hub deep in pure mud, the wheels helplessly slipping over without traction. We were all spattered with mud from top to toe! We turned off the ignition and got out. By now the familiar sight of onlookers had appeared in ones and twos as if from nowhere, hoping to make a killing. Soon the high banks on either side were lined with villagers, greed writ large in their beady eyes. They kept meaningfully mum and they would not make the first move. I went up to them and said in Kiswahili, "*Motokaa yangu katika matope. Unaweza kinisaidia kuisukuma gari?*" (My car is stuck in the mud. Can you help push it?) If my

query had been made in English, they would be loath to answer me. East Africans, no matter what tribal tongue they spoke, were proud of their common language, Kiswahili. But that is neither here nor there.

And when they named their price, we were aghast. Then, one of us had a stroke of inspiration. We quickly broke off some stout branches within our reach from the trees on the verge and stuck them into the mud across the rear wheels and tried again. The wheels did come half way up the mud marks, but slipped back again. So we repeated the procedure for the front wheels as well and tried again, this time with the added force of three of us, ankle deep in mud, pushing the car from the rear. And, hey presto, we were free and on the home stretch again to the utter chagrin of the 'onlookers' whose shoulders had visibly fallen! Nothing like that could have happened to the train I had been travelling in on even rails towards Morogoro on thar second night of my arrival in Africa.

Early next morning, the train chugged into Morogoro station. My friend Babu who had helped me secure this teaching position was on the platform to meet me. He took me directly to his place, where I was to stay for the next two years before I could move into one of the staff houses that were even then under construction. Babu was a teller at the local branch of Standard Bank of South Africa. The only other bank in Morogoro at that time was the Barclays Bank branch, where another Malayalee, Fernandes by name, worked as a teller.

Morogoro was a sleepy township, which from end to end in any direction stretched no more than a mile or at the most two. Once a year it came alive somewhat, when the gruelling East African Safari was on. It was held over the long Easter weekend, and one of the fuelling stops along its long and tortuous route happened to be Morogoro. It was quite exhilarating to watch the cars, often badly dented and caked in mud, roar past. On the Easter Saturday of 1956, as I stood at the vantage point of the only gas station in town, who should come to a screeching halt in front of me in his battered car but Mathew Philip (Kunjumon of Kuriannoor), my old classmate and friend from Ashram School days! He was rather a tearaway in school, so I wasn't exactly surprised to see him behind the wheel of a safari car. We had just enough time to say hello to each other, before he roared off with his navigator beside him.

The township is about a hundred miles due west from the capital town of Dar es Salaam. Wherever you turned, you saw the corrugated tin roofs of the single-storey shops or the dwellings that lined the streets, of which there were not many. Tiled buildings were few and far between, much less anything standing taller than two storeys. The one landmark of Morogoro, if you could call it that, was the War Memorial, which stood in a small, but well-manicured park that the town council regarded as its showpiece. The two commercial banks close by were also quite distinctive. Of course, the Ismaili traders of the town had their place of worship, the *Jama'at Khaana* or the community house, a large, squat, two-storeyed building painted a light yellow. The town boasted of a petrol station, the only one for miles around, which belonged to one of the few Sikhs in town. The Sikhs, most of whom were motor mechanics or artisans of some kind, were known among the local Africans as 'Singa-singa'. Our Sikh in question was a cut above the rest and he was always immaculately turned out and had excellent public relations skills. He owned a large grocery cum liquor shop where most Asians and a few Europeans bought

stuff. Like most expatriates, whose credit-worthiness was never in doubt, we too had a standing account with him until we moved to Dar es Salaam. Come Christmas or Easter, he would invariably send a complimentary bottle of good whisky and a fruit cake to each of his regular customers. The only other general store to speak of was 'The Adelphi', patronized largely by the Europeans. The owner was a Greek. The town was also the headquarters of the district as well as of the province of the same name. It therefore was both the seat of the district and provincial administrations.

The provincial commissioner lived in a bungalow in splendid isolation at the top of one of the hills that skirted the town. His name escapes me now, but all referred to him as the PC. Then there was the District Commissioner Richard Gower (whose young son David was to become a great cricketer later), the District Officer A.B. Jones, John Chudleigh, the Chief Engineer and the other British civil servants who lived in comparative comfort at descending points on the slopes of one or the other of the hills around, depending on where the men stood in the pre-ordained pecking order of the colonial officers. The system perpetuated a status-ridden society in which the top dog always stayed at the top of the heap, literally.

Those at the bottom of the heap were the Asian clerks and the bookkeepers and the storekeepers that kept the governmental machinery running smoothly. Without their active involvement, the system would come to a grinding halt. And yet, they did not enjoy the kind of benefits that would be commensurate with the work they did. They were overworked and underpaid and could never hope for promotions; not for them the privilege of 'rising to the level of their inefficiency' that the British were 'entitled' to. Not for them the Africa hardship allowance or the disturbance allowance or the periodic Rest and Recuperation that the top dogs could by their Caucasian rights claim. Not for them the luxury of the spacious fully furnished bungalows, complete with crockery, cutlery and domestic appliances provided, in low-density areas set aside for the privileged few. Not for them the privilege of being home on furlough every year. Not for them the 'golden handshake' proffered on separation from service, besides the assurance of receiving a liberal life pension. They had no perks of any description. They lived cheek by jowl in purpose-built, half furnished houses of humble proportions. They were given home leave only once in five years. The only privilege they could look forward to was the prospect of receiving a modest pension in their twilight years. The lot of the Asian teachers was not any different from that of the lowly civil servants.

A year after my joining the school, I was to become the acting headmaster of our school. Like my Asian compatriots working for the government, I was also relatively deprived; I did not receive any special allowances for this additional responsibility. But, by virtue of the position that this granted me, I would be invited to the official parties and sundowners that were laid on by the powers-that-be on special occasions like the Queen's Birthday or Poppy Day or whenever. One suspected that these big parties were held more to anaesthetize the colonized African's feelings of helpless inadequacy than with any genuine desire to socialize with the 'white man's burden'. Except for such occasions, which were few and far between, the rulers understandably kept themselves to themselves. Their social life was largely centred round the European Club whose members were 'white' by definition, but not all necessarily of Anglo-Saxon stock as

many of the top civil servants were. There was a sprinkling of Scottish, Welsh and Irish among them and an assortment of settlers like Cypriot Greeks and Afrikaners, mostly Sisal planters, several shades darker than the more ruddy northerners.

The Anglo-Saxons of their species were past masters at the art of effortless condescension without being seen to be patronizing. Three and a half centuries of lording it over the subjugated, but often resentful, peoples in their far-flung colonies must have helped them develop this into an art form that found a permanent place in their race consciousness. The few not particularly well educated among them, mostly in the police and prison services, however, were more insensitive and severe in their dealings with the 'natives', as the colonized were disparagingly referred to. This was not surprising, for, since these minions of the law did not 'come from old money and privilege' but rather from the hoi polloi, they would be the first ones to feel insecure if Britain were to close shop in Africa. Subconsciously, this must have made them presciently resentful towards the Africans. Yet, their Anglo-Saxon hands would have smelled sweet set against those of the Germans, who had earlier ruled with a mailed fist over Tanganyika. Many were the horror stories I heard from the Africans who were old enough to remember how notoriously brutal the Germans were in their punitive policies.

Being a UN mandated territory at the time I started work there (formerly it was under the trusteeship of the League of Nations, having been wrested at the end of the First World War from the defeated Germans), Tanganyika was not a colony technically, but a territory to be administered by Britain only as trustees. Although in practice this was mendacious double-speak as everyone knew, the powers-that-be made it a point to send educated officers especially hand-picked for Tanganyika, unlike some of the uncouth upstarts that Britain sent to their colonies elsewhere in Africa. The Tanganyika officers were cultured and well spoken, the few exceptions proving the rule. For the most part, they were also good family men and churchgoers.

A few of them were Church of England. The Emmanuel Anglican church, located a mile due south from the town centre, was on a gentle bank just past *Nyumba Taanu* (a cluster 'Five Houses') on the lower slopes of the hill on which the Provincial Commissioner lived. It was a small, granite-built church sporting a Norman tower with a belfry. And the vicar at that time was a Reverend Arblaster, a mild-mannered Australian who was a good preacher and also a good listener. At a time when the darker-skinned of the faithful were likely to feel intuitively unwelcome at that Anglican Church, the good reverend had no doubts about receiving us with open arms. Yet, many of us preferred to occupy the pews at the rear lest we inadvertently ruffled uppity feathers.

It was in the font of that church that our son we affectionately call Bonny (a nickname he has regarded with distaste since his opting for the American way) was baptised Jacob Poonnoose Joseph, according to Mar Thoma rites by Bishop Alexander Mar Thimotheos who was later to become the Metropolitan of the Marthoma Church. Surprisingly, my son's new-found eagerness to re-discover his roots is now nudging him to 'go native' and change his first name Jacob, to Chacko, its indigenous version, as an earnest of which he has already changed his e.mail ID to 'chakos' which looks more like a strange hybrid.

At the other end of the Christian spectrum, Morogoro had its evangelical counterpart from, where else but the Buckle of the Bible Belt, Nashville, Tennessee, in the person of Roger Bert Banzhaf, bringing the good word to the 'benighted'. He was an outgoing person whose hail-fellow-well-met approach made many friends for him among the Indian Christian expatriates, even as it made audiences who would open their doors for him to hold prayer meetings. Knowing as he did their heterogeneous Episcopalian moorings, he was careful not to stray into the veritable minefield that sectarian hair-splitting could prove to be.

He drove a Volkswagen that took him to wherever his calling took him. Like him, his wife was –Leah I think was her name- an outgoing person and just as American as apple pie. Incidentally, she is the one who taught Ammu how to make peanut butter. They had two children, a boy and a girl. The Banzhafs were less strait-laced than your Bible-thumping, fire and brimstone kind of joyless evangelicals that accost you in our part of the world, who were offensively Christian. They liked good company and good food. Often, we would join them on picnics. A favourite picnic spot was the Morningside hill that constantly echoed to the sound of the streams sluicing down the slopes.

There was not much else that a one-horse town like Morogoro could offer by way of recreation. It had a barn theatre, but that was the exclusive preserve of the uppish Anglo-Saxons. There was one cinema and the pictures they ran were generally dated. Besides, it was strictly out of bounds for children under five. On one occasion, we smuggled in our son Bobby for a matinee showing of 'Ithano'. It was the story of a bull, fighting against the odds, and of a matador trying to kill it ceremonially as was the required ritual. Try hard as he might, he could not finish off the bull. Bobby was hardly three. He was so excited at the combat in the ring that he started clapping his hands and letting off little squeals of delight at the bravery of the bull. We felt sheepish and repeatedly tried to shush him for fear that others in the dress circle might object to the racket he made. In the event, they were so taken with his childlike joy that they told us to let him be. Cliché or not, surely there is a child in every man? Or is it a man in every child?

Could Bobby have seen this unequal combat as a parable of the exploitation of man by man? At the time, no one could have been prescient enough to imagine that he would one day be working as a community worker in Tottenham, North London, among the ethnic minorities who were trying to fight the odds. That the hopes and aspirations we had cherished for Bobby –that he would prove to be an academic high-flyer- did not exactly bear fruit is another matter. There I go with the perpetual lament of a good many control freaks whose children, like the bull in the story, refused to yield. Perhaps its refusal to yield was both a metaphor and an irony.

Even as a child, he had shown signs of being venturesome. He was hardly four when he sallied forth on his own to visit his playmate Nina without telling anyone. This happened a year after we had moved to Dar es Salaam. Nina lived a good half a mile away with her parents Ninaachan and Kunjamma, our family friends. Half way down, Bobby lost his bearings. Not knowing what to do, at first he stood there sobbing silently. He had stood there for a considerable length of time before a kindly passer-by managed to make sense out of his disjointed mumblings and led him back home. Once back home, he regained his composure and acted as though his failed mission had achieved something. In the

meanwhile we had been beside ourselves with worry, Ammu virtually tearing her hair with anxiety. There was not an apartment in our compound that we had not lurched into, calling out his name. Fearing the worst, Saidi our manservant had gone so far as to trawl the ditches dug nearby to let rainwater flow through. The heavy fall of rain earlier in the day had filled them with water the colour of coffee.

Bonny too, as a child, had had his moments. He was hardly five when he 'exceeded his brief' and kissed all the girls on the stage instead of just the two he had been coached to. It was Parents' Day at the Nursery School and the kids were acting out the nursery rhyme, 'Georgie Porgy Pudding and Pie, / Kiss the Girls and Make them Cry'. Some five years later, he expressed his fancy for Sarah Verghese, a girl several years his senior at school, by letting out a wolf whistle as she passed by. The effort only led to his losing control of his bowels. He came home soiled and shamefaced soon after.

Saidi was a personable boy who was very closely attached to the children. He took good care of them both and made sure that they were always well turned out when they were out and about. He was never found wanting in carrying out the domestic chores entrusted to him. And yet on one occasion in a fit of pique, I sent him away because he wanted a few days off for attending his friend's wedding, which I was not prepared to grant. But, he insisted. At that time, I had thought that it was only a pretext on his part to shirk work. Without giving it a second thought, I peremptorily barked at him in Kiswahili, *"Hapaa nataaka kuona wewe mara tena. Nenda zaako. Sasa hiwi!"* (I don't want to see you again. Go away. Right now!) I got him to pack his things, drove him to the bus station and put him on a bus. Looking back, I feel ashamed that I had acted so cruelly, not to say impulsively. It was a long time before we managed to get a suitable helper to replace him. When we act in haste, we get our comeuppance measure for measure!

It took more than three years of trial and error before another reliable helper came into our lives in the person of Juma. He had at one time worked for my uncle Abraham (Kunjuppaappen) and his wife Thankammakochamma. My uncle who worked for the East African Railways always had Juma in tow wherever he was transferred to. It was Tabora first and then Tanga in Tanganyika. It was Eldoret in Kenya after that. My wife had had her second confinement at Eldoret and thus had occasion to see for herself how loyal he was to that household and in what high regard my uncle and aunt held him. That was in 1958.

In the March of 1960 we went on leave to India. The Saidi incident had transpired a few months before that. Ammu stayed back in India for her undergraduate studies. She was to read for her B.A in History and Economics at St. Teresa's College at Ernakulam. After completing it, she returned to Dar es Salaam in 1963. Not long after, Juma turned up in Dar-es-Salaam and initially found employment with a compatriot of ours, Sreedhara Menon. One fine morning he turned up at our doorstep and asked us if he could work for us. We took the precaution of checking with Menon before saying 'yes'. He was the answer to our prayers. We had suffered long enough for our callousness towards Saidi.

Anyone meeting Juma was sure to take him at first glance for a relatively well-off white-collar worker. He was always neatly dressed and well groomed. He would only wear pointed, two-tone shoes that were all the rage at that time. That it must have cost him the

better part of his monthly take-home wages did not seem to worry him too much. Your average African led a carefree life and lived beyond his means. Tomorrow never entered his thoughts. Saving up for a rainy day was not part of his philosophy of life, but keeping up appearances most certainly was. That was his strength, but also his weakness. Juma owned a brand-new bicycle.

In those days, owning a bicycle was the average African's dearest wish. It was also his proudest possession. It was his way of stating that he had arrived! It was too the most utilitarian of his goods and chattel. He went everywhere on it. He went to work on it and he went shopping on it. He visited friends on it. He moved house on it. Literally! It was not an uncommon sight to see an African moving all his worldly possessions on his bicycle. His woman would be riding the carrier, often with a baby in a papoose on her back. His older children sat astride the cross bar and if numbers demanded more space, you wouldn't put it past him to use the handlebar. The family's only bed would be balanced on the man's head. Believe me! Piled up on top of the bed would be other odds and ends that make up the family's sum total of belongings.

In those days, the African on his bicycle was also the object of unkind mirth among the not so sensitive expatriates, especially the men. Whenever they got together, they would feel socially at ease especially if they were in their cups and would then proceed to think up ways of passing the time in various ways. Often they would settle for a round of gin-rummy. And, after playing as many hands as their attention span would permit, sometimes they might burst out into bawdy songs or challenge each other with 'trivial pursuits'. I remember an occasion when someone quite out of the blue asked the rest of us, "Which is the most dangerous animal in Africa?" and almost immediately came the reply, 'the lion'. 'No!' was the instant rejoinder. Then other answers were tentatively offered with the same result. When we exhausted all likely answers, we gave up and redirected the question to the one who quizzed us. After pausing for effect, he replied, "an African on a bicycle". When you see an African sometimes riding like fury on his bicycle, heedless of what injury he might bring upon himself or others in his trajectory should he be flung from his vehicle, you begin to wonder if there is some substance to the riddle after all.

But Juma, our helper, was different. Every morning, he would turn up for work riding his bicycle at a sedate pace. He would dismount and lock it up, since bicycle thefts were, for obvious reasons, not uncommon. As soon as he came into the house, he would go directly into the store-room and swiftly change into his work clothes. By the time we were ready to leave for school, our breakfast would have been served.

And after we left for school, he would get Bobby ready to take him to the kindergarten. Juma's trusty bicycle would be the mode of transport. Bonny too would ride with them. After dropping Bobby off, Juma would go shopping for groceries or what have you with Bonny in tow. As soon as he returned, he would busy himself with domestic chores.

Every weekday, by the time we came back from school, he would have done the laundry, tidied up the house and cooked lunch without fail. His knack to time his work to a T so that our lunch would be served piping hot was always a source of our unspoken admiration. So was his cooking. There was almost no dish that he could not cook, once

he had learned the basics. And, especially, the Parottas and the mutton korma he conjured up were a recurrent topic for small talk when Ammu and her friends met! While he was busy with the chores, he never failed to keep an eye on Bonny and keep him entertained lest he got out of hand. He had a way with both Bobby and Bonny. They loved him. In the evenings, when all the work was done, he would take a shower, change back into his 'designer' clothes and ride off into the twilight, literally. To this day, whenever we think of him, we grow wistful, for since then we have never had a helper as dependable as he was.

To get back to our days in Morogoro, the town as it then was did not hold out much promise in the way of diversions. Sometimes our friends from nearby sisal estates at Pangawe and Tungi would invite us over for the weekend. These sallies to the sisal estates provided us a welcome change from the unappetizing prospect of having to make do with the 'burnt offerings' of Mwunjamfuwa, our manservant at that time. True, there was not much else to do at these estates except to savour the home-cooked Malayalee dishes on offer at Tungi Babychayan's quarters. His wife Ponnammakochamma was an excellent cook. So was Ammukutty, Pangawe George's wife. Until Ammu was to join me, with Bobby in her arms, several months later in February 1957, Babu and I had enjoyed their hospitality gratefully. In that select band of hosts I may add Kingolweera Thomachen and Pangawe Baby and his wife Ponnamma.

Mwunjamfuwa's 'eyes were bigger than his stomach'. Whether it was lunch or supper, he cooked prodigious quantities of food shrewdly calculating that when his Bwanas had eaten their helpings of food, never too generous, what was left over would be all his. In the evenings we usually preferred chapattis and some relish to go with it. Usually it would be a concoction of meat and vegetables or as he says, '*Nyama pamoja na mboga*'. And he would make a whole pile of chapattis! I remember once a friend of ours, who had dropped in on us late in the evening, was taken aback by the sight of a casserole brimful with curry and a veritable column of chapattis rising from the centre of the dining table. The scamp in him aroused, pointing to the table he archly asked Mwunjamfuwa, "*Hii ni ya nani?*" (Who is that for?). Keeping a straight face, he answered just as disingenuously, "*Hii chakula cha jioni yetu*" (It's our dinner).

If he went over the top in stacking up chapattis mainly for his consumption, he thought he could atone for his greed by rustling up vast quantities of mangoes for his masters from the towering mango trees, of uncertain age, that had for long lined the streets of Morogoro, especially the ones along the thoroughfare leading up into the hills past 'Nyumba Taanu' or 'Five Houses'. Mangoes were anyone's for the plucking. This was a carryover from the old system of common ownership that traditional African societies or communes had once practised before the avaricious colonisers brought with them the concept of private property and perimeter fences. Apparently, they had spared the mango trees.

History tells us how the desire for private wealth transformed early communities, which had at one time shared their lives and their possessions in communes, into societies in which each one acquired goods and chattel for himself often to the detriment of the general good of the people. And yet, vestiges of the elemental willingness of man to share with others are still evident in many places. We read in the Scriptures how when

the disciples of Jesus, who as they passed through a cornfield plucked ears of corn to quell their hunger, were chastised by the Pharisees not because they had trespassed into private property, but only because they had apparently violated a pharisaic prohibition against working on the day of Sabbath. To this day, in many parts of the Middle East one could walk into a date-palm grove or a garden and eat the fruit thereof to satisfy hunger. Almost a quarter of a century after we left Tanganyika, I would, while driving along, pull up now and again and pluck golden bunches of ripe dates from the fruit-bearing date palms that lined the medians along the streets of Dirayyah, a suburb of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Because the mango trees that lined the road to *Nyumba Taanu* in faraway Africa were too tall for us to climb, Mwunjamfuwa had 'done the honours' for us, as I said.

At the *Nyumba Taanu* we had three friends two of whom were not family men. Unniannan was a confirmed bachelor in his late thirties. To him a wife was unnecessary baggage. He was an outgoing person who made friends easily. He liked a good laugh. Uhuhuhuhuh! Ehuh! Ehuh! Ehuh...He would laugh loud and long until he spluttered to a stop, but his bewildered audience would be none the wiser about what precisely provoked it. Bhaasi who shared his house was an eligible bachelor in his twenties. He was marking time to go back to India and get 'knotted' to a prospective bride of his family's choice. Occasionally, he fell into deep bouts of depression that we felt was not a condition that a life partner could not have put right. Since this is not the place to expound on mood swings or, for that matter, the virtues of marital bliss, it is best left unsaid. Then there was Suku the only married man in that lot, whose homemaker wife Radha had the added chore of cooking for the two bachelors as well. They were all passable at a game of tennis. Of the three, Bhaasi was the best. Babu and I did pass muster too. The five of us, along with a Punjabi lawyer by the name of Sharma and occasionally also with the good Reverend K. M. John, used the local railway club court, on loan to us, to play often strenuous if rather amateurish tennis on weekdays to keep ourselves in good trim.

Then there was cricket, at the weekends. I was not much of a batsman, but my bowling was tolerable. In fact, I once surprised myself by bowling out Richard Gower, the District Commissioner. The DC was just as surprised. Incidentally, it was his son David Gower who was to captain the English cricket team some twenty years later. Not long after my one-off bowling exploit, I was inducted into the Eastern Province Cricket Committee. H. Woollett was its chairman. The other members were, G. D'Sousa, J. Chudleigh, Hon. S. M. Patel, M.B.E., M.L.C., M. S. Gangji and H. Mwakalango.

Some weekends were devoted to playing cards. We played '56', a game native to Kerala. Even after we moved to Dar-es-salaam we continued our addiction. Six players, three a side, play the game. Unlike the sedate game of bridge, this robust variety of card-game would spontaneously lend itself to rambunctious arguments and wry remarks, just as quickly glossed over, and it was all part and parcel of the game. Wherever the game was played, the women cooked gargantuan amounts of food. I remember Ammu and Radha, Suku's wife, cooking food for us time after time. It was always washed down with beer, a local brand called *Tembo* with the logo of an elephant boldly pasted on the bottle. The Swahili word 'tembo' means 'elephant'.

That brings to mind the time, some years later, when my son Bonny told his grandfather, my father that is, how I had tried to fool them into thinking that the brew we drank in

Africa was elephant piddle (the elephant logo was a convenient red herring, initially!), but that it had not taken them long to get wised up. In his mitigation, I must say he was compelled to squeal only after my dad had caught him holding a rolled-up dry leaf between his fingers, taking it up to his lips and pretending to be smoking. He was only three or four at the time! On being chastised for it, he blurted out to my father how his own son Yoosuf had been guilty of not only smoking but also drinking. That act of squealing on his father probably saved him from a good hiding. Remarkable, how quickly children learn that plea-bargaining can be the lesser evil!

Two events cast a pall of gloom over our otherwise pleasant life in Morogoro. One was the passing away early in 1958 of the Rev. K. M. John, who was working among the Asians of the Anglican Communion, at the behest of the Diocese of Central Tanganyika. He was well-liked by all who knew him, regardless of their religious persuasion, and was sadly missed when he died. He had played tennis with us one day and had gone back home, when without warning he felt an acute stab of pain in his lower abdomen followed by nausea and he had to be rushed to the hospital. He underwent emergency surgery for appendectomy. Unfortunately, the appendix had burst before it could be safely removed. Peritonitis followed and he died soon after.

The Malayalee communities of Morogoro and Dar es Salaam promptly joined together to set up an education trust fund for his children, who were to be repatriated with their mother back to India. The only sour note that was struck in their repatriation was the shabby manner in which Messrs. Kearsley (EA) Ltd., travel agents for the Diocese, went about the business of packing their personal belongings and making arrangements for their embarkation.

The other sad event was the unforeseen demise of Leela in childbirth, the very pretty and the very young wife of Titus Mathew a.k.a Aniyan kunju of Kumbanad. They had been married only for a year or so. She was in the bloom of her life when she became a cruel victim of the Morogoro District Hospital’s obstetrical indifference. The irony was that she could have had her confinement in Dar-es-Salaam where she was working at that time. It was at the solicitous insistence of her sister-in-law, Tungi Ponnammakochamma, that she was to have her baby at Morogoro. Her death was more poignant to us because the Mathews were our family friends. Their child, Tilu, who survived his mother, is now in the U.S.A.

Morogoro was a halting point for expatriates who had to travel long distances to Dar es Salaam on official business, such as renewal of contracts or of work permits. After a tiresome drive from the middle of nowhere, they would usually break their journey and spend the night with friends in Morogoro. Such occasional visits by your compatriots always brought a welcome change from your sense of isolation in far-away Africa. Sometimes, during school holidays, teachers accompanied by their families would pitch up unannounced. My memory goes back to one such school break. It was at a time when I had shaved off my hair in the fond hope that I would have a new thatch to check the ravages of time on my receding hairline. I was barely thirty then! The price we have to pay for the Narcissus in each one of us! With my shaven pate, I would often preen in front of the mirror fancying myself as a Telly Savalas or a Yul Bryner. On the occasion in question, after having driven down from Arusha, our friend Joseph and his wife Ammini,

pulled up in front of our apartment and mistook me for a Muslim. As I stood at the front door, with my shorn head all shining, he turned to his wife and said for all to hear, '*Ente vichaaram ithoru Tulukkante veedaan'na'* i.e. "I think this is a Mohammedan's house". Having seen my shining top, he had naturally taken me for a Muslim just back after performing Hajj. He was about to turn his car round and leave when I rushed out and told them that I was indeed who they had initially expected to see and added quite unnecessarily that despite my moniker being 'Yoosuf', I was no Muslim.

'What's in a name?' you might well ask. There is everything in a name as another event was to prove three years after what had happened in Morogoro. We had by that time moved to Dar es Salaam. Our friend A. T. Thomas who was working at the Standard Bank branch in Morogoro at the time had come down to receive his bride of barely two months. Lizziamma, who, after chafing at the frustrating wait before her husband could get an entry permit for her, was at last coming to Africa to join her husband. After receiving her at the harbour, he was making his way to our place to stay the night with us. When he told her that they were to stay at Yoosuf's place before proceeding to Morogoro, she was aghast and by their own account is said to have asked him, 'You mean you could only find a Muslim to stay with? I am surprised that you don't have a good Christian house to take me to!' Ingrained prejudices die hard. We had a good laugh later that evening when Thomachen recounted the tale. In the event, they stayed with us a day or two more before they travelled to Morogoro.

Two years after my joining the school at Morogoro, Roshan Ali the headmaster was transferred to another of the Aga Khan schools in the territory. Incidentally, I remember him fondly for something that was not even remotely connected to my professional association with him. Roshan Ali had taught us the art of making crisp samoosas, a savoury pastry with minced meat filling, and a culinary delight one would never tire of eating. And, some never stop eating it when once they have started. If they have a larger than ususal offer in front of them, that is.

Some twenty years later we got to know the good Reverend John Klyberg, the Dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Lusaka, Zambia. A frequent visitor to our house at 4 Milima Road, Lusaka, he was a trencherman if ever there was one and he could, by his own admission, 'eat samoosas until they came out of my ears'. If we knew that he was visiting, Ammu would make loads of it. He liked his whisky too. For a man of the cloth, he gave the impression of being too much 'of the earth', rather in the mould of a Friar Tuck and a Falstaff rolled in one.

This was obviously a social mask that he put on the better to appeal to his pastoral flock. Our son Bonny, who like his father had proved to be not an overly church-going Christian, was so taken up with him at the time that he was ready to read one of the two customary 'lessons' from the Bible during the Sunday service at the Cathedral whenever he was asked to, which he performed like one to the manner born. The dean's short but thoughtful homilies on Sundays showed the more serious side of the man. I may add he was generous enough to offer us the use of his cottage at Hythe near Folkestone when my wife and I moved to London in 1984 on leaving Zambia for good. That we did not have to avail of it is another matter. Later he was to become the Bishop of Fulham.

Not long after his elevation to the bishopric, as a matter of courtesy, I contacted him when I was on a visit London. I remember his inviting me to lunch at the Athenaeum Club, at the corner of Pall Mall and Waterloo Place, just a brisk walk down lower Regent Street from Piccadilly Circus. The club was redolent of the smell of old leather, old money and old tweeds. I had accepted the invitation eagerly, but my only misgiving was whether my table etiquette would be up to scratch among the venerable members of that club. Would I get my spoons or forks mixed up? Would I slurp? I could not ask the good bishop for guidance, could I? Perhaps it was just as well. The mention of samoosas did send me off at a tangent from Morogoro and Roshan Ali, didn't it? Let me now get back to the story.

Roshan Ali was a soft-spoken gentleman who did not have a presence that one would have wished a head of school to have. He was soft-spoken and gentle to a fault. The boys and girls were generally well behaved and did not pose him serious discipline problems. Occasionally, however, he would have to contend, not so much with the odd obstreperous Ismaili pupil or two that the school had to carry on board as with some of the wealthier parents who would not hear of their children being disciplined. In dealing with them, he had often had to yield to pressure at the risk of being seen as less than even-handed. But, this was nothing when compared to the problems he faced in managing teachers.

Some of the teachers, whose work ethic was of the 'what can I get away with' variety, did make things very difficult for the headmaster. Of that lot, I remember Rattani, Valliani and Khakiani, all hailing from Sindh in Pakistan. Their first names escape me now. Rattani used the shrewd ploy of openly carping at the headmaster to forestall being hauled over the coals for his own lack of dedication. He had piercing eyes that could intimidate a lesser man. Then there was Valliani. If the axiom 'apparel oft proclaims the man' could be true of anyone, no doubt the sartorial indifference of Valliani with the 'lean and hungry look' would fill the bill perfectly. He was as sloppy in his work as he was in the way he carried himself. He dressed shabbily almost as though to advertise his lack of self-esteem. His shirt-tails would often be hanging out, and his tie askew. Khakiani, the third in that trinity, was, by contrast, a well-dressed young man of ample proportions whose initial teaching efforts flattered but only to deceive later. Whenever the three were seen huddled together, there was an air of conspiracy about them that would soon manifest itself in some mischief. Three such on his team was too much for Roshan Ali to handle. He asked for and got a transfer.

That was how the unenviable task of having to keep the seat warm for Roshan Ali's replacement was thrust upon me. I became the acting headmaster. Only, it took two years before the new headmaster made his appearance in the person of Ahmed Khan from Afghanistan. Looking back, I believe I made, in more ways than one, a pretty good job of running the school. For one thing, I could easily stare the likes of Rattani down and get them to fall in line. Also, when they saw that I would not spare myself when it came to work, often over and above the call of duty, they were left with no pretext to shirk work. The general tone of the school improved, even if I have to say so myself.

I cannot hark back to my track record as teacher and headmaster -well, all right acting headmaster- without some sense of satisfaction. I have always relished talking about it openly and with immense pride. If anyone called it self-praise, I believe that would have

been a case of sour grapes. There may even be those who might bluntly choose to call it compulsive self-publicising. That does not put me off too much, either. Let your light so shine before men… That reminds me of the time when my son Bobby, on seeing our slide projector prominently featuring me, frame after frame, virtually to the exclusion of others, archly remarked, "Me, me, me and more me!" Sadly no one is a prophet in his own home! But one learns to take such put-downs in the stride. When you deal with a bloody-minded world, self-effacement is not necessarily a virtue. You have to tell your troublemakers where to get off. I was thankful for small mercies, for most of the teachers were hardworking and competent.

Most of the boys and girls were Shia Ismaili children (whose parents were without exception traders, their roots going back to Gujarat or Kutch or Sind in the Indian subcontinent), but their children had to learn Kiswahili as a second language at school. And Victor Mponji was their Swahili teacher.

Africans in those days, whether deservedly or not, had a reputation for malingering. They would be hale and hearty one day, but could take sick leave the next. They could take leave at the drop of a hat. It could, for instance, be for the death of a parent, of whom they seemed to have more than one. Polygamy being the rule rather than the exception in tribal societies, it was but natural for them to have several putative mothers. Could they have had one mother too many, one would often be tempted to wonder. Sometimes, they stayed away to nurse a hangover. The symptoms of 'the morning after the night before' were not entirely unknown among the African teaching fraternity.

Victor was not of this stereotypical mould. He was a good Roman Catholic and a conscientious teacher. He was a small-made man. He was blind in one eye as a result of an attack of trachoma as a child. He wore thick glasses. He was invariably dressed in dazzling white, almost; a white, half-sleeved shirt tucked under a pair of white shorts complete with white stockings worn inside a pair of shining black shoes. Soon after Tanganyika became independent, he was to become a minister in Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere's cabinet. I remember his gladly receiving me in his chambers when I paid him a courtesy call after his elevation. Clearly, his position had not gone to his head.

Maureen Molloy was a matronly presence in the staffroom. Her Irish Catholic sense of humour always helped smooth ruffled feathers, when raised hackles tended to 'disturb the peace' during staff meetings. She was rather dowdily dressed, but that did not detract from her outgoing nature. She taught English. Then there was Ammukutty George of Pangawe. She taught Biology and taught it well. Ahmed Bhutt from Pakistan was another teacher on the team. He spoke English with a pronounced Punjabi accent, but he was a good teacher of Mathematics. There were a few more. But I do not seem to be able to attach a name to this or that face that I can still recall except that of the venerable Pishori.

And there is a reason for it. He was a devout Muslim of the Bohra sect hailing from Kutch in India. Short, bespectacled, balding and bearded, he was in his fifties and had a large family. They occupied the apartment just above ours in the new staff quarters that we had moved into, not far from the school. We would often meet in the evenings for a pleasant chat. Once, among other things, the conversation turned to the large water heater

that had been installed in the bath and how it was heavy on power consumption. When he learned that we hardly ever used the geyser, he apparently mistook it to mean that we hardly ever had baths and said rather proudly that they would turn on the geyser every Friday, when they had their weekly baths! Little did he realize that every self-respecting Malayalee would have a bath twice every day, come hell or high water. We did not try to disabuse him of his imagined advantage over us..

The new building, into which the school was shifted, stood on a five-acre piece of land on Mount Pleasant road. It was on the outskirts of the town. That end of the town was yet to be developed. The land was uneven, largely scrubland, with an undergrowth of bushes and a few trees mainly acacias and a baobab or two. I managed to get the school compound levelled and graded, courtesy the help of the Public Works Department. It was Mr. Chudleigh, the chief engineer, who had loaned the use of his earthmoving machinery free of cost to do the job. For the first time, the school had its own playing fields.

It was a red-letter day for the Ismailis when the newly installed Aga Khan, barely out of his teens, visited his followers in Morogoro. No effort was spared to affirm their allegiance to him with pomp and splendour. As part of the festivities, the local leaders had drawn up a programme that included a ‘sun-downer’ in his honour on the school premises. A sundowner is a cross between a cocktail party and high tea, characteristic of the social scene in sub-Saharan Africa and in particular Anglophone Africa. It starts at sunset and usually goes on well into the night. Nuruddin, the manager of the school had inducted me into the programme committee for the event and, among other things, I had an ‘uplifting’ part to play in the ‘event management’. That was, to take care of arranging the hard drinks for the invitees. To some of the Ismaili Muslims I knew, this form of indulgence was taboo only in letter but certainly not in ‘spirit’.

Why Nuruddin entrusted me with the task is still a mystery to me. Surely, he had never seen me in my cups? Perhaps, the stereotypical image of the Christian as a consumer of wine, never mind if it is consecrated by the priest, must have persuaded him to delegate me. Or, perhaps he did not wish a fellow Muslim to taint himself with ‘pitch’ even by touch. Anyway, hardly any alcohol was consumed by the select faithful that evening perhaps in deference to the presence of their spiritual leader. Even the Caucasian invitees, perhaps subdued by this novel experience of a godman’s presence, were discreet in their indulgence.

The long and the short of it was that there were several bottles of Black Label and Bell’s and Hennessey and Martell and Gordon’s and Campari and Cinzano and what have you lying unopened in the headmaster’s office. When the manager visited the school next, he was surprised that they were so many unopened bottles. He promptly asked me to take them home, which I did after an unconvincing show of unctuous reluctance. I suspect, that bit of play-acting did not fool him in the least. Anyway, even without an entertainment allowance or at least a headmaster’s allowance to fall back on, I was to find that thereafter I would rise in the estimation of my indulging friends for this heady, not to say ongoing, offer of ‘smooth’ hospitality. When that stock eventually ran out, I was already marking time to move to Dar-es-Salaam. That did not mean that friends were not welcome to our house after that. My wife, being the sociable person that she was and still is, had a way of making friends and entertaining them, alcohol or no alcohol.

If alcohol makes you expansive in a social gathering, it may also have the gratuitous result of gaining contacts in high places especially if you are an invitee at an official sundowner, of which there were a few held every year in that part of the world. If you carefully nurse a drink in the company of the other invitees, taking only the occasional sip, you can exercise your gift of the gab without the handicap of a thickening tongue. And showing off your clear diction has its uses. I believe that was how I came to be inducted into the Immigration Languages Board of the Eastern Province. At these sundowners, you would quite frequently rub shoulders with and have occasion to soft-soap the local decision-makers. One such was A. B. Jones, the District Officer of Morogoro. Not many days after I was introduced to him, he contacted me, quite out of the blue, to enquire if I would be willing to sit on the Immigration Languages Board and went on to assure me that it would not meet more than two or three times in a year. Needless to say, I readily agreed. An official letter from the District Commissioner, under reference C.12/169 of 14 November 1957, arrived not long after, "with a request that you will accept appointment to the Immigration Languages Board, and will be grateful if you will let me know if you are able to".

The government had set up the Board to assess the language skills of the expatriates who initially entered the country on temporary work permits. They were required, "while still holding that temporary status, to give some indication of the extent of their identification with the life of the Territory. A certain measure of this can be obtained by a person's ability to make himself understood in one or the other of the two recognized languages of the Territory" (vide the letter cited above). Thus, passing a language test either in Swahili or English was a pre-requisite, under Section 9 of the Immigration Ordinance (13/57) for a person wishing to apply for an Entry Permit Class G. Each candidate would appear before the board for an informal interview. The members would take turns at asking questions to test the candidate's communicative skills. It would usually take no more than ten minutes. And when the candidate left the room, a consensus was arrived at. If my memory serves me right, I attended three sittings before leaving Morogoro. The Board decided that, on the evidence available, among others, three of my friends, John Thomas of Fatemi Sisal Estate, Kidugallo, Vazhiyambalathil Elias Mathew of Central Line Sisal Estates and Thomas Mathew of Morogoro, were declared proficient in English and were granted certificates *in absentia*; with a little bit of help from me, you might have guessed. The fact is, their communicative competence had never been in doubt to me and so I made bold to vouchsafe for them.

M. J. Mwandike, Secretary of the Native Authority, Morogoro was the Swahili examiner on the Board. Incidentally, I was the only English examiner on the Board who was not of Anglo-Saxon parentage. The others were, Messrs. P. J. Barnwell (chairman), J. C. Stewart (vice chairman and Provincial Education Officer, Morogoro) and K. G. Johnson (Secretary). Someone must have been persuaded that I had enough insights into their linguistic preserve to be deemed worthy of inclusion in that privileged company.

'Anglo-Saxon' has a certain ambivalent ring to it; it can both include and exclude; sometimes, even preclude. And thereby hangs a tale. Some six years after my induction into the board, I left Tanganyika to join the Institute of Education University of London to do a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. Rules precluded applicants who were not

of Anglo-Saxon stock from opting for 'Teaching of English as a Foreign Language' (TEFL) as their special subject for training. It took me more than one meeting with Professor Bruce Pattison, the head of the Department of English, to persuade him that my English was chaste enough and that I could 'imitate' Received Pronunciation as well as the next person. I found a place in the group I had asked for. All in that group with the exception of me were British, born and bred, although not all of them were strictly speaking Anglo-Saxon by definition. For instance, there was Christakis Toffi of Greek extraction and Gordon Jarvie and Linda Powell both from a Celtic background. Could Greek, Gaelic or Welsh be of Anglo-Saxon origin? They were, nevertheless, all native speakers of English.

Early in 1965, the group spent a month in Barcelona for teaching practice. I was attached to a school on Calle Balmes and to a Beatrice Valdemorro, the class teacher-in-charge of the class I was to teach. The late Dr. Jack Bruton of the British Council had come along with us to observe our classes. After a session with me, he broached the subject of my antecedents and wondered if I was of Eurasian parentage. I was quick to disabuse him of the thought that I was what he thought I might be. Clearly, he was looking for an Anglo-Saxon gene in my chromosome to justify my 'unexplained' competence in their linguistic preserve. Anyway, at the end of the academic year my name was also included in the English Language Teaching Register of the British Council. Five years passed by before I thought of invoking the help of that Register to find a new job through the British Council. I received a terse reply, which read, 'We regret to inform you that as you are not of Anglo-Saxon parentage, you are precluded from being considered for the teaching position you have applied for' or words to that effect. There is 'perfidious Albion' in its chameleon colours for you! They gave and they took it away!

Many years later, I remember mentioning this to a colleague of mine at the United Nations Institute for Namibia. The person in question was Dick Chamberlain, deputed to the UNIN, by the Overseas Development Administration of Britain, for EFL materials production. Not long after that, to my astonishment, that letter along with the first letter of registration mysteriously disappeared from among the papers I had kept in a cabinet in my office.

To travel back in time to Morogoro and the school, there had been a mysterious disappearance there too from my cabinet in my office. It was money that disappeared. Who could have taken it away? It was probably Abdullah. It was on a Friday. And the provocation may have been alcohol! Abdullah was the school janitor who cleaned the office and the classrooms every morning, rang the school bell, circulated notices and ran errands for the headmaster. He was also an unregenerate malingerer, especially after he had been in a bout of drinking the night before, which was not infrequent. The African's propensity for swilling gallons of beer at one go is phenomenal; they say, next only to that of the Germans. Abdullah was no exception. Why he was kept on was anybody's guess.

On the Friday in question, I stayed back after classes in the office to tally the takings from the sale of textbooks to the scholars. It was too late in the day to bank the money collected, so it was locked up in the office cabinet. Abdullah had also stayed back to tidy up the office after I was through with my work. The next morning when I returned to the

school, the office had been broken into and the money stolen along with the wall clock in the office. And only Abdullah had known that money had been left behind in the office overnight. The police grilled Abdullah and even searched his house. However, nothing came of it.

One might wonder why this incident should find a place in this narrative. There is a good reason. An elderly compatriot of ours on being told of the incident was reported to have obliquely remarked, “That is interesting. How come the police did not grill the headmaster and search his house?” It just goes to show that there is in human nature a murky side that prompts one to feel pleased about causing discomfiture to others. It is called malice without motive. Perhaps, in this instance, there was an even more plausible reason. It may have been a Freudian slip. The said gentleman worked for a sisal estate and it was whispered about that he was not above pilfering things from the estate store, of which he was in charge. Once he was reputed to have cracked, “If you can’t swipe at least a bag or two of sugar when you have the chance, you must get your ass kicked”. He meant, from the estate store. He may have believed that no one was above a bit of pilfering.

Anyway, the management did not dock my pay or ask me to make up for the loss. The administrator, Al Noor Kassam, had visited the school to investigate and had written off the loss. During his visit, he also sounded me out about a possible transfer to the Higher Secondary School in Dar es Salaam. Was this a punitive transfer? I did not find out and I did not care. I reasoned that it was an opportunity to put my academic antecedents to better use, and I did not demur.

I was in no doubt that moving to the capital would also bring with it a positive change in the quality of life we led. It would be a welcome shift from the provincial milieu of Morogoro to the more cosmopolitan surroundings of the capital. Being able to meet and mix with a wider choice of people from various cultural backgrounds, we would find social life to hold more exciting possibilities. While doubtless broadening one’s cultural horizons, the capital would also offer opportunities to spread oneself; that is, to spend one’s efforts, both socially and professionally, to good effect. But, this would also entail one’s financial resources being stretched to the limit.

On a modest starting salary of a little over 800 shillings a month (approximately £500.00 per year gross), we could live comfortably in Morogoro and still have something left over for a rainy day. Food was cheap. A *Summini* (half a shilling) would fetch you a free-ranging chicken for the table or a clutch of eggs or a *Kikaapu*ful(a sturdy, wide-mouthed garden basket of plaited reed) of *Machunga* (oranges) or *Vyaasi* (potatoes) or tomatoes or okra and the like. Beef or lamb was not very much more expensive either. And the tall mango trees that lined the road to *Nyumba Taanu* bore an abundant crop of mangoes. They offered all comers the freedom to pick that exotic fruit to their hearts’ content, for free. Things proved to be certainly much more expensive in Dar.

Perhaps fish was the only exception. We could buy a Seer fish at the *Kaariaako* Market for next to nothing. You could take your pick and still pay the same fixed price for the day, what ever size of the fish you bought. We remember once buying a fish more than a yard long for a paltry five shillings! After filleting it, –the kitchen sink was not big

enough to do it so it had to be done on a spread plastic sheet in the bathroom- we had to pickle most of it for want of space in our modest fridge to refrigerate it.

A few weeks after the new headmaster had taken charge at Morogoro, we moved to Dar es Salaam. We were given a two-bedroom apartment that was more than adequate for our needs. All the expatriate teachers of the school lived as a community in a residential compound comprising four blocks of flats. The compound was in Upanga, a leafy suburb of the city that had a largely middle class profile. The school was only five minutes away. The all-inclusive Kaariaako Market was close by. The well-equipped Princess Margaret Hospital –later renamed Mhumbili Hospital- was just round the corner. The Infectious Diseases Hospital was across the street from where we were For the paranoid who might feel jittery about its proximity, it was comfortingly hidden behind a cluster of tall shrubs and almond trees that kept the hospital well out of sight and out of mind.

The residents were an assorted lot. There were two Goan families, all devoutly Catholic; the Carvalhos and the Pereira's. There were three Goan spinsters, Teresa Coutinho, Sally Fernandez and Maggie Lopez. Then there was a Zoroastrian family. The man of the house bore the fanciful name of Rohinton Ardeshir Firdausi Kanga, as expansive a name as was its owner's waistline. As with people of ample proportions in general, he was a genial person who was popular among his colleagues. His wife Nargis was a good hostess. There were also a few Muslims from North India, namely Mohammed Khan, Ahmed Khan, Mohammed Sheikh and Kabir with their families who generally kept themselves to themselves. This stemmed rather from their reluctance to let their women out of their zenanas, than from any great desire to be clannish, for the men were always quite friendly in the company of their colleagues. Apart from ours, there were three Malayalee families; the Baby Johns, the John Zechariahs and the John Koleths. And there was Thenganamkulathu Mathai Mathai AKA Baby, a Malayalee bachelor. In the block we were in, on the top floor was the apartment of Peerwani, the executive secretary to the Administrator of the Aga Khan Schools.

A word in passing about two of my compatriots would, I believe, be a salutary lesson for a student of human failings. I had helped them both to come to Africa. They had asked me if I could help them to find openings for them in Africa and I was able to find them teaching positions in my school through the good offices of the then Manager of the school, Ismail H. Ibrahim. When the first of the two, arrived in Africa with his wife and children at the beginning of 1960, as a matter of courtesy we put up them up for a brief period until an apartment was made available for them to move into. We gave them our guest bedroom. On the second day of their arrival, while Ammu and I were out shopping, they quietly changed their bedroom for ours, the master bedroom, without so much as a by your leave. That was the thanks we got for putting them up. That was only a hint of worse things to come. What was that about the 'freezing, bitter sky biting not so nigh as benefits forgot'?

The second colleague, a bachelor then, who arrived a year later, was put up with us for the next three years. When I left Tanganyika in 1964, Ammu having earlier left for India for higher studies, our apartment was entrusted to him. He had been of immense help to us while he was put up with us, so it was but natural that we had great faith in him. As events unfolded later, I did not go back to Dar es Salaam. Therefore, we had to request

him to send us all our belongings which we had left in his care. Not only did he not send all of it, for the two gentlemen in question had conveniently appropriated some of the stuff for their own use, but also the things he did send were packed in such an indifferent fashion that they arrived in India in one broken, tinkling heap! Whether it was his sense of guilt that made him act distantly since then is anybody's guess. In the first place, it was at my mother-in-law's instance that I had found a job for the latter who was a total stranger to me until then. On being told about his shabby response to our request, I remember her saying, "Just like them 'to bite the hand that feeds you'!"

I remember the time when the occupants of the six apartments in our block sought shelter in Peerwani's top-floor apartment, for a few fearful hours, when there was civil unrest in the city following an abortive army coup led by the non-commissioned officers of the army, not long after independence. At one point, even as we were taking a furtive look at the goings-on from the comparative safety of Peerwani's balcony, with more than a little anxiety, we could see looters, their hands full of their plunder, scattering in all directions at the crackle of gunfire. The soldiers had been out and about to stop the looting. We saw one of the looters running across the scrubland overlooking the balcony and hastily hiding something in a clump of undergrowth before running off laden with the rest of the spoils. Unable to resist temptation, I ran down the stairs, through the wicket in the fence and into the scrubland, ignoring the frenzied attempts of others to restrain me. The hidden object turned out to be a two-pronged ornamental dagger in its wooden sheath, intricately carved and trimmed with brass, which I retrieved without further ado. It was a double-ended sheath with the slit at the other end found gaping with the dagger removed. As I learned later, it is a curio that Kashmiris make with no lethal intent. It still adorns our cabinet among all the other bric-a-brac.

The mutiny lasted only two days. In the morning of the first day, Juma our manservant turned up unusually early, fear writ large on his face, and blurted out what had transpired in the city and added, "*Usiende shule leyo"* (You must not go to the school today.) He wanted to forestall my customary drive into the city to drop Bobby off at the St. Joseph's Convent School where Bobby was studying in Class One at that time. My initial reaction was to scoff at his warning, but on reflection I thought discretion was the better part of valour. So, I desisted. All the schools, offices and businesses had been closed. Soldiers had fanned out in all directions. Looters were having a free run except when soldiers were seen approaching. The incident of the dagger happened a little later.

In the afternoon, unable to contain my curiosity any longer and chafing at my enforced inactivity, I decided to venture out into the city to see for myself what the state of play was. I had managed to drag Mathai along with me. We were concerned about the safety of our family friend Babu and his wife Marykutty who were living in downtown Dar es Salaam at that time. As we drove along the streets, it was obvious that there were not many out and about. Were we being foolhardy? There was something surreal about the streets, what with people having deserted them, but not the stray dogs, which as usual lazily ambled about totally unconcerned! On Acacia Avenue, the main artery of the city running almost the whole length of the seafront from north to south, there were army trucks parked at every vantage point, with an armed soldier manning it gun at the ready. Adrenaline pumping up my pulse rate, I drove past keeping my fingers crossed. We were

merely waved on at every control point. All the while, folks back at Upanga kept their fingers crossed, beside themselves with worry. When we got back after picking up Babu and family, there was an audible sigh of collective relief.

President Nyerere had been tipped off in the nick of time and was able to keep out of harm's way by taking refuge in one of the embassies in the city. Second Lieutenant Alexander Serakikiya of the Armed Forces was the one who had given him the tip-off. By coincidence, a British warship with marines on board was lying off the East African waters at the time. Their help was sought and was readily offered. At first light on the second day, marines landed in their helicopters, surrounded the army barracks and fired two mortar shells into the guardhouse. And the mutiny was virtually over. Over the next two days helicopters could be seen flying low, crisscrossing the city, to locate and buzz the mutineers who had fled with their rifles at the first hint of danger. They had been offered amnesty through a mobile public address system if they were to surrender within forty-eight hours. Wherever one went, one could see bedraggled soldiers limply waiting by the wayside with their weapons at their feet, looking decidedly crestfallen, to be picked up by the military police. Within three days the last remnants had been mopped up. I remember seeing a helicopter land on our school football pitch to pick up a soldier they had run down and cornered. Three years later, Alexander Serakikya was to become the army chief-of-staff.

Professionally, the school opened up new horizons for me. For one thing, I was given fifth and sixth forms to teach English language and literature. This was just what I had hoped for. Four years after I joined the school, I was appointed Head of the English Department responsible for organising the work of ten teachers at all levels. Among them, I still remember Messrs Maundrill, Nazareth, Pereira, Almeida, John Koleth and Shaw and Mesdames Silvertand and Marsh. After having left St. Thomas College a little more than seven years earlier, it was the first time I could sink my teeth into something professionally meaty. It gave me opportunities to meet other teachers of English from other schools formally, at workshops and seminars, and compare notes with them.

I was active outside the classroom too. I helped the boys with tennis and athletics and founded the school's basketball team. Without sounding too immodest, I believe I gave a good account of myself in all these activities. It was in recognition of this that I was appointed manager of the school sports team that participated in the Inter-territorial games and athletics meet for the Aga Khan Schools held in Kampala in the year 1962. Rasul, the physical instructor and Jinnah, the religion teacher, also accompanied the team. At my instance, Chacko of Morogoro School also joined us. The team was approximately a hundred strong. We travelled by train to Mwanza, a harbour town on Lake Victoria and thence by boat to Port Bell in Uganda. The passage, which covered the entire length of the lake, took nearly two days. Except for a brief call at Kigoma, a port on the east coast of the Lake, the boat did not tarry anywhere in its passage. It was a well-appointed motor vessel with comfortable cabins and the cuisine was passing good. For the first time, I saw hippopotami -literally in their hundreds- floating almost submerged but for their nostrils and eyes just above the surface with their cavernous jaws wide open except when they were cavorting on the lake. From Port Bell we travelled by coach through Entebbe to Kampala.

Kampala, a city on seven hills rather in the manner of Rome, was in those days a charming little town with clean streets and green parks. The view from Telegraph Hill was as breathtaking as it was panoramic. The redbrick built Anglican Cathedral on Nyamirembe Hill is another landmark of the city. But of all the places we visited, none was as serene in its ambiance as the Bahai Temple, which proclaimed through its architectural roundness and simplicity, shorn of images and idols, the spiritual oneness of mankind. The sacred books of all religions were displayed there, for all to pause, to read and to meditate, which is what some ineffable power draws all but the confirmed agnostic into doing. In downtown Kampala, proudly standing six floors high, was the famous departmental store, 'The Drapers'. Another landmark in those days was the grass-thatched palace of the Kabaka of Buganda on the outskirts of the city. The palace and the rondavels that go with it were surrounded by a stockade to deter trespass. The more modern structure of the Ugandan Parliament or the Lukiko was also worthy of note.

We spent a week there and managed to win well nigh all the trophies on offer. The Kenyan team gave us stiff competition, but we were the first past the post most of the time. The Ugandans came a distant third.

Our return journey was by bus. It took us through Kenya. We did not go into Nairobi, but skirted it to take in the Nairobi National Park, the oldest of Kenya's game reserves, just outside the perimeter fence of the Nairobi Airport on the outskirts of the city. We drove in with two game scouts accompanying us to view game in their natural habitat. Of the big five, all except the elephant are found in that park. The other four are lion, leopard, giraffe and rhino. Of course, there are the 'lesser' animals too, which include the zebra and the monkey to name the most obvious. The boys were allowed to alight from the bus only in certain spots. Although the more adventurous among them were eager to venture out further, we would not allow them the option to have close encounters except for the least dangerous of the lot. Besides, the scouts were constantly tracking their movements.

Observing animals at close quarters can be an edifying experience, especially if the object of your interest is a simian. Its antics are pure theatre, somewhat reminiscent of your actor on a stage who wants to be looked at, listened to and admired. To a greater or lesser degree, there is an actor in all of us. We are all prone to striking up poses without appearing to have done so with intention. That probably explains how man's proclivity to show off has evolved or, more likely, has been sublimated into an art form on the stage.

My interest in theatre as a university student once again found natural expression at this school. It had already had a tradition of excelling in dramatics under the guidance of Alice Silvertand, a matronly colleague of mine. The success of her production of 'Happiness My Goal' at the Youth Drama Festival in 1963 was a testimony to her enthusiasm and patience in licking into shape a cast with raw talent but little experience. When she decided to give up the reins of the school Dramatic Society, I took up that responsibility. With another colleague, Norman Almeida, to assist me actively, the school managed to repeat its triumph in 1964, beating St. Francis College, the premier educational institution of Dar es Salaam run by Catholic fathers, in the prestigious Tanganyika National Youth Drama Festival sponsored by the British Council. Our production of 'The Hewers of Coal' was a particularly good effort by all accounts. The outstanding actor was Bashir Jaffer, whose diction, poise and interpretation of his role

were excellent. Interestingly, after watching the play M.W. Jones, the British Council Resident Representative at the time felt that I should formally pursue my studies in dramatic production. So did the adjudicator, Dr. Barnard, who had been specially flown down from London for the Festival. Before I left the school for higher studies, not long after, I was able to wheedle the school management into investing in professional stage lighting for the school hall.

Kerala Kalaa Mandalam, the social and cultural society of the expatriate Malayalees in Dar es Salaam, had been active among other things in the production of Malayalam plays for many years running when we moved there. Soon I found myself in the thick of things, acting principal roles in many plays. The one that stills linger in my mind is the role of the selfless engineer in *Puthiya Aakaasham, Puthiya Bhoomi,* a play by Thoppil Bhaasi,a well-known playwright with a leftist bias. The engineer is a complex character that reflected the changing moods of a man with a social conscience who has to cope with the shortcomings of people, both bureaucrats and ordinary citizens he constantly comes into contact with. His role has to display a whole range of emotions from despondency to anger to the unforeseen pleasure of part fulfilment of one who works against heavy odds for a new social order, a new heaven and a new earth. At the end of the play, when the hero dies, our son Bonny was heard to have asked plaintively, *'Appicha chathu poyo?'* that is, 'Is dad dead?'

Of all my colleagues I was drawn to, I soon discovered that Norman Almeida and Salus Fernandes were, in their different ways, the ones I could rapport with more than I could with the rest. They both hailed from the former Portuguese colony of Goa, on the west coast of India, and they were both bachelors at the time. I learned that Salus became a family man later, but not Norman.

Norman was more than passably tall, was prematurely bald and had a lean frame. He was an introvert. Retiring by nature, he gave the impression that he lacked confidence in himself and was self-deprecating to a fault. Often he went through long spells of depression and was by his own admission an insomniac, but I soon discovered that there was more to him than meets the eye and that he and I had many things in common. Like me, he was interested in sports and games. When a basketball court was being laid at school, it was his enthusiasm that egged me on to get the work completed before the deadline was up. And when we started regular sessions of coaching the boys, he was indeed a great help. I remember him especially for his lay-ups and his unerring hook shots that would find the hoop from any angle, time and time again.

He was a man of many parts. At the other end of the spectrum, he was fond of reading and could be seen engrossed in a book even as he ambled along the corridors oblivious to what went on around him, rather in the manner of monks in a monastery or as a Hamlet along the battlements of Elsinore. One could say he brooded. If he were ever provoked to anger, it would not be long before he relapsed into helpless resignation. Interestingly, I remember his telling me that he had at one time toyed with the idea of becoming a Jesuit. He read as avidly and desultorily as I did; only I did not lose myself in the book. Again, he shared my thespian interests and was an excellent director of plays.

Salus was of a different mould. He was of average height and was compact of frame. He had a thick black thatch of hair that was always brushed back neatly. His gait was brisk and he brimmed with confidence. He was a dilettante who could hold his own on any subject. Although his discipline was chemistry, he had a wide range of academic interests. He was a master of the riposte and would not gladly suffer anyone who would interrupt him when he is holding forth. However, if he discovered that the object of his scorn could give as good as he got, he quickly changed tack and made overtures. The policy was eminently practical; 'if you can't beat them, join them'. That is how Salus and I became good friends. His father was a bar owner in town and bore the unlikely name of Jesus Fernandes. We would often rib Salus as the son of Jesus the publican, which of course he took in good part. He took a more than cursory interest in sports and games, although he did not excel himself in any. He was a keen angler, though, who could wield a mean fishing rod. Many were the times I tagged along with him to Oyster Bay and beyond for angling. Quite often we would come back with a good catch, mostly red snappers. Sometimes he would venture further afield in search of excitement.

On one occasion, Norman and I joined him in one of his forays into the wild. We went to the Mikumi Game range, a three-hour drive from Dar along roads not uniformly paved. He owned a black Hillman Minx, a sturdy car that could reputedly withstand the punishment of the rough terrain of East Africa at that time. After viewing game, on our way back late in the afternoon, the transmission shaft of the car fell off from the rear end and brought the car to a scraping halt. Luckily, we were able to retrieve the bolts and nuts that held it in place and put them back on as best we could. The car had to be jacked up before we crawled under the chassis, which took no mean effort.

We resumed our journey and as we were nearing the city, the ammeter on the dashboard showed that the battery was not recharging and was draining fast. It was already dark and the headlights were growing dimmer. Salus decided to turn off the lights and drive on, regardless. If, by some misfortune, the car had stalled, we would have been left high and dry at that unearthly hour in the middle of nowhere. It had not. That there was a half-moon in the sky that night was halfway comforting. And, fortunately, there were not many oncoming cars and we made it back, but only just, very late in the night, thoroughly drained. And the battery too, I may add.

In passing, I must mention another colleague, an Englishman, Bill Maundrill by name. He was in his forties, a bachelor with a fast balding pate. What was left of his hair was always unkempt. He wore thick glasses, but that did not hide his turned-in right eye, which gave him a curious look that tempted the more uncharitable of his colleagues to call him 'Mandrill' behind his back. Some called him 'Four-eyes'. His meerschaum pipe would always be sticking out of his mouth except when he pulled it out just enough to speak, all sputter and spittle. The ever-growing deposit of pipe ash under his seldom-pared nails would testify to his utter disregard for appearances.

I remember our son Bonny refusing to take his hand extended in greeting, on one occasion. Instead, stepping back and making a face, he simply said, 'Dirty!' But Bill good-humouredly ignored it. In his khaki shorts (the only pair perhaps?) having seen better days, often with flies open, his threadbare knee socks refusing to hug his none too fleshy calves, one sock slid down more than the other, and his crumpled white shirt

crying out to be washed, he was the very picture of studied sartorial indifference. His car, a red Volkswagen Beetle was a familiar sight in town. Wherever he went, he would have a set of his pupils, mostly school cricketers, accompanying him. His car was also a tip for all the unsightly rubbish he was loath to part with, the sum total of his worldly possessions in a manner of speaking.

For all that, he was a gentle person. Soft spoken and friendly, he was easy to get along with and would always be willing to help if he was asked. He was known to have helped some of the more disadvantaged of his students to pursue their studies after school. Cricket was his craze and his passion and he helped to groom a creditable cricket side for the school. One of his protégés, John Solanky, made a name for himself as a national cricketer. Incidentally, John Solanky later moved to Ireland as a cricket coach. I understand he is no more. Bill was a regular visitor to our place, for tea and small talk. Unlike many of his insular countrymen, his general knowledge was quite impressive. Many were the times I picked his brains when I had wanted specific information to use it in the classroom or to flesh out a piece of writing. A common interest often makes very different people come together.

I think it was sometime in 1959, just two years before Tanganyika had become independent, that Dar es Salaam hosted a week-long international trade fair, perhaps the first of its kind. One of the attractions of the fair was the quiz competition held every evening when contestants would be picked at random from among the visitors. Somewhat in the mode of the Channel 4 programme, ‘Fifteen to One’, but minus the three life-saving lights, the contestants would take turns at answering questions, failing which they would be eliminated one by one until a winner emerged. Salus had tried his hand at it and was caught with his guard down when the quizmaster shot a question at him. “Who killed Cain?” and almost involuntarily Salus answered, “Abel”.

I had already been warned of this before I ventured to go along and try my luck. My friend, Sadasivan, a chartered accountant in the city, took me along in his rattletrap of a car, a Standard 8 as I recall. He was there to give me moral support if I found myself on the open stage. I did, and soon I was one of the last three standing. It was my turn to answer and, to my great surprise and relief, quick came the sly question, “Who killed Cain?” I paused dramatically for effect before answering, “I didn’t know anyone could kill Cain. Remember, he had the mark of Cain?” The quizmaster’s mouth fell. The next contestant could not answer his question and was eliminated. That left two of us. The next question was directed to the other one. ‘Name the play on which the musical ‘My Fair Lady’ is based. My adversary, who happened to be English, did not however know the answer. That was an unexpected piece of luck. As usual, the question was then passed on to me. I replied promptly: ‘Pygmalion’ and added unnecessarily, ‘by George Bernard Shaw’. The Blauponkt radio I won was triumphantly carried home in my friend’s car and was with us for a long time afterwards and my mother was to be its chief beneficiary.

A few months after my success, we nearly came to grief in Sadasivan’s car, the very same jalopy that carried back my trophy. Sadasivan was short, dark and tubby, and was generous to a fault. He was an academic high-flyer. No wonder, he was a gold medallist in the C.A. Exams. As a bachelor he always found himself invited by his friends for a meal and a chinwag, for which art he would give the best of the wags a run for their

money, especially in the evenings, after a long draught of beer. He was a regular visitor to our apartment. Once when we suggested a visit to Morogoro, our first home in Africa, over the weekend, Sadasivan said he would drive us down, for we did not own a car at that time. Although we had our doubts about whether his car would withstand a rough ride, we could not resist the prospect of a free ride.

So, the six of us, that is, Sadasivan, Ammu, Bobby, Bonny, Saidi our helper and I drove to Morogoro that Saturday morning. Sadasivan was behind the wheel. I sat in front. The rest were cooped up in the back seat, from time to time wiggling their behinds and elbowing each other to lessen their discomfort all along the ride. To make matters worse, Saidi our man Friday had to hold on for dear life to two lengths of cord that had each been tied to either door handle lest the doors flew open, which it was known to do without warning. Our benefactor was not familiar with the twists and turns of the stretch of road he was rattling along. We had covered about half the distance when we came to a blind corner, which our friend negotiated without bothering to shift gears. The fact is he did not read the road sign which clearly said, '*Pindi la hatari'* (Dangerous curve). He got into what he thought would be a straight stretch only to realise that he was on a sharp S bend. Try hard as he might, he was not able to turn the second corner without taking a sideswipe at the hard shoulder on my side. All this took only a few seconds, but it seemed an eternity as we screamed and cringed in fear. We had escaped a mishap by the skin of our teeth, virtually. Unruffled, our hero merely said, 'How was I to know there would be a bend after a curve? *Walavil thirivu undaakumennu njaanarinjo?*

As if this were not enough, disaster very nearly struck again. We had just entered the town when the rack-and-pinion attached to the steering rod came off and the car came to a stop. Fortunately, *Sadasivan* had already slowed down. A roadside workshop set it right. Our host Thomachen who had been waiting for us with increasing impatience was getting more and more worried and was just about to contact Dar es Salaam when we hove into view.

Sadasivan belonged to the Ezhava community of Kerala, a supposedly backward community at that time. There was a time when members who claimed to hail from the upper castes used the pejorative nickname *Kotti*, which meant 'a toddy tapper', to refer to them. *Chovan* was another such appellation for them. This had something to do with their traditional occupation of toddy tapping which used to be the preserve of that community.

In course of time, the meaning became more generalised and the word began to be used to poke fun at any obtuse person, slow on the uptake. And it was also often used in banter to rib each other, especially among friends. *Edaa, chovatharam kaanikkaathu* was a common form of reproof for any act of stupidity. One day, I had gone along for a haircut to my customary barber's only to find that the two chairs in his saloon were taken. The barber saw me and signalled, 'Five minutes' opening and closing his left hand. I came back in five minutes to see someone beating me to the chair that had just been vacated. The barber shrugged his shoulders helplessly. I could not immediately make out who the usurper was.

More than a little miffed, I blurted out, in the vernacular, 'Who's that idiot?' or '*Ethu chovanaada athu?'* My friend Thomachen, who had accompanied me, frantically shushed

me and pointed to the chair again where to my dismay I saw Sadasivan comfortably ensconced. When we ran into each other later that day he said half in earnest and half in joke, 'Hey Yoosuf, Did you have to insult me in public?' that is, *'Yoosufe, Parasyamaayittu enne apamaanikkanamaayirunno?'* How in the world was I going to live this down in the eyes of my friend? If indeed Sadasivan took it to heart, he never once showed it after that.

Years later, my indiscretion came back to nag me when I heard that Sadasivan had been killed in tragic circumstances. He had moved on from Tanganyika to Kenya and thence to Malaysia where he worked for the income tax department. In the course of his work, he was known to have brought to book some criminal elements for income tax evasion. I remember my brother George telling me how he had warned Sadasivan to be on his guard about his personal safety when he was out and about. George had earlier met him at our place in Dar es Salaam in transit to Malaysia from London. One morning, as Sadasivan was about to get into his car, he was waylaid and assailed by two men on a motorcycle who stabbed him many times and left him by the wayside to bleed to death. The culprits were never caught. He left behind his wife Sulochana and his baby son. They presently live in Trivandrum.

To take up the account from where I left off following the incident at the hairdresser's, Sadasivan was soon to go on leave and, as it happened, to get married to Sulochana. That was in early in 1963. Sulochana could not accompany her husband when he returned soon after to resume work. A dependant's permit had to be obtained from the immigration authorities before she could join him. That was not long in coming. About that time, Ammu and the children were coming back from India, so it was arranged for Sulochana to travel with them. They flew Air India to Nairobi. The connecting flight to Dar was by East African Airways. This was a one-stop flight, with a brief stopover in Zanzibar.

On that particular day, for some reason, this stopover was cancelled, but Ammu and company had not been informed of the change of schedule. It would appear that the hand-written note that the captain had passed down the aisle to that effect did not find its way to where they were. The rest of the passengers, who were all Caucasians, may not have thought that their 'black' fellow passengers were worthy of attention. Am I being racist? When the plane landed at Dar, Ammu and company stayed put in their seats thinking that they were in Zanzibar. All the other passengers disembarked and walked across the tarmac to reach the terminal. Our folks did not appear to have seen anything unusual in that! From our perch in the visitor's gallery, we scanned all the faces as they came closer to the terminal and there was no sign of the ones we were looking for. There were one or two stragglers bringing up the rear and finally the crew, in a bunch as usual. The ramp to get on and off the plane was at last going to be removed, and still no sign of them.

Frantically, we rushed to the airline desk to check the passenger manifest. Sure enough, they had taken the flight. We told the ground staff of our quandary. By that time, the ramp had already been wheeled away. It had to be hastily wheeled back into place and, lo and behold, our self-conscious heroes disembarked more than a little embarrassed. It would appear, amid all the din and clatter of the snacks being served on the short hop and the hassle of having to keep the kids in check, they had not noticed the captain's note

being passed down. We thought it strange that the crew got off before checking all was in order. Ah, well.

And, when friends would meet for a chinwag, among all our anecdotes that were regularly re-cycled, this never failed to cause considerable mirth. Whenever friends met at Sadasivan's place, Sulochana would make a whole heap of *dosais*; a crisp pan cake made of rice and lentil, and served together with' red-hot' chutney that would explode even in seasoned palates such as ours. Was this her way of getting her own back for all the ribbing she had had to take?

Our friends got together often, especially over weekends, in one or the other of the houses. Playing '56' for hours on end was the principal diversion and, in the meanwhile, indulging ourselves with food and drink to stoke up the engine of our weekend recreation. Sometimes, we would get into our cars and head towards one of the wonderful stretches of beach that Dar boasted of. Especially, Oyster Bay beach was a familiar haunt. Often in summer, a dip in the shallow waters there gave welcome relief from the scorching sun. But of course, only men in briefs waded out, never anyone from our lot in a bikini! That was a big no-no.

On the way out to the beach, we routinely stopped at the Naaz Restaurant, an eatery well known in the city for its savouries like kebabs and samoosas. We would buy up enough goodies to last us the long evenings. The stuff would be washed down with tender coconut water. Often, there would be urchins hanging around at the beach eager to scale the coconut palms around and pluck tender coconuts for you. They would sometimes do it just for the asking and sometimes for a small consideration.

On Sundays as we drive to the beach, sometimes for a change we would take the longer drive along the whole waterfront to enjoy the brazing sea breeze that blew in our faces and, if we got lucky, to catch a glimpse of President Nyerere pedalling along the sea front. Many were the times he had been seen on his bicycle on his way to the evening mass. It was a measure of the man's greatness that he lived a Spartan life at the State House without the pomp and circumstance that was rightfully his to flaunt had he been so inclined. In pursuance of their political ideals many an African leader has been known to choose an unassuming lifestyle in the first flush of independence, only to succumb later to the blandishments of power. Nyerere remained constant to his ideals to the very end. By all accounts, his family too deferred to his wishes. And I can vouch for that.

Ammu and I were beside ourselves with worry one evening when our son Bonny suffered an allergic reaction of some sort and was seen to swell by the minute in front of our very eyes. Our efforts having failed to contain it, we rushed him to the casualty ward of the Princess Margaret hospital and were surprised to see the First Lady, Mrs. Maria Nyerere, in the queue just ahead of us with a woman and a child in tow. It was not as if she could not have had a doctor to call at the State House. She chose not to pull rank. We were to learn later that she had in fact brought her maid and her child for treatment. And, remarkably, the African doctor in attendance did not show any obsequious haste to attend to them before their turn.

As for Bonny, the doctor gave him an antihistamine injection and asked us to get rid of pets if we had any. Sure enough, we had a stray tabby with us and we promptly got rid of it. And the incident of the First Lady at the Casualty Ward would have been a salutary experience to anyone who was used to a status-ridden dispensation. In India, in a similar situation, the doctors would have fallen over each other to curry favour with the high and the mighty! There was nothing of the high and the mighty in the Nyereres.

To Julius Kambarage Nyerere socialism was the be-all and end-all for removing man's greed and cultivating an egalitarian society. That was his only 'sin' of commission in his public life. He called it *Ujama'a*. As a Christian, he could not reconcile himself with the communist ideology of the end justifying the means. He therefore found it hard to fight the iniquities of the North-South Divide decisively except to rail ineffectually against capitalism on the one hand and on the other, imploring the North to come to the aid of the South. Nor could he see the bigger picture and make half-way allowances for man's natural instincts of acquisitiveness that came from a need for survival in a dog-eat-dog world, so he rigidly held on to his idealism. That was also his 'sin' of omission. Yet, no one thinks the less of this great man.

A month or so before the country was to become independent, Julius Nyerere, president of the Tanganyika African National Union, was invited to be on a Brain's Trust panel and field questions from an invited audience. He readily agreed. That was when I met him personally for the first time, for I also happened to be invited to sit in on that panel. To this day, I have not been able to fathom the reason for my inclusion, but, needless to say, I have cherished the memory of that meeting ever since. The others on the panel were Brenda Holroyd, the chief editor of the Tanganyika Standard and Fraser Murray, a leading lawyer in the city. It is not for me to say whether I acquitted myself creditably or not, but I do remember being flummoxed by one particular question directed at me: 'What would happen if an irresistible object came into contact with an immovable one?' or words to that effect. If I remember correctly, while I was racking my brains for a plausible answer, Mwalimu (teacher), as Nyerere was affectionately called, came to my rescue with an answer. I still do not know what the right answer is. Some brain I am!

By and large, as a teacher, I managed to get along reasonably well with my colleagues. They were a dedicated lot for the most part and went about their work unobtrusively without having to be prompted or pushed. In such a professional milieu, egos would rarely clash. Occasionally, however, someone would try to score points off you or pull rank on you. It was more likely to be the result of a human failing than that of professional difference of views. In any academic discussion, professional detachment among the participants is to be taken as read. Or, to put it differently, the members must agree to disagree with objectivity and, more importantly, with equanimity. But if ego enters that equation, then it becomes a catalyst that compromises not only objectivity but also personal relationships. Often, it is rather because of one's inflated sense of importance than of any genuine conviction about the point at issue that one tends to be perverse or obstinate on such occasions.

I too have a character flaw that tempts me sometimes to lock horns with others, particularly if they send out the wrong kind of 'vibes' when you come to deal them. The vibes are probably no more than an echo of my own pet prejudices about people or more

likely of my own 'inflated sense of importance'. That was how I came to try conclusions with the headmaster, Bhaiji who had just replaced the previous incumbent. It happened at a staff meeting. Apparently, he was not satisfied with being merely 'first among equals'. That had been the ethos of his predecessors, but he was determined to change all that.

At the staff meeting in question, when the allocation of contact hours was under discussion, he tried to ride roughshod over the suggestions and arguments put forward by the teachers. There was a chorus of dissent. I weighed in with some injudicious remarks about the headmaster's high-handed approach. Judging the general mood of the teachers, he had no option but to give way. However, he did not do so with good grace.

Two days later I received a memo from the headmaster, copied to the manager of the school, which in effect asked me why I should not be disciplined for insubordination. More than a little incensed, I scribbled on the same memo a reply that merely read, 'That I was insubordinate on the occasion in question is a matter of opinion'. I then initialled it with a flourish and handed it back to the office assistant that had brought the memo to me. She hesitated for a moment, saw the look on my face, slowly turned on her heels and walked back to the office. Nothing came of the implied threat. When I met the manager a few days later, he gave me a knowing look. Apparently, he did not think much of the headmaster's 'savoir-faire', for what it was worth, but I sensed that there was mild rebuke in his eyes when he looked at me. Looking back, I am not sure who came off worst in this exchange. Was it I? Was it Bhaiji?

In the event, he did not last long. He was soon transferred to an upcountry school and that was the last I heard of him. His predecessor, D. R. Gregory, an Englishman, had been headmaster for many years, but there was a quick turnover of headmasters after Ahmed Bhaiji's departure. First, there was Alfred Duarte from Goa. He was an elderly gentleman with the bearing of a Portuguese grandee, but with the mild manners and affability of a probationer on the make. Perhaps, he was too gentle to stamp his authority when it was called for. Then in quick succession came Rabindra Nath Bannerjee from Calcutta and J. E. Greenshaw from Britain. The former was the archetypal Bengali '*Bhadralog*' intellectual, opinionated in the extreme with the hint of an overbearing tone. Regardless, I rather liked him and we got along very well. I had a sneaking suspicion that the Britons on the school staff resented this because he was the object of their –for want of a better expression- 'in-your-face' racism, for he was uncommonly dark-skinned. Their prejudice was subtle and rarely expressed, and they were constantly in bland denial that their lighter skin pigmentation gave them any special privileges.

Bannerjee did not have a long tenure, either. His successor Greenshaw, though a relatively raw hand at running a school, was to stay on for a long time. I came to realize during my stint in Africa that the Ismaili Khojas, in particular the lighter skinned among them, harboured a racist mentality towards people of darker skin and tended to defer to those above them in the scale of whiteness. Other factors being equal, the white jobseekers -as top dogs in the colour heap- were likely to receive preferential treatment. It has also been known that sometimes whiteness alone invested the jobseeker with a certain aura that the prospective employer, especially if he is not white, could not resist. Let me hasten to add that this is not a failing that is peculiar to any one race or people. It is a common human failing. Every race carries assumptions, largely groundless, about its

own limitations relative to others. But it is equally true that every race also carries assumptions, just as subjective, about its own virtues and its supposed superiority.

When Greenshaw took up the reins of the school, I was already marking time to leave for London. I had earlier secured admission at the Institute of Education University of London. My students of the Higher Secondary Certificate classes, with the active assistance of the headmaster, threw a farewell party for me. The school hall was tastefully decorated with bunting and balloons, with streamers and coloured lights. After the brief farewell speech and my equally brief response, the teachers and students joined in the party games that had been arranged. When that was reluctantly brought to a close, a table laden with goodies was waiting for us. I was deeply moved by the affection I was shown on that day. In an otherwise thankless profession, heart-warming moments such as these are recompense enough.

Before my departure, the school magazine, 'Phoenix', Volume 7 Issue 1, thought it fit to write a thumbnail sketch of my stint in its column 'Who is Who in School'. I hope it will not be out of place to quote relevant parts of that article here. If nothing else, it would help provide chronological coherence to my account that had been rather without order so far.

"…He commenced his teaching career by becoming a lecturer in English at St. Thomas College, Kozhencheri, Kerala in June 1954 and remained there until November 1955.

Meanwhile he had decided to move to East Africa and late in November 1955 he took up a post at the Aga Khan School, Morogoro. Here he served until December 1958, being for a time the Acting Headmaster of the School. At first he was teaching Biology and English but in recent years he has transferred his affections to English and indeed is currently Head of the English Department in the school. This has been extremely fortunate for us since he has taken over the teaching of Principal Level English Literature. In the Higher School Certificate he has had a hundred percent record of successes, something indeed of which he may be justly proud.

But, Mr. John's activities have by no means been confined to the academic side of the school life. He is an ardent believer in the truth of the old adage '*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano'* and he has encouraged us to take an active part in school games. At one time and another he has played cricket, (he once bowled John Solanky, although we must confess the ball bounced about three times!) tennis and has taken charge of athletics and basketball. This latter, is perhaps his pride and joy, for it was he who through his enthusiasm introduced the game into the school and from a handful of raw recruits produced an unbeaten side in the local school circuit.

He has been equally active in Drama and last year the play, 'Hewers of Coal', which he produced was acclaimed as the best play and received high praise from the adjudicator Dr. Barnard. This year again he will be producing the School Play in the British Council sponsored Youth Drama Festival.

Altogether, Mr. John is a decided asset to our School and we would like to wish him all luck on his forthcoming trip to the United Kingdom."

In the same issue of the magazine my message to the students also appeared, under the column, 'Staff Voice'. And this is what I wrote:

"It is with mixed feelings that I make this contribution to your magazine. I shall be going to the United Kingdom in September to obtain a Diploma in Education. Naturally, I am pleased with the prospect of going to London, but I shall be also sorry to go away even though it will only be for a short time. I have enjoyed working here and I hope that you have gained as much as I have from our association over the past few years. I feel that we are together building a school of which we can justly be proud. When I am away, I shall be looking forward to hearing of your successes at work and play.

In this context allow me to commend to your special notice our School Motto, *'Labor Omnia Vincit'* and all that these words imply. If work has to conquer everything, it has to be done well. Work is only done well when it done with a will. It must be said, to your credit, that on many occasions you have amply justified your school motto in your work both in the class and on the playing fields.

I will only add this. In whatever work you do, you must be absolutely honest to yourselves. Develop a sense of fair play so that you may cry out against injustice whatever quarter it may come from. This would naturally pre-suppose a readiness on your part to admit your own mistakes fearlessly whatever the consequences may be."

I flew to London in the first week of September of that year. I was to return the following year, but that was not to be. In July 1965, I flew from London to India. Bobby and Bonny were at that time boarders at the Loyola School, Trivandrum. Bobby was in Grade Three and Bonny, Grade One. I visited them the day after my return, with high expectations, but I was totally disenchanted by the general tone of that school. I was in a quandary. Do I take them back to Tanzania or leave them behind to continue in the Indian school system? My heart urged the former option, but my mind said otherwise.

At moments such as these, help generally comes unexpectedly. I believe it was providence that came to our aid. From a well-wisher of ours whom we had not heard from for a long time, we learned that a teaching vacancy was due to be filled at the Lawrence School, Lovedale, early in the following year. I promptly applied and was called up for interview not long after. It would appear, my credentials satisfied the powers-that-be. Learning of the circumstances under which I applied, the headmaster, K. I. Thomas, was considerate enough to let me join the school without delay. By virtue of that, I could avail myself of a teacher's privilege to have my children admitted to the school forthwith. Bobby joined Class Four and Bonny, Class Two at the Prep School there in September of that year. Throughout my professional life, many were the times when unforeseen intervention had helped me in times of crises. Try hard as I might to rationalize these happenings merely as every-day coincidences and not help from an immanent source, I have always found the exercise far from convincing. Rationalization reckons without the power that your inward groanings elicit.

Chapter Four >>