

| Chapter 5

London Beckons

This was no seven-year itch for either of us and it was already the autumn of the year 1964. In fact, almost ten years had passed since we had been married. We had no reason to have grown quite tired of each other yet. Therefore, yielding to an impulse merely to seek a change in life and going our separate ways was the farthest from our thoughts at that time. Still, we each needed a bit of space for ourselves for different reasons.

My wife, Ammu, left for India to be trained as a teacher, because I had always egged her on and not always gently, to find a niche for herself in life apart from being just a homemaker. Call it self-interest if you like as we had two other mouths to feed, so we could do nicely with some more loose cash 'to bring home the bacon' so to say. Besides, nudging a homemaker to train for a profession will have its uses; it will have prepared her to be an 'independent' widow and to handle matters on her own, in a largely unhelpful world, should that need arise.

And I on my part was considering making a career move, for a different reason; I was partly prompted by the kind of restiveness that had always kept me champing at the bit. To stay put in one place for too long would make me fret, for I was not fully set in my ways yet. The same yearning for far-away places that brought me to Africa was once again beginning to work on my mind. I had spent nine long years teaching there, and, much as I loved the place and its people, I felt it was time to be on the road again. I believed a change of scene, if only for a while, would add zest to my life. And the ideal opportunity soon presented itself. And I moved on to London.

That a rolling stone gathers no moss is a convenient cliché with which to rap a person over the knuckles for his changefulness; that is, to blame a person for not having a sense of direction or singleness of purpose in life. But when you come to think of it, you realize it is so much piffle! The truth is that even as the stone, rough and misshapen, tumbles down and gets worked on, it has its jagged edges smoothed and rounded into a pebble. In what may be seen as a life of drift, you may have to suffer many knocks that wear you down, but each one perhaps adding an unforeseen dimension to your life. Moss there may not be on a pebble, but polish there most certainly is!

I was given to 'rolling' on from as far back as I could remember, but not always of my own volition. From school to school and later from college to college, I had found myself moved apparently to 'equip' me for a future about which I had at no stage personally given much serious thought. However, this tiresome routine of rolling on had had its fortuitous rewards, not all of which may have helped get the rough edges smoothed, but which did add new dimensions to my life. If nothing else, the drift took me to different places, different surroundings and different peer cultures. All the while, I was beating hitherto untrodden paths.

Apart from these ‘bonuses’, whatever my formal education, such as it was, had made of me did not really give me a flying start in life. A good university certificate would no doubt have given me an initial advantage, but mine did not quite impress any one. I had been no rough diamond waiting to be cut. For the compulsive underachiever, it would have been rather helpful to be born to influential parents or to have a godfather to give him a leg up. I was pretty much left to my own devices, and whatever guidance I did get from my parents was like water off a duck’s back. As a student, I had been merely dabbling instead of seriously ‘toiling upward in the night’. The result was that I could barely keep myself from falling at each academic hurdle!

When I graduated Master of Arts in English, in May of 1954, with no clichéd flying colours I might add, there was no choice for me except to settle for a position as a fledgling lecturer in a barely-known college that was yet to make a name for itself. At university, I remember sitting in on a debate in which the motion was ‘Those who can, **do**; those who can’t, **teach**’. George Bernard Shaw, who first said it, had implied that teachers were rejects from other more worthwhile positions in the industry and professions. He was merely echoing the popular myth that any fool could teach. That contention is open to question. Even those academic high flyers that soared to stratospheric heights could not have got to where they reached without the initial assistance of those ‘fools’. Besides, as matters stood in India then, not many in that fraternity of ‘fools’ were equipped to teach English with competence. Good teachers of English seem rather thin on the ground as snowflakes in summer.

In the initial fervour of Indian Independence, it was quite natural for people in general to shun anything that smacked of a colonial imposition. Many more years were to pass before they quite got over their professed contempt for this ‘colonial hangover’ and sent their children in droves post-haste to English-medium schools in order to learn English from the word ‘go’ as a perceived economic necessity. Sadly, judging by the evidence we now have, many children learn a deviant form of English that many a ‘teacher of English’ purveys in these so-called English medium schools that have sprung up in makeshift response to this ever-increasing demand. But that is neither here nor there.

Times there had been when teaching in general was regarded as a respectable profession but, by the time I was looking for a start in life, teaching as a profession had slid down the scale of preference in the eyes of a society that was becoming increasingly obsessed with acquisition of wealth and status as the ‘be all and end all’ of life.

Received wisdom, however, had it that a college teacher could, like an intrepid mountaineer, claw his way up that sheer professional climb, ledge by slow ledge, to attain in course of time the position of a full-fledged professor and, with some luck, even that of the principal of a college with all its prestige and concomitant benefits. Only after having reached that summit, however, could he hope to enjoy parity of esteem with the more highly-regarded professions in our society’s blinkered scale of snobbery

Interestingly, this scale of preference does not remain carved in stone for ever. The relative esteem that each profession enjoys at any given point in time is apparently bound up with the quick economic returns it brings to the ‘investing parents’ with an eye to the main chance. As with the share market, we prefer blue chip in life’s market too, don’t

we? Interestingly, as a sociological fallout from this, even in the matrimonial market we look for 'blue chip' for our sons and daughters, but there is no saying whether what was blue-chip yesterday might not lose some of its gloss today! And, tomorrow is anybody's guess. The world is now in a state of such fast and furious flux! No one can make an educated guess what new dynamic the present information superhighway would lead to!

I did not teach at St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, long enough to strike roots there either professionally or socially. The need to make ends meet obliged me to seek prospects elsewhere. My monthly earnings in 1954, while I was on probation, amounted to the grand sum of one hundred and twenty-five Rupees, take it or leave it, and that only for ten months of the year! 'Probation', is a word that is bandied about with pursed lips. You see, when his physical presence was not called for at the college during the eight weeks and a bit of the long summer vacation, a lecturer on probation would be uncharitably denied even this measly sum, which his more senior colleagues 'enjoyed with full benefits' such as they were! And, if the vacation extended beyond two months, the additional days of enforced 'absence' would be pro-rated to dock his 'wages' further. Thus it was that this managerial shabbiness cleverly schemed with my budgetary shortfall to drive me from the land of my ancestors to the land of the Original Man, Africa. For nine long years, in the first instance, I lived and worked in that fascinating continent. When later I did decide to leave Africa in answer to my peripatetic urges, even if only for a short spell as I had planned, it was with great sadness that I did so, for the place had begun to grow on me.

That stint in Africa taught me how foolish I was to have thoughtlessly swallowed the horror stories about Africa and Africans that were reeled off by my elders, whose knowledge of the outside world was sketchy at best and scandalous at the worst. What I experienced in person was a different Africa. It was not the stereotypical 'white man's burden' of primitive Africa, the Africa of impenetrable forests and of bloodthirsty savages, waiting to be 'saved', that met my eyes.

I saw an Africa of vast landscapes and unending grasslands, dotted with baobabs, acacias and what have you. It was an Africa of distant horizons and of magical moons that I saw. One of the more enduring memories of Africa is not so much its unending open spaces as its pristine skyscape with nothing that is man-made to mar its broad sweep. But above all, I came to cherish the memory of a warm-hearted people, the very image of unpretentious courtesy that the racially arrogant expatriate often mistook for submissiveness. How different they are from the image of the savage that is conjured up even to this day in our collective race consciousness when Africa is mentioned! How much more human than the small-minded yahoos that we Indians obstinately turn ourselves into! My toes curl whenever I hear a compatriot labelling Africans as 'Negroes', the word's racial overtones being clearly implied in the body language.

Africa helped give the compulsive rolling stone in me considerably more sheen than it had assumed hitherto. It gave me more self-belief. It taught me that one could attain remarkable things even with only the limited opportunities that teaching could offer. Again, there was so much that one could do for his wards beyond the four walls of the classroom. After doing a spell of nine years there, however, I started marking time once

again. It was ostensibly to better my prospects professionally, but I had other aims as well.

Years before, a chance acquaintance had insisted on reading my palm, much as I had distaste for such quackery. I remember him looking at my upturned palm and pompously intoning, with seeming earnestness, that I would restlessly drift from continent to continent until I came to rest my bones in far-off climes. Despite my scepticism, that pronouncement caught my fancy. Journeying to distant lands had since been for me a kind of wish fulfilment. However, to end my life's journey in strange lands was the farthest from my thoughts when I was getting ready to leave for England.

Apart from honing my skills as a teacher of English, I was also eager to see a new place and get to know its people and their ways. I had earlier applied for and been offered a place at the Institute of Education University of London, to pursue my language studies. It was a chance meeting with A. S. Hornby, the well-known lexicographer and grammarian of those days that set me thinking along those lines. He was in Dar es Salaam courtesy of the British Council to conduct workshops for teachers on the content and methodology of teaching the new-fangled structures and patterns. It was all the rage then, pedagogically that is.

During one of the sessions, I remember his asking the participants -many of them of Anglo-Saxon parentage- if they could come up with a more precise generic term to classify the verb "to be" than merely as a helping verb. His intention was no doubt to debunk the prescriptive approach to traditional language teaching. None of them offered to answer promptly. A snigger went round the hall when I ventured to say that it could be variously defined as a 'copula' or a 'link verb' or an 'intransitive verb of incomplete predication', all of which were so much old hat. It did not throw any more light on the word than before. Of course, I was merely repeating what traditional grammarians had at various times chosen to call it. That answer, passé though it was in his view, prompted Dr. Hornby to seek me out at the end of the seminar and, among other things, suggest that I did the diploma that the TEFL department of the Institute of Education University of London offered.

I left Dar es Salaam for London in the forenoon of Sunday, the 12th September 1964. Three days earlier, I had been surprised to hear the strains of the well-known pop song 'A certain smile' coming over the radio. Apparently, it was asked for as a goodbye gesture on behalf of some of the girls I was teaching. The girls were quite fond of me and, in a collective sort of way, I them. One or two of them I suspect might just as well have asked for the number 'I want to be a teacher's pet' if they had been more forthcoming! The programme was the popular 'Listeners' Choice' on the local radio station and the day also happened to be my birthday. That made my day! At least, teaching has its emotional rewards of a certain kind!

The evening before my departure, the boys and girls I had until then been teaching 'A' levels Language and Literature at the school had organized a farewell party for me and there was a lump in my throat when we held hands and sang "Auld Lang Syne" as they bid me goodbye. Three of those students, of whose names I recall only those of

Mohammed Bhimji and Basheer Jaffer, and my colleagues Baby John and Salus Fernandes, were at the airport to see me off for the first leg of my journey.

I may add, ruefully, that there were no ‘teacher’s pets’ to see me off. Ismaili girls had not become totally emancipated by then! Ah well! I vividly remember looking over my shoulders, to give the men a farewell wave as I took my long walk across the apron -this was long before the latter-day chute along which one could pass from the departure gate into the aircraft without being exposed to the elements. I had my overnight bag slung over my right shoulder and my Dunlop Maxply tennis racket, complete with its press, held tightly in my left hand. It is funny though; as it turned out, I never managed to get even a single game of tennis in while I was in London. There were other more pressing things that begged my attention!

The East African Airways’ connecting flight from Dar to Nairobi was a short hop, which took a little less than an hour. The craft was the Dutch-made Fokker Friendship, which with its pressurised cabin was certainly a vast improvement on the juddering DC 3’s that usually plied the domestic routes. The stopover at Nairobi was to drag on till late in the evening. My friend, Sadasivan the accountant and Roger Banzhaf the missionary, both onetime residents of Tanganyika, met me at the airport and took me out. That helped to fill the long hours I would otherwise have had to spend twiddling my thumbs in the transit lounge.

The onward journey to London was on a B.O.A.C Comet IV, a new-generation jet aircraft that had not seen service for very long. However, the service on offer did not turn out to be as friendly as it was cracked up to be. At least for me, it was not! The plane was packed to the rafters and, as ill-luck would have it, after what could at best have been called only a frugal dinner, my ‘reclinable’ seat refused to recline despite my frenzied attempts to ease it back and stretch myself. And, when it finally gave, the pawl would not click securely into the ratchet to allow me to lean back in safety. Instead, with each increasingly frantic effort, the seat helplessly flopped back into the lap of the gentleman occupying the seat behind mine.

He viewed my efforts good-humouredly for some time and then shrugging his shoulders with an air of resignation he decided to give me a hand in trying to set it right, which I thought was quite decent of him. But it only proved to be a trying time for both of us. The steward, who was summoned for help, confessed he was helpless after he had given it a cursory shy or two. Looking back, I suspect he had not tried hard enough. To make matters worse, as I said before, there was not a single vacant seat that I could move into, fore or aft. The long and the short of it was that I had to sit bolt upright, for seemingly unending hours until the end of the journey, with neither sleep nor rest. It was infuriating to think that I was being denied, the secure use of a seat that I had paid for in full when the others all around me could lie back and snooze in some comfort. The crew couldn’t care less! My feeble attempts to protest were met with stony silence.

You see the all-English crew on board –and all-male in those days I may add- had already made it known by many an unsubtle hint that I was on board on sufferance. To serve the odd one out among a crowd of white faces must have been *infra-dig* for them. I soon realised that to expect anything more by way of service from that lot would have been to

whistle for it. So I had to spend a sleepless night, to say nothing of the slur that the English stewards cast, as only they can, by their pettiness. This did not altogether a surprise to me, judging by the less than subtle way that some of my Caucasian colleagues had bristled at my having been given leave with full pay to pursue my studies in England. Only, they would not directly speak their minds. But, of course, they had other ways to convey their message.

Some of them had unctuously warned me of the culture shock –read, racial discrimination- that I would have to put up with there. However, as it turned out later, whatever racial intolerance I might have sensed in England was much more nuanced and subtly camouflaged at least among the more educated. Yet others among my colleagues had held forth about the rigours of London weather. Some others doubted if I could cope with the demands of the academic work there. Perhaps, there was a grain of truth in it as matters turned out at the Institute of Education. I was being exposed for the first time to the concept of tutorials, term papers and seminars as forming a vital part of completing a university course. It took me some time before I could get to grips with the system, so to that extent their tut-tutting may have been justified in hindsight.

But of all the deprecations that my departure provoked, this last one took the biscuit! John Silvertand, a young English colleague in his early twenties just out of college, made an oblique remark about how interlopers, especially the darker of the species, sullied their English Roses by, as he crudely put it, ‘screwing’ them the first opening they got. He was most unsubtle. Could it have been pointless penis envy? And, he must have felt I was at an age to make me a prime suspect. Could the English crew too, all of them young and pale-faced like John, have seen in me the makings of a wannabe violator? What John could have admitted, had he been less obtuse, was that the boot was more likely to be on the other foot. To mix metaphors merrily, the ‘prickly’ English Roses were more than capable of ‘drawing first blood’ in this unequal encounter on their own turf.

The plane landed in London early next morning. After immigration and customs, I made my way to the information desk, where I had been told that a message awaited my arrival. There was none. However, I soon heard my name announced over the public address system, directing me to the meeting point where a British Council chauffeur was waiting to pick me up and drop me off at my destination, the Methodist International House, MIH for short. He was quite a friendly and helpful sort, which came as a pleasant surprise coming as it did in the wake of the boorish vibes of the night before. In fact, he wouldn’t hear of my carrying my baggage to the car. Later, on reaching our destination, he took the trouble to usher me into the house. Again, my protestations notwithstanding, he quite happily carried my stuff into the hall and then took leave of me. I did not know then that a tip would have been quite in order. The MIH stood at Number 4, Inverness Terrace, in West London.

I had asked for a room all to myself but, since one was not readily available, I was asked to wait for a few days until one fell vacant. In the meanwhile, I had to share a room at 50, Inverness Terrace, the MIH Annexe. My roommate was a Jamaican student whose name escapes me now. He was quite outgoing as West Indians generally are, but my association with him did not last long enough for me to overcome my initial diffidence

and strike up a lasting acquaintance. Two weeks after my arrival, I moved into a single room at 4, Inverness Terrace. But I am jumping ahead of my narrative.

A couple of days after my arrival, I took the tube for the first time in my life and sped from Queensway to Tottenham Court Road which was only a few stops away on the Central Line. It was with a great sense of relief that I went up from the claustrophobic depths of the tube station to emerge into the open, although the morning was wet and grey. A ten-minute walk past Bedford Square and across Gower Street took me to the Institute of Education on Malet Street, where I paid my tuition fees and completed the admission formalities. The Institute at that time was under the same roof as the University of London Senate House lying cheek by jowl with the British Museum. The new term was to start only on the 7th of October, but the week following my registration, I was assigned to a Junior Mixed School for pre-sessional teaching observation and practice. It was a school in a largely white middleclass neighbourhood in Islington or thereabouts. The children were generally high-spirited without being disruptive and, except for one or two who made a nuisance of themselves to gain attention, I found the children generally well-behaved. On one occasion I was asked how I could speak their language so well and I remember asking them in reply, my tongue firmly in my cheek, whether they thought it would take anyone more than a week or two to learn their tongue.

At that time, England had begun to experience a steady trickle of expatriate South Asian immigrants, mainly from the territories of East Africa in the wake of those countries gaining independence from the British. They were mainly second or third generation traders who had felt threatened by the new dispensation and had therefore decided to pull up their roots in Africa. The relocated Asians tended to form ghettos of their own in cities such as London, Leicester and Birmingham. The schools in such areas had to take in a large number of polyglot Asian children at short notice, and were therefore not quite up to the task of absorbing all those children into the system smoothly.

It was then that the Local Education Authorities in those areas thought up the novel idea of starting what was called ‘reception classes’ in such schools to take in the Asian children and purportedly give those disadvantaged children remedial help in separate classes before they could be assimilated into British society. In effect, this only proved to be ‘segregation classes’.

It was to one such class at the Dormer’s Wells Junior Mixed School on Dormer’s Wells Lane in South West London that I was later attached to for my preliminary teaching practice. That was in the latter half of November, a month after classes had started. Their headmaster was a Mr. Nicholls and their class teacher was a Punjabi lady who did her best to cope with the task of preparing the polyglot children to find their feet in England and to bring them up to scratch before they could successfully take the 11+ exam that would let them continue their studies.

Seeing how segregated these children were from the local children, who could otherwise have been helpful in reinforcing their English language skills, and also how they looked subdued and totally at a loss on the school fields during recess when the other children were having fun and games, I was not sure if this was the ideal way to integrate them into the mainstream culture. Clearly, they were denying the children the immediacy of

language use, in the classroom as well as the playing fields, which would otherwise have been a reinforcing factor in the process of their socialisation. I came away less than enlightened by this my first exposure to the much-touted educational system of England and Wales.

The adult polyglot lot at the MIH, however, did not seem to have much of a problem in adapting themselves to the new environment they found themselves in at Inverness Terrace. In any case, with few exceptions they were all excellent English speakers. Besides, for the birds-of-passage students at MIH, melding with the mainstream culture was not the first priority. One could say we stayed at MIH in splendid isolation from the hurly-burly of the city although the city centre was just minutes away. Inverness Terrace was in those days a quiet street, lined on either side with a row of terrace houses standing cheek by jowl. Except for a low profile hotel right across from where we were, there were no shops or anything closely resembling a commercial establishment in the street. A flight of steps from the pavement led up to the pillared entrance to each house. The bottom end of the street leading through Porchester Terrace to Porchester Road to the north gave the appearance of a leafy suburban avenue with trees on either side.

The street was generally empty especially in the mornings, except for the odd delivery cart bringing milk and bread or a low flat-bedded cart filled with goods noisily drawn by dray horses as they clip-clopped along, hooving that typically hollow sound of horseshoe on stone. On weekends, there would be coaches parked outside the hotel opposite to carry their quarry for package tours or maybe to Billy Butlin camps. The nearest high street was Queensway where we did all our shopping. It was only a five-minute walk from MIH to Queensway and the Bayswater tube station on the Circle Line. Queensway tube station on the Central Line was about the same distance away, at the corner of Bayswater Road and Queensway.

The board and lodging cost me 5 Guineas a week (a Guinea, a former British coin worth one Pound one Shilling then, or in present-day reckoning, one Pound and five Pence). To think that the board would cost at least twenty times as much now! I had a largish room all to myself at the end of a passage on the first floor. Its window brought you eyeball to eyeball with a tall, drab building, practically breathing down the back of the MIH. Nothing escaped its nosey eyes if any of the MIH Venetian blinds happened to be raised, especially during the day. By the way, this wasn't exactly reassuring to those who liked privacy. The board included breakfast, evening tea and supper everyday, except that on Saturdays and Sundays the charges covered lunch as well. An in-house cleaning lady tidied up the room at regular intervals and changed bed linen once a week.

The room had a radiator for heating and a gas ring, which yielded gas only if you fed the drop box next to it with pennies. When you ran out of gas, you dropped more pennies in; I hardly used it. There was a comfortable bed to sleep on, a bedside cabinet, a desk, a table lamp, a chair or two and a tallboy. There was wall-to-wall carpeting of some sort – it would not exactly fit the description of a pile carpet, as I recall- but it just about served to keep out the draught through the floorboards. That was the sum total of what five Guineas would fetch, neither too well appointed nor too Spartan. Luckily for me, one of the baths on my floor was adjacent to my room. I could step out of my room and take a mere two steps to find myself in the bath, virtually *en suite*. Luckily, I found it

unoccupied most of the time I needed it, as, along that corridor, there were no other compulsive twice-daily bathers as I was.

Comparisons are odious as the cliché goes, but many of my friends at the MIH must have felt relatively deprived by the pokier digs they were in or the double rooms they shared, either by choice or by chance. And yet, the modest three Pounds and nine Shillings or four Pounds and a bit that they only needed to pay every week must have helped them pile up a speculative holiday nest egg at the end of each term. The tally at the end of the year would reflect a notional savings of anything up to seventy Pounds; a princely sum in those days, when one realised how it usually added to up to three months' wages of an office clerk in London in the Sixties, more or less.

For a cash-strapped student, it was a crock of gold at the end of the rainbow! A shoe-string jaunt or two in Europe during the breaks between terms would do nicely for the travel freaks; and, the aspiring theatre buffs, could take in more plays and musicals at cut prices along Shaftsbury Avenue and around Leicester Square. The ballets at Sadler's Wells, or wherever, would be the icing on the cake. Then, there were museums and art galleries aplenty to visit for the culture vultures. London was and still is a treasure-trove that throws up surprises at every nook and corner for the persistent footslogger. So, in those days, Seventy Pounds held out great possibilities!

One time or another, a student was likely to find himself flat broke, more often than not, at the fag end of a month. My entire savings scraped together over nine years, a modest one thousand and odd Pounds, was with the Clements Lane branch of the Standard Bank of South Africa in the City of London. The bank had an arrangement with the Midland Bank branch on Queensway, which let me withdraw a fixed sum of money – ten Pounds I believe it was - at a time. There would be a lapse of a week before the next withdrawal was due. If you ran out of money in the meanwhile, you either cadged things like cigarettes off your friends or borrowed money from them or both. But, such asking had its limits. Neither money nor goodwill was inexhaustible.

I cannot say that I made friends quickly at the MIH. I was all of thirty-five years then. Most of the others were younger than me. I was the only student there from the Institute of Education and I commuted to and from the Institute every weekday, with no one to keep me company. That put paid to the chances of getting to know the other resident commuters while moving on the Underground. Then there was the dining hall at the MIH. Residents usually went in and out in dribs and drabs, so that you had no way of knowing who would come in and at what time; you would rarely spot the same face two days in a row. The TV room drew a fair number during prime time viewing, but it was not exactly the ideal time to break the ice and strike up a conversation when others sat glued to the set, watching Top of the Pops or Harry Seacombe Show or Steptoe and Son or whatever programmes that took their fancy. Your best bet to make friends was the lounge where most residents met late in the afternoon to have a cup of tea, to read journals and generally to relax.

When you look around for a friendly face as a possible quarry, you tend to seek out the familiar face of a countryman first. The MIH had residents drawn from every corner of the globe. I remember a student, with mestizo features, from as far away as Chile and

another one from the Antipodes, unmistakably Caucasian. There were lots of Caribbean students. There was even one from the Soviet Union doing a doctoral programme in chemistry. There were a large number of Indians and Sri Lankans as well. And it was very difficult to tell these South Asians apart, especially the generally darker-skinned South Indians and those Sri Lankans that hailed from the largely Tamil-populated north of the island.

Samuel Prabhakar Theodore, Sam for short, hailing from Madras, was the first to catch my roving eye. One day, not long after my arrival, he spotted me and smiled at me from across where I was sitting in the lounge. When I returned the compliment, he got up and walked over to me. After introductions, we got to talking about Madras. It gave us a common topic to talk about, during which I ventured to show off my smattering of Tamil. In fact, when I tried it, I remember he exclaimed, '*Adi shakke!*' which meant something like 'Well, I'll be damned!' That is one Tamil expression I use to this day almost involuntarily to show surprise. I still remember the trademark crinkle that pressed round his eyes when his laughter tinkled out with his cry of surprise.

Sam's father had been at one time a professor at the Madras Christian College. That was long before I passed through its portals, though. Again, his mother was a Syrian Christian lady from Travancore. That too gave us a common bond. Outside working hours, we became almost inseparable. Very soon, it was almost as though we had been life-long friends.

In the evenings, we went shopping together; often we went to the only fast food outlet in those days on Queensway as I remember, Wimpy's, for a bite, and now and again we went window-shopping further up the street to Whiteley's the multi-storeyed department store, on the offside chance that we might hopefully pick up a cut-price article of clothing that was put up in the sale. A polo neck woollen sweater that I once bought for a Pound at Whiteley's was a bargain. It lasted me several years! A sporty Harris Tweed jacket - complete with leather buttons, double vents at the back, patch pockets and leather elbow patches no less- that I had picked up for five Pounds at Burton's in Oxford Street served me even longer.

During weekends, we would join others at Kensington Gardens for a game of soccer or cricket. It was a just a hop step and jump away from MIH, which stood at the corner of Inverness Terrace and Bayswater Road. You stepped out of the hostel porch into Inverness Terrace, turned left, crossed Bayswater Road and you were at the Inverness Terrace Gate to the gardens. It took us barely two minutes and no more to get there. A ten-minute walk further along the gardens in the direction of Marble Arch would take us, if we were so inclined, into Hyde Park which lay seamless with Kensington Gardens.

I made more friends through Sam. Paul Khambatta, a Parsi student from Bombay was one of them. Tall, dark and handsome, he could break many a hankering female heart. Incidentally, it was his statuesque sister Persis Khambatta who later gained fame of sorts when she landed a role, I believe, in the first-generation 'Star Trek' TV serial. Then there was the unassuming W. T. Cheung of Hong Kong. Heir to a large fortune, he was just plain Ben to his friends, although I couldn't figure out why he was called Ben when his initials were W. T. He was generous to a fault. I still remember the Christmas Eve of

1964, when the four of us, Sam, Paul, Ben and I, clad in woollen overcoats, caps and gloves, took the tube at Queensway to Oxford Circus, just four stops away on Central Line, to see the illumination along Oxford and Regent Streets. Braving the bitter cold of that December evening, we made our way down Regent Street, all lit up for Christmas, to Piccadilly Circus, ablaze with neon lights, to dawdle around Eros for a while before strolling down Haymarket into Trafalgar Square to savour the festive mood around the traditional Scandinavian Christmas tree there and watch the madcap English youth, almost in the buff, frolic in the fountain under Nelson's Column in the middle of winter! We later went pub-crawling, and Ben wouldn't hear of anyone else picking up the tabs.

To the connoisseur of fine wines and beers, the old pubs of London were like shrines where he offered his accustomed libations. He was sure to know all the byways and back alleys of the town where these stood, like the back of his hand. One such 'man of taste' was Christakis Toffi, a Londoner born and bred, and my classmate and friend to boot at the Institute of Education. Birds of a feather, eh? Although he was of Greek extraction, he was no Adonis. He was almost always poker-faced. I don't remember ever seeing him with any kind of expression on his face even when he cracked a joke, which was often. He was very tall, had a generous waistline and a rather ungainly gait. Of course, that was no sign of excessive indulgence. His hair was close-cropped. He was no ouzo-guzzling Zorba the Greek. And, there was no mistaking his typical North London accent.

It was he who initiated me into the art of pub-crawling. To listen to him wax lyrical on each pub, the flavour and body of the beverage it offered as also its provenance was to me a journey of discovery that took me in my imagination into the world of wineries and breweries. In a way, it was also a harking back into the history of London and of the literary figures that patronized these pubs. And, strange as it may seem for a Greek, he never once talked about the authentic draughts of his putative motherland. Chris was also an inveterate punter, who was lucky in his hunches most of the time. I remember an occasion, when much against my will, I placed at his urging a one-Pound bet on a horse and won ten Pounds! There were other pub-crawler friends too at the Institute, but of them by and by. I am not done with Sam Theodore yet.

Sam was a good ten years younger than I was. He had read Commerce at the Loyola College in Madras before leaving India for the United Kingdom. When I arrived in London, he was working part time and, in the evenings, attending extramural courses connected with Business Management. He was a fraction taller than I was. A good athlete and an exceptional field hockey player, he had represented his university in hockey. He was lithe and graceful in his movements and could sweep any girl off her feet, literally and figuratively, by the vigorous steps of a quickstep or a jitterbug, of which he was a wizard. He sang a good tenor. His rendering of the song that goes 'I believe, for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows...' still echoes in my ears whenever I think of him. He was an easygoing person who endeared himself to others, whatever the type of people he was with.

It came as no surprise, therefore, that he pitched upon a fellow resident of the MIH as his prospective life-partner, in the person of Pauline Poonmathi Ramswaroop, the tall, willowy Secretarial student from Georgetown, British Guiana. They now live on Holden Avenue off Woodside Park tube station and they have two daughters. Sam and I kept in

close touch for a long time after I left London, but have heard less and less of him lately, but let me get back to MIH.

My circle of friends there widened as time went by. Kumari Pillay, a Malayalee Nair by birth but a Singaporean by domicile, was one of them. She was reading to be a barrister and by all accounts a favourite student of Lord Denning who was to become Lord Chief Justice later. She was demure and soft-spoken, but could come out of her shell in the company of friends. In her cosy attic room with its dormer window overlooking the street, her small circle of friends occasionally met and talked desultorily on subjects of topical interest, ranging from politics to fashion. In her neatly draped silk sarees, she always carried herself with effortless grace and dignity. Soon after returning to Singapore, she married a Fijian Indian diplomat she had met in London and moved to Fiji, but sadly died of a fatal illness not long after.

There were others too from Singapore among the closed circle. Dixon Chan and his sister Susan were good company. The bespectacled Dixon was an angular young man who looked the bookish type, but was no wet blanket when it came to partying. In fact, he was known to let his hair down during the occasional social evenings that the residents of the MIH organized in the basement of the house. His sister Susan was a compact girl with high cheekbones under a shock of dark hair always kept bobbed with bangs and all, which gave her ever-smiling face the look of a Japanese doll. In a word, she was petite.

To everyone's surprise, Susan fell for Mohammad Tabbaari. He was a hot-headed Iranian student staying at the MIH at the time. He had come to London to learn English. He could barely speak a word of English before he arrived in England and we often wondered how Susan and Mohammed could have hit it off so well. His 'Aryan' chutzpah could well have more than made up for his initial loss for words. Susan had the gift of the gab and some of it must have rubbed off on Mohammed in their moments of closeness, for it was not long before he could hold his own in English. *Amor Omnia vincit!* They eventually married.

The Sri Lankans of the MIH, of whom most were Sinhalese, were in a class of their own. They were fun loving and happy-go-lucky. It was as if they went about their work with a 'Baila' song on their lips, without a care in the world, almost footloose and fancy-free. The few Jaffna Tamils among them were a little more circumspect in their outlook on life. The accountancy student Sebaratnam, for instance, and his wife, a medical doctor, appeared to spend less time going gallivanting with the rest of their compatriots, but they never missed a social evening, and their dancing passed muster.

And among that lot was also Sarojini Kannangara. The daughter of a one-time Sinhalese cabinet minister, Sarojini was a short, chubby, pleasant-faced girl, somewhat woolly-headed and flighty by nature. She always wore a sari, and that somewhat dowdily, with its hemline rising a good three inches above her instep, clearly revealing her ankles that were not exactly exciting. The tail end of her sari was always slung over her right shoulder *a la Ceylon*. On her face, she wore a permanent smile. Whether this was because she was vivacious or vacuous was anybody's guess. Anyway, she loved company. She was a sort of cuddly mascot for the other Sri Lankans. Among them, Denali was the closest to her. This was a case of opposite poles attracting each other, for Denali was tall,

lissom and pretty. Her cute looks belied a head that was quick on the uptake. She always wore a jacket and trousers, the very latest in women's fashion, a perfect foil for the not so fashion-conscious Sarojini. Denali and Sarojini were inseparable, but it was hard to tell who was whose sidekick. The last I heard, Sarojini had moved to New York and married an Italian and assumed the surname 'Bruschi'. Of Denali, however, nix.

Sometimes, especially on the bleak Sundays of winter, those of us who were loath to stir out into the cheerless grey of London would huddle together at one of the digs. We would enjoy a cosy chinwag between the inevitable mouthfuls of roasted peanuts, which could be bought loose by the pound at Woolworth's in those days, or assorted biscuits, washed down with steaming tea or coffee that the host brewed on demand. Consuming anything more stimulating in the student digs was a big 'no-no' for the good Methodist Reverend Cook, our warden. His first name escapes me now. It was neither Thomas nor Robin, that's for sure. Smoking he tolerated, but only just. To Miss Porter, the patron of the MIH, even smoking was something to be frowned upon, but thankfully the grand old lady's visits to the house were few and far between. She was as formidable in her persona as Reverend Cook in his was unassuming. The mention of a Cook brings to mind the rest of the staff, especially the cooks at the MIH, most of whom were of Caribbean stock.

Those Caribbean cooks could conjure up a good meal if they applied themselves in that direction, which I must confess was not always. They were a happy-go-lucky lot who addressed everyone 'Dear' or 'Love' as they ladled out our 'helpings' or waddled about the kitchen with their big bosoms threatening their poise, but their ample bottoms somewhat helping to counterpoise their top-heaviness. As to their work, they thought nothing of taking the line of least resistance. Accordingly, the dishes they made were rather slapdash. To the Indians used to the rule-of-thumb recipes of their mothers who always got them right, a good meal at the very least would comprise rice and curry and a relish to go with it, the spicier the better. There were the occasional days when rice and 'Indian' curry would be on offer at the MIH, but the girls in the kitchen did not always get the blending right. They had no problems, however, with concocting the blander English dishes.

The typically English Yorkshire Puddings and Steak and Kidney Pies were standard fare for supper and I didn't quite mind them. In fact, by the time I left London after my studies, I had acquired quite a taste for the steak and kidney pie regardless of its blandness. Breakfast was always predictable. It was either bangers and mash or bacon and fried eggs with toast to go with them. Sometimes, for a change, the egg would be scrambled or poached. I don't remember anything remotely Indian being served for breakfast, ever, at the MIH. For that, in those days one had to go all the way to the India Club on the Strand, a favourite haunt of the High Commission staff at the India House at Aldwych.

Anyway, the aftertaste of the Caribbean offerings at MIH was eminently forgettable, or were 'long gone!' as the Jamaicans themselves would breezily say, but the friendship I had developed with a Caribbean kindred spirit still lingers. Her name was Rachel Manley. She was a pretty girl with dark hair and grey eyes, but it was her grey matter that appealed more to anyone who made her acquaintance. Barely out of her teens, she had just finished her 'A' levels and was aiming to begin her undergraduate studies. I met her

at a get-together for Commonwealth students held at the Commonwealth Student Centre. She stayed not far from there at 27, Courtfield Gardens off Gloucester Road in South West London. In the course of our circulating among the invitees and meeting them, we ran into each other. Like any young(ish) man who has an eye for good looks would, I decided to chat her up. When she learnt that I had arrived from Tanzania, she was keen to know more about the country especially since she had heard a lot about Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, the President of the country. It soon turned out he was a friend of her father's.

We know that, in general, African Americans and West Indians are eager to learn more about what they regarded as their 'roots' and about wherever in Africa they think their ancestors came from. There is that instinctive emotional bond, going back a long way, that they sedulously sustain. You could say there was an Alex Haley or a 'Kunta Kinte' in every one of them. But, I wondered how someone such as Rachel, who could pass for a white, possibly Welsh or Irish, was so much interested in Africa. Could her interest be purely academic? Sensing my thoughts, she said that as a quadroon she had a 'womb-bond' or kinship with Africa, and I felt at the time that it was too delicate a matter to ask her which of her grandparents was black. Interestingly, the expression she used is uncannily similar to the expression *As'syllath Ir'rahim* that the Arabs use to express a blood relationship, or *Rektha Bendham*, as we would say. Rachel's standing in Jamaican society as it transpired was top drawer.

It emerged that she was the daughter of the Jamaican politician Michael Manley. He was later to become the Prime Minister of Jamaica for more than one term. To his countrymen, he was the 'Joshua' to his father's 'Moses'. His father was none other than the illustrious Jamaican statesman Norman Manley who had founded the People's National Party and had led Jamaica to independence. It also transpired that she wrote poems. That intrigued me no end. I had at one time entertained the notion that I was a budding poet. As a student of literature I had dabbled in prosody and attempted versifying, but the output, such as it was, had never seen the light of day except perhaps in bits and pieces once or twice in a college magazine. I was just as keen to meet her father as I was to read her poems and I said as much to her.

Rachel arranged for us to meet the next time her father was in England. We shook hands warmly when Rachel introduced me. If one could judge a man by the firmness of his grip, it was easy to guess that he was a leader to the manner born. He was tall, and rather handsome in a rough-hewn way with a long face and a square jaw, but there was no mistaking the African blood in him underneath his light but leathery skin. As a labour union leader he had arrived to attend an international conference of socialists. We met at a restaurant and had lunch, in the course of which we spoke at length on African politics. His grasp of the subject came as a surprise to me. I learned from him more things about the Tanganyika African National Union and its leader Nyerere than I had managed to pick up during the nine long years I had spent there. After about an hour or so, he looked at his watch, got up and excused himself saying, "I have got to go" and added almost conspiratorially, "You children can take your own time".

Could he have thought that Rachel and I had more than a friendly relationship? An old English woman that once saw us chatting together thought so too, but for a different reason. I remember her doing a double take as she was passing us by and hissing between

her teeth, “You bastard!” My mind at once went back to my young colleague John Silvertand and I smiled at her. Rachel ignored her, but could not hide her embarrassment. With her father, it was different.

You see, I had not told him anything about my antecedents. As soon as he left, Rachel put me at ease by telling me that her father was in the habit of addressing all her friends, most of them her age, as ‘children’. Later on as we warmed to each other more and more, she made sure of telling me rather poetically how our companionship was but transitory, being no more than that of passers-by in time, lingering, indecisive, heart and mind both warring for a fleeting moment, and then moving away. She may or may not have had a sort of schoolgirl crush on me, but she must have had unspoken misgivings about where I would draw the line. I never once made a clumsy pass at her, but such was her defenceless appeal that I would have been but human if I did. We remained good friends.

It was not until 1972 that Michael Manley became the Prime Minister of Jamaica. He could have reached that position long before then, with a little bit of help from his illustrious father had he lowered himself to do it, but nepotism would have been unthinkable to a patriot like Norman Manley. I was at the time in Zambia working at St. Paul’s Secondary School, Mulungushi not far from the town of Kabwe and I remember writing a congratulatory letter to him. He promptly sent me a reply.

Office	of	the	Prime	Minister
24	East	Box	Race	Course
P.O.				638
Kingston,				Jamaica
3 rd August, 1972				

Dear Mr. John,

It was very nice to hear from you and most thoughtful of you to write. I well remember our discussion in London. It all seems so long ago now.

Rachel is married and has a son and is very well. She will be delighted when I tell her that I heard from you.

It must be very interesting teaching in Zambia which faces vast problems but seems to have good leadership. May I wish you every success in what must be a fascinating phase of your career?

Yours
Michael Manley

sincerely

After five years, his party lost the elections and he was cast into the political wilderness. It was not until 1990 that he was granted another chance to lead his country again.

Unlike Rachel the undergraduate, delicate after a fashion and somewhat unsure of herself, Leila Ziyal was a full-blown graduate student, from St. Mary’s College, University of Durham. She was bold as brass. Her visits to London during term breaks always brought her to the MIH and invariably caused a stir because she had a way of making heads turn

whenever she made her imperious entrances, sporting a pert ensemble that was the very latest in London fashion, but trailing a heady perfume that gave away the Orient in her. A rolled-up broolly, *a la* Royal Ascot, which she sometimes flaunted, completed the picture. She was from Turkey and hailed from the ancient city of Izmir at the head of the Gulf of Smyrna. The local wags called her ‘Turkish delight’, of course behind her back, after the namesake candy that was popular at the time, and not out of any special liking for her. She was too snooty for their taste. She knew she did not make friends easily, so in her efforts to find a likely quarry to amuse herself with she must have thought that I was made in the same mould as she was; being standoffish like her. She was not wrong and I was curious. I decided to play along.

We would occasionally run into each other in the lounge and then chat. She was a good conversationalist. Sometimes, the Italian bistro on Queensway lent us a venue. She was fond of Italian food. I don’t recall ever having to pick up the tabs, for she was loaded, which was convenient. Her general knowledge was quite wide-ranging and her opinions were forthright. Not long after we had first met, I remember telling her, among other things, that I was trying to learn Spanish, whereupon she looked me full in the face and said, ‘*Chiero usted*’ (I like you) in Spanish. Was she merely trying to show off her Spanish? Seeing I was taken aback, she switched to English and put a gloss on it by saying, ‘I mean I like your eyes’. Need I say I felt flattered?

She was rather like Gloria Steinem, the brash, bra-burning feminist of yesteryears who spoke her mind boldly. On one occasion I remember her telling me in a level tone that she was a lesbian. The subject under discussion had happened to be gender differences. On later reflection, I foolishly thought that her ‘deviance’ might have been an instance of her geographical closeness to Lesbos that determined, in some indefinable way, her sexual preference. It might have been just a co-incidence that Sappho, the ancient Greek poetess who wrote passionate poems addressed to women, had hailed from the island of Lesbos, only a few miles up the coast from Izmir, as the crow flies. There were others too whose company was enjoyable in one way or the other.

Lest you begin to wonder whether my stint in London was more for studying women and less for studying pedagogy, let me now quickly revert with a twinge of conscience to teacher training practice. In addition to Dormer’s Wells school, I had to do practice teaching at two more schools. One was at Shoreditch with Fagin’s fictional kitchen just round the corner, so to say. The school was located in a working class neighbourhood and understandably the prospective parents by and large suffered from low self-esteem. Alcoholism and its attendant ills of domestic violence and marriage break-downs were rampant in such families. That would give you an idea of the kind of student profile one could expect to have in a school such as that. Most of them would be eagerly marking time to drop out and seek employment at 16+, the mandatory school leaving age stipulated by the Butler Act of Parliament in 1944.

The school -I think it was called the Shoreditch Comprehensive- had just been ‘upgraded’ from being a Secondary Modern to a Comprehensive in response to Anthony Crosland’s egalitarian compulsions. He was the education secretary in the Labour government of the time. As part of their social commitment, providing equality of educational opportunities to all and sundry was the one insistent bee that buzzed the most in the Labour Party’s

bonnet. In response to that, the government yoked together many a grammar school and the omnibus secondary modern school purportedly to equalise opportunities and relabelled it a comprehensive school.

In effect, the change was merely cosmetic what with the mere addition of a grammar school stream or two for the academically gifted ones to the lowly secondary modern streams for all comers under the same roof. If anything, this turned out to be an invidious separation which effectively led only to a watering down of standards for the silent majority. It was not surprising, therefore, that the grammar school children, who were always turned out in their distinctive crested blazers, school ties and grey flannels, looked down their noses at their less gifted secondary modern counterparts and regarded them as veritable pariahs despite their having come from pretty much the same social background. One would have thought that academic attainment and arrogance were unlikely bedfellows! Oh, well.

I also had the opportunity to spend a week or two observing and practice-teaching in an ordinary secondary modern school without the pretensions of having been raised to a Comprehensive. Teacher-trainees were often told horror stories about the brassiness of the girls and the impertinence of the boys in such schools. The school I went to was in Golders Green not far from Hampstead Heath, if I remember correctly. The neighbourhood was largely Jewish, which was reflected in the preponderance of Jewish children at that school. In refreshing contrast to the snooty grammar school children at Shoreditch, I was pleasantly surprised to find the unassuming children at this school quite down to earth and friendly. And quite a few of them took their studies seriously and were zealously preparing for the G.C.E 'O' levels before they could take the 'A' levels preparatory to going to university. I managed to develop a rapport with them.

Was it possible that their Jewish genes may have had something to do with this more positive approach to life? My co-trainee Richard Swan, himself a North London Jew was naturally of that opinion. I was not so sure. Rather, I was inclined to believe that the heavy odds that any immigrant community would be up against in the country of its adoption would make their members work so much harder for acceptance and hence their successes. Once again, here was another example that added fuel to the flames of the perennial nature-nurture controversy. I found the children very eager to learn English, as did other immigrant children elsewhere in London. I felt united with these children in a natural bond of kinship. I do not know if I could speak with the same degree of conviction for some if not all of my more laidback classmates.

As I have already mentioned, among my classmates training to be teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL for short) at the Institute of Education there was Christakis Toffi, the pub-crawler and punter *extraordinaire*, of whose unusual gifts I have already sung paeans. There were two others at the Institute whom I found to be especially congenial company, but for different reasons. One of them was Gordon Jarvie, who on first meeting gave the impression of being a dour Scot. He was from Troon in Ayrshire. He was a man of few words. But after downing a pint of draught beer he was transformed before your very eyes, which metamorphosis bore not the slightest resemblance to the unforthcoming, unsmiling chap you first met. He could then talk philosophically at any

length, but always with a faintly smiling face, on the virtues of restraint in whatever we did not excluding indulgence of the pub kind.

Then there was Graham Till of Bognor Regis in Sussex. His British friends, who used to rib him for his ginger hair, would call him “Ginger”, which nickname he did not particularly care for. But, he generally managed to take it with a smile like the good sport that he was, but with just a hint of colour on his face. He had grey eyes. His sharp nose, his long face and his spare frame gave him a certain look of introspection that at first glance belied his outgoing nature. On closer scrutiny, his compact frame had a rather roguish attraction that was enhanced by his good taste in clothes that matched his ‘Tony Curtis’ haircut -all the rage among the youth at that time- which prompted his lady admirers to tease that he was ‘hep’ or ‘with it’, in the local parlance in currency then. Whenever we were free from lectures or seminars or tutorials and the like, which was not always, Graham, Gordon, Chris Toffi and I would sally forth into the university precincts and sometimes further afield for beer-bibbing expeditions. Of the three, I was drawn the closest to Graham for he was the friendliest of that generally friendly lot.

It was he who exposed me to another slice of student life in London. The bottle party! There are no formal invitations to it. You come to know of it on the local grapevine. You gain entrance to it by the simple expedient of carrying a bottle of drink with you. I remember tagging along with Graham, who carried a large bottle of cider for both of us. To be quite honest I felt like a fish out of water there. If it was just a matter of behaving wildly after imbibing more than you could hold, that would have been understandable. Until then, I was not used to seeing couples in attitudes of physical intimacy either propped against the passage wall or stretched out in different stages of undress wherever they could roll over. Not that I was a prude. Unselfconscious nakedness takes some getting used to for an uninitiated oriental.

It was the same sort of feeling that I had when I had gone swimming to the pool at the University of London Union and stood aghast at the sight of a row of swimmers with nothing on, and I mean nothing, under the common showers. I must have stuck out like a sore thumb standing under the shower with my swimming shorts on. Incidentally, my eyes saw only male ‘members’ on that day. I never went back there. On this occasion, however, I lingered at the party long enough not to raise Graham’s suspicions and then left Graham to his own devices.

That he was a pushover for girls with good looks was kept well under wraps until we were in Spain for our month-long EFL practice teaching as part of our course requirement. Two of the better-looking girls in our class, both Welsh, coyly vied with each other for his attention, as only women could. The brown-haired, brown-eyed Lynda Powell, by far the prettiest of the girls, did seem to have an obvious edge in looks over the fair-haired, grey-eyed Davies girl in their unspoken contest. She was not as tall as Linda, either. But, she was by far the livelier. She was always bubbly in company. I forget her first name. Lynda, on the other hand, could be seen to brood at times. And, almost everywhere that Graham went outside teaching hours, one of them, or occasionally both, would tag along. He disappointed neither.

Graham and I shared a room, so I could not help being witness to their comings and goings. Often, I would be invited to join them, which offered me a change from the cheerlessness of our rather rough and ready lodgings. Our sparsely furnished room opened into a drab corridor on one side with a common bath at the end of it and, on the opposite side, into a narrow, built-out balcony with a wrought-iron handrail all round, its green paint fast peeling off with age, overhanging the pokey alley below.

You see, we were put up in a no-frills *Pensione* by the unlikely name of Residenza Corona at 63 Via Augusta, off Calle Balmes in the Mediterranean city of Barcelona on the Catalan coast. So any opportunity we could get for a change from the drabness of our boarding house, we would grab with both hands and sally forth into the city. Besides, since the *pensione* only offered 'bed without breakfast' or 'bed without any meal' for that matter, we had no choice except to eat out in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. That was how I came to try Spanish cuisine for the first time in the wayside *cafes*, *bodegas* and *restaurantes* of Barcelona. Back in London I had tried Italian Bistros for their spaghettis and lasagnes, but nothing that was remotely Spanish.

For breakfast in Barcelona, it was almost always Tortilla Espanol (Spanish Omelette) and Spanish bread for me and black coffee to go with it. One with a lean purse generally had to count his 'pesetas' before he decided to eat out in a city. That way, one would rather be safe than sorry. Spain, however, was not an expensive place then, and the Pound fetched around 170 pesetas then if my memory serves me right. For less than 50 pesetas one could eat an adequate meal in a decent eatery. You could eat for even less if you knew where. A sandwich and a cold beer would do nicely for lunch. Sometimes it would be a Spanish vegetable soup, somewhat like but thinner than minestrone, and bread and salami to go with it. It cost next to nothing compared to London. Even then, some of us bought bakery stuff from the neighbourhood *panaderia* and carried it around in our shoulder bags for a quick bite to save time whenever we felt peckish. I carried no backpack.

I still remember the figure of a classmate of mine, Peter Loadman of Stokebishop, Bristol, carrying French bread and cheese wherever he went, whether he was out sightseeing or teaching Spanish kids. In his duffel coat complete with toggles, the worse for wear and never off his back when he was out and about, he projected an image of shabby gentility. His breakfast of bread and cheese was almost always alfresco. He made a virtue of such unselfconscious parsimony. For all that, he was a decent sort. Bread and cheese is what he had for lunch too, always unabashedly washed down with mineral water that he carried in his shoulder bag.

Incidentally, I might add that no eating house in Barcelona worth its name would ever serve '*agua pura*' or drinking water to its regulars. If you asked for water, you got mineral water most of the time and had to pay for it. But wine was a different matter. Many an eating place offered it, both red and white, on the house and, mind you, rather rough or full-bodied as the euphemism would have it, for the customers to slake their thirst even before orders were taken. I had not quite acquired a taste for dry or even medium-dry wines by that time, so I hardly touched it any time then. In the evenings, I generally settled for a *Cafe con Ron* (black coffee laced with rum) with *calamares* for starters (ringed slices of squid, dipped in batter and deep-fried) before digging into a rice-based, pork and sea-food dish garnished with vegetables, paella no less, the icon of

Spanish cuisine as haggis, God knows why, is to the Scots or rice and curry, though less curiously, to the Indians. Thirty-five more years were to pass before I dug with great anticipation into haggis –made from the chopped-up innards of a sheep with bits of oatmeal, suet and onions thrown in and stuffed into an ovine stomach and cooked- at a pub in Edinburgh at the time of the Festival. The lengths to which they go for cooking such a bland dish! Never again, I was to say to myself! But, paella? That’s a different proposition altogether! That is Spain’s culinary icon, its flag bearer so to say.

Barcelona, Spain, also had its cultural icon in the person of Antonio Gaudi, the 19th century architect and designer who pushed his reclusive fantasies to the edge of fairy tale when he conceived the kind of buildings he was to design. He had developed a unique architectural style represented by sinuous lines and asymmetry that gave it an esoteric significance of its own. Perhaps it was the Catalan in him that was cocking a snook at the architectural style of a Castilian *catedral*. Barcelona is a part of Catalonia, a region of Spain bordering France in the Pyrenees and the Costa Brava. It has for long nurtured a strong separatist bias against the wielders of power in Castilian Madrid. Would such arcane architecture lend itself to an expression of a separate identity?

The still unfinished church of La Sagrada Familia that he had designed, started more than a hundred years ago, is now the most striking symbol of this Catalan city. With its spindly, asymmetrical spires, it would not look out of place in a theme park beside the hoary turrets and battlements of a Camelot or the Sleeping Beauty Castle or the even the more mythical ‘topless towers of Ilium’. Along many a city avenue lined with palm trees, standing cheek by jowl with the conventional buildings, there are many more such ‘discordant’ structures in Barcelona that would take the uninitiated visitor by surprise. Imagine for a moment the absurd figure of Quasimodo at the *Notre Dame* catching the unwary Parisian unawares with an unexpected leap of laughter, with Esmeralda beside him. The asymmetry of the hunchback coupled with his out-of-character lunacy, yoked together with the classic beauty of his ‘Emerald’, would have jolted any passer-by into turning on his heels and taking a closer look, wouldn’t it? Needless to say, more than once, I did a double-take at ‘Gaudi’s madness’. So too Graham!

And, everywhere that Graham went both girls were likely to go! Nearly always! Occasionally, I too! Less than an hour south of Barcelona by bus is Sitges, on the Costa Daurada. Graham, Lynda and I went down to Sitges not long after we arrived in Spain. It was in those days a biggish village that had all the makings of becoming a ritzy resort to attract tourists for its sandy beach lined with palm trees and its endless expanse of uniquely Mediterranean blue. A parasol or two dotted the beach with a few desultory bathers stretched out beneath them. There were a few restaurants and hotels stretching past the shore. I still remember *Restaurante La Ribera*, with its cobblestone pavement giving on to the beach. I distinctly remember the place because we had a meal there and a photo session in front of it. Then somewhere above the seafront, going up a slope, I remember visiting a model of a traditional Catalan village as a heritage showpiece. All round it and inside it, the place was cobbled and pedestrianised for visitors to stroll around. Again, one would hardly fail to notice the mosaic of ceramic tiles with several different tints but mainly blue that adorned floors and walls in many a building in Sitges.

Of all the places of interest that we visited in and around Barcelona, nothing was more elevating, in more senses than one, than Montserrat, the mountain fastness that is the setting for a monastery and a basilica which jealously holds in its bosom the small wooden statue of La Moreneta, the Black Virgin, the patroness of that region. It is about two hours from Barcelona by road to the foot of the peak. From there, if my memory serves me right, the only access to the place for the ordinary traveller is the cable car that steeply sweeps over the valley several hundred feet below. And you feel as though you are in a cage suspended in midair and, looking down at the mist-covered depths below, you realize you are at the mercy of providence. Without a ripcord, as it were, to open a chute and arrest a free-fall should the cable snap! One of those rare moments when a wordless prayer is wrung out of your heart! Clutching at straws? I was no exception. I remember thinking of the Psalmist who cried, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills; from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord". Was He up there yonder?

For someone like me who had, even as a child, lisped in anti-Papist sentiments with the compulsions of a largely reformist bias in the family, the prospect of this ascent to a Roman Catholic monastery perched on a hill was anything but reassuring. Whatever misgivings I might have had until then gave way to relief when we got there. There was no further room for prejudice on my part as I began to take in the atmosphere that pervaded there. There was a great sense of peace and tranquillity there. Soaking in it was a humbling experience for me. The retreat and its cloisters were awash with an ineffable otherworldliness. And when the monks chanted their canticles and psalms, even the most dyed-in-the-wool sceptic would have found the celestial strains that rose from their throats to the very rafters of the church soul-stirring, to say the least. Back in Barcelona, there was the Tibidabo to visit, a hill that is home to a church as is Montserrat, and along with it a huge figure of Christ as tall as it is sublime

From the sublime to the gross is but a short fall, when you step into a shabby tavern straight from church, figuratively speaking, that is; especially an alehouse where the beatniks and the hippies hang out. There was one such joint on Calle Balmes complete with cobwebs strung across the corners -were they real? - and guitars and calabashes and such like hung on the walls all round, adding to its odd ambience. I forget the name of the place. The regulars were generally untidy and hirsute. Some drank, some smoked pot and some plucked their guitars and sang Spanish songs that came across with anger suppressed in words; Joan Baez or Janis Joplin sort of songs; they were soulful in an irreverent kind of way.

Then there was the night club, more posh, where one could sit in comfort and eat and drink with more elbow room around you while watching a show. Baring of bodies was a big 'no no' in Catholic Spain under Franco, so there were no ecdysiasts or even cabaret girls as in London or Amsterdam or Paris. But there was Flamenco, instead! Fully clad women booted and suited in long, swirling, black skirts with red underlining literally kicked up a deafening racket as they clicked their fingers and clapped their hands over their heads and tapped their heels as they dished out their oomph to the accompaniment of strumming guitars and clapping castanets accented by insistent banshee wails and

syncopated gypsy ditties. It was so virile, so stirring, so delightful, but of a much more physical sort!

Barcelona with its tree-lined avenues is a great place for the inveterate stroller. In particular I remember the laid-back Las Ramblas, not far from the bottom end of which is moored an exact replica of *Santa Maria* the ship on which Columbus, under the patronage of Queen Isabella, set sail to the West to find the Orient. Graham and I visited the place more than once. Quaint little cockleshell of a ship it is!

I have gone off at a tangent for far too long. We had come to Spain for teaching practice. I was attached to a boys' school and my Spanish counterpart was a short, frumpish lady by the name of Beatrice Waldemorro. She wore thick glasses. She was anything but the image of a fiery Spanish *senorita* that I had carried with me when I heard her name. This was before I had met her. As it turned out she was a stern *senora*! She was a dear, nonetheless, and was of immense help to me in the classroom. The boys I taught were in their pre-teens and were indeed a wonderful lot.

Staying in a hotel not far from where we were put up was our supervisor, Dr. Geoffrey Broughton, a senior lecturer at the Institute of Education, who would from time to time drop by -we were each assigned to a different school and he had to visit them all- to sit in on practice lessons and give us useful tips. Towards the end of the month-long teaching practice, we had an important visitation from London in the person of our chief examiner Dr. Jack Bruton of the British Council fame. After observing one of my classes, he said how very much impressed he was with my 'presence' in the classroom and my performance as a teacher. Need I say that I was hugely buoyed up with his remarks? Coming as they did from an Anglo-Saxon, whose penchant for understatement is well-known, his generous remarks were indeed gratifying. But I was careful not to show it as if to say, "So, what else is new?." He was curious to know what my educational background was. I told him, without going into the pedestrian details. Then looking at me sideways, he casually asked me if I was of Anglo-Indian stock. The question was as unsubtle as they come. I knew at once what he was getting at and quickly disabused him of his impression and added that I was a Syrian Christian from Kerala. At which point, he tried to make amends for his faux pas by hastening to add rather unnecessarily that the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar were known to be a snooty lot. I agreed with him, if only to rub it in!

Before the month-long teaching practice in Barcelona wound down, some of us also went sightseeing to Tarragona further down the Catalan coast. It is a walled port well-known to the tourists for its ancient Roman walls, aqueduct and amphitheatre apart from its Romanesque-Gothic Cathedral going back some eight centuries. When the month was out, while the rest of the group returned to London, I proceeded to Madrid by train. I boarded the *Rapido* that sped past Zaragoza and later Guadalajara that took me into Madrid.

I had heard that Prado, the National Museum, contained one of the greatest painting collections in Europe and I was not about to miss this opportunity that beckoned. And I did not. It took me two days to give it the once over. I was particularly drawn to Velazquez, the 17th Century Spanish painter whose realistic paintings, devoted to Spanish

domestic life in subtle colour schemes and in contrast the court portraits including dwarfs and jesters, showed the artist's depth of perception. Then I visited the Moorish fortress that spoke of an Islamic legacy that Spain had once been heir to. I also visited Miguel de Cervantes' house in Madrid, which brought back images of that extra-ordinary epic narrating the misadventures of that ridiculous hidalgo, bearing the unlikely name of Don Quixote, who stubbornly seeks to revive the traditions of knight-errantry by tilting at windmills. About an hour's drive from Madrid is the Escorial, a complex of buildings that include a Castilian palace, a monastery, a college, a Renaissance church and the mausoleum of a long line of Spanish kings. It also houses a famous art collection.

Toledo was next on my itinerary. Hemingway's '*For Whom The Bell Tolls*' -with the Spanish Civil War as its backdrop- prompted me to visit Alcazar, the Moorish castle and fortification, where the anti-monarchist International Brigade of Republicans made their futile last stand against the Fascists under Franco at the end of the civil war in the late 1930's. The Falangist dictatorship that followed for many years, before monarchy was restored to Spain, is now history. Toledo has a certain kind of mystique about it that takes you back in your imagination to a past age in which other cultures flourished there, the world of Don Quixote in a manner of speaking. In the streets and in the market place could be seen donkeys laden with pottery of different shapes and sizes but all flaunting geometrical and floral patterns characteristic of Islamic symmetry.

Although the Jews and the Moors had been expelled from Spain well-nigh five hundred years earlier, its Visigothic-Moorish city walls, its medieval bridges, the Moorish Alcazar fortress and its synagogues-and-mosques-turned churches all bespeak its long and varied history. The *Casa-Museo Del Greco* (the house and museum of El Greco) that I visited was interestingly in what was at one time a Jewish *Sinagoga*. El Greco the 16th century Spanish painter of Greek extraction, one of the great artists of the Counter Reformation, had made a name for himself through the baroque treatment of his subjects and of his dramatic use of light and dark. Again, Toledo had its traditional cottage industry in steel going back into the hoary past; especially its sword blades have been famous since Roman times.

My next stop was Paris. I had travelled from Spain by Wagon-lit sleeping car. I stayed for three or four days in a *pension*, the cheapest I could find in Paris, which was not exactly a cheap city for a visitor. I had earlier tried to find accommodation in a youth hostel but had drawn a blank. The thought that I could avoid a separate trip to see Paris made me settle for the somewhat more expensive 'pension' as the more sensible option, since I could stop over in Paris on my return journey from Spain.

Louvre, the national museum and art gallery of France was the first place I visited. It was a former royal palace converted to its present use after the French Revolution. It took me two days to give it the once-over. It was both mentally and physically exhausting to rush through the halls although the intention was to be able to boast later that I had been to the Louvre. The only spot I tarried was at the Mona Lisa painting to see for myself the much touted mystique of that smile. Perhaps it was the philistine in me that failed to see its purported beauty. Perhaps what I enjoyed more was the Tuileries Gardens which stretch along the Right Bank. The city's original site, and its geometric centre which is in the River Seine, is the Ile de la Cite with its distinctly Gothic character in its medieval

buildings especially the dark and brooding Notre Dame. The left bank contains more medieval buildings, and further west there is the Eiffel Tower. Stretched along the Right Bank of the river is the system of squares and boulevards surrounding the Arc de Triomphe and the Place de la Concorde with the Champs-Élysées connecting them. Then there was the Sacre Coeur, the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, atop a Hill which you reach by a funicular railway. I also visited the Pigalle and the Mont Martre, the not so reputable quarters of Paris. Although I drew a blank at the more crowd-pulling *Lido*, I did manage to gain entry to the *Moulin Rouge* to watch a floor show, which I thoroughly enjoyed. This was on the day before my return to Dover en route to London via Calais.

It almost slipped my mind, having been carried away by matters much more after my own heart, to mention another kind of school I had earlier been to for practice teaching. In the Michaelmas Term, straddling the last week of November and the first week of December 1964 to be precise, there had been more teaching practice and this time round it was with one of the AREL Schools (Association of Recognized English schools) teaching English to foreign students. The school had an upmarket address on Princes Street in Hanover Square, Mayfair, Central London, and had the pompous-sounding name of the London School of English. With a name and an address such as that, one would have thought locating the place would be a cake walk.

As it turned out, it took me the better part of the forenoon to find, not far from Oxford Street, wedged between two prominent commercial addresses the narrow doorway that opened into a narrow hall and up a narrow, not to say steep, stairway that led to a flat that housed the so-called AREL School. It contained three or four pokey rooms one of which served as the reception and, separated by a glass partition, the cabin for the director.

And behind his desk was the man himself, a certain Mr. Fabian, accoutred in a dark blue suit complete with a striped, high-collared shirt and a bowtie. He was the jolly old English type with ruddy cheeks and curly hair. And he was friendly enough. He could have easily passed off as choir master in a village church. He led me to a room that was so tiny it could not have held more than ten or twelve people and that at a pinch. There were about six or seven students seated there, a mixture of the eastern European and the Mediterranean types, looking very earnest and no less eager. And the school blurb had made a virtue of necessity by cleverly advertising that their students received individual attention and that, with that end in view, they took no more than ten to a class! And now I knew why! Whether the students themselves got wised up to this subterfuge is anybody's guess. They were there to learn something new, which they did, purely for bread and butter reasons.

Some grandly call education preparation for life, which implies that the time spent at school and later college is intended for a purpose that is extrinsic to what is learned at the time. In this context, I recall the inaugural lecture of Professor R. S. Peters who had been appointed Professor of Education just before I joined the University of London. The title of that lecture was '*Education as Initiation*' and in it he averred that the worthwhileness of education was in developing the intrinsic potential of a person for its own sake rather than for merely preparing him for a means of livelihood. Only when education is undertaken for its own sake rather than for an extrinsic end can it be sustained throughout one's life. Funnily enough, I never had the occasion to see the great man in person.

His plenary lectures, meant for the whole student body of the Institute of Education, were broadcast over the public address system so that you could sit in any one of the previously notified lecture halls and listen to his disembodied voice. I did, however, often meet Mr. Dearden, the senior lecturer in Philosophy of Education and attend the follow-up seminars he held at his office at 29 Woburn Square, just a minute's walk from the Senate House. Professor J. S. Lawrys, a naturalised Briton of Eastern European extraction, was another distinguished teacher whose lectures on Comparative Education I never missed. Not all subjects that I had to study, however, were uniformly interesting.

Dr. Andrys and his seminars on educational psychology I found particularly boring. Despite all the nuances of his psychology, he could not gain and hold my attention for long. Even at the most receptive of occasions, my attention span had never been particularly long. Besides, there was always something else that came along to add to the distractions.

In the third week of April, 1965, over the Easter weekend, from Maundy Thursday through Easter Monday to be precise, I was in the company of my MIH friends on a package tour to the Netherlands. There were about twenty of us. From London to Dover by train and from there by boat across the channel, we quickly reached Ostend in Belgium. Without further ado, we made our way by coach to Amsterdam with a short lunch break at Rotterdam, where we found time to take in the famous harbour and shipyard there. Almost twelve hours after we set out from Dover, we reached Amsterdam and got on to a canal boat that plied the network of canals that Holland was known for. All we had to do was to step off the bus and step into the boat, practically, for wherever one looked streets ran along these canals.

For the next two days and a bit we were more or less water-borne, but our boat turned out to be merely an apology for what was cracked up to be a comfortable vessel. It had cabins, each the size of no more than a poky box room with bunk beds in each one to accommodate two! The common toilets, or what were passed off as toilets, were too few to go round when the call was most urgent in the mornings. We realized only too late that we were led up the garden path by some fly-by-night operator who was out to make a quick kill. We roughed it out on board as we criss-crossed the canals mainly of South Holland. For a bath, we had to seek assistance on land. We had to knock at doors and ask around.

As it happened, it was a horologist -a watch dealer in plain English- who on one occasion came to our aid; for a consideration, that is. For two Guilders per person, he let us have the use of his toilets and a hot bath after that at his place. After we had so urgently made use of that facility and just as we were leaving thinking what a skinflint he was for charging us so much for that service, he surprised us all by graciously inviting us to stay back for dinner as a gesture of goodwill. That there was to be a sting in the tail, we realised only after he had palmed off on more than a few of us, during the course of that thoroughly enjoyable social evening, several Tissot watches of which he was a dealer.

To be fair, his wife played the perfect hostess regardless. We had aperitifs and then a good dinner, on the house need I say, followed by a spur-of-the-moment dance session arranged in their spacious living room. I remember the hostess, a strikingly good-looking

woman in her thirties, first looking archly at Paul Khambatta, and later making sure that she buttonholed him more than once on the dance floor. Paul was the ladies' man among us. He was a good dancer. I must confess I was more than a little peeved that he alone should get so much special attention, and at that moment I could have given an arm and leg to be granted the boon by whatever deity to transmogrify myself into a good dancer somehow. Well, you win some you lose some as the wags would have it.

We plied the canals, moving up and down and visiting quite a few places. That there were windmills everywhere was not an exaggeration, and no doubt tulips of all hues in such profusion. The Kukenhoff – meaning kitchen garden I was told- that almost endless expanse of a garden flaunting row upon row of flowers of different kinds, but mainly tulips, and hothouses with exotic flowers from other parts of the world was fascinating. We later visited The Hague, where the International Court of Justice is based and also Leyden, famous for its pottery. Apart from the ubiquitous windmills and tulips, wherever one looked one saw many a plus-fours-clad Dutchmen deftly weaving about on their bicycles. Many of them rode tandem on bicycles made for two. They all looked so ruddy and cheery on their saddles.

Back in Amsterdam, we got into a glass-topped boat to view the waterfront and its typically Dutch buildings and landmarks. Later that evening, we spent some time in a discothèque and danced amidst the comforting obscurity of dozens of merrymakers who could not give a damn what the others on the floor were doing. They swayed and bumped to ear-shattering music under the mirror balls and the somewhat disorienting strobe lights that blinked on and off and changed colours as in a kaleidoscope. When we came out of that din into the cool, night air, it was as though a thunderstorm had all of a sudden abated. Still later, we stepped into a night club where the unselfconscious ecdysiasts were doing their act with clinical precision, as stage performers would anywhere else. The girls in our group did not seem to be in any way disconcerted by this act of pseudo-provocative twirling and shedding of their lingerie, their itty-bitsy briefs and bras with tantalising insouciance. I felt a bit discomfited that our girls were so blasé about seeing other women in the buff. For the unselfconscious strippers it was business as usual.

Later, what did make the girls feel rather self-conscious was the sight of women, who sold sex, being exhibited in glass-fronted boxes, like so many Japanese dolls in shop windows, for each 'browsing' customer, to examine clinically and pick from, before he would for a price blithely have a banana with the Lady Diana of his choice. The timorous or the cash-strapped could simply ogle at these living dolls for free.

There was an assortment of girls on offer to suit each man's fancy; the tall and the short, the angular and the curvy, the svelte and the plump and the in-betweens, some with hair let down and some bouffant. And each one's clothes were meant to reveal her points to her best advantage. Yet, they all looked so surprisingly sanitised. And from all accounts they were.

It was reassuring for the client to know that each such purveyor of prurient pleasure had to undergo stringent, municipal health checks periodically to ensure that she could neither infect nor be infected. That the powers-that-be also bestowed so much social protection upon these members of the world's oldest profession -as demanding as it is perennially in

demand- spoke volumes for the pragmatism and the refreshing openness of the Dutch. Stodginess you may accuse them of, as a sweeping generalisation, but you could not point a finger at them for hypocrisy. It was this national trait that later on persuaded them to legalise the use of some drugs, especially marijuana, in controlled situations.

On our return journey by bus from Netherlands we browsed through Antwerp without stopping, but halted briefly in Brussels, where I vaguely remember visiting the *Atomium* and going up and down and across that gigantic mock-up in steel of the atomic structure. To the uninformed, it looked nothing but a criss-crossing maze of passages that would not have been out of place in a children's park. And on to Zebrugge from where we took the boat back to England for the last leg of our trip. That lap on the home stretch turned out to be squally and uncomfortable thanks to the cold breeze that swept athwart the channel. If we had gone to Holland eager to savour its tulips and tranquillity and of course the unpretentious warmth of its people, which we did despite the discomfort of the canal boat that took us around, the return stretch on the channel turned out to be a damp squib. Even the thought that we were back home in the familiar milieu of Inverness Terrace did not raise our spirits for a while.

It was now time to pull up one's socks and put on that final spurt to make amends for all the remissness of the past, for exams were staring you in the face. Even while I had my nose in my books, I could not often resist distractions that came my way. I remember visiting Oxford in the company of friends in May to see the much vaunted dreamy spires and cupolas of that university town, its deer park and of course the river Isis for its romantic associations. I well remember visiting the Radcliff Camera and its stacks and the All Soul's College and wandering around its quadrangle. It was a pleasurable experience for me, but at the same time it pained me somewhat that I did not have what it takes to be a member of that exclusive band of highfliers who successfully combined business with pleasure as to the manner born.

The exams came and went. And then it was time to leave London and head back home. Sam was at the airport to see me off, and so were Sarojini, Susan and Denali. The girls gave me an inscribed Ronson lighter as a farewell gift which remained in my possession for four years until I gave it away to Kuppusaami of Lovedale on the day I decided to give up smoking once and for all.

It was not until fourteen years later that I was to visit London again. It was the fag end of the year 1979. I was at that time with the United Nations Institute for Namibia. My colleague Aminata Diallo and I had travelled together from Lusaka to London. What occasioned it was the week-long international conference of English language teachers organized by the IATEFL. The venue was the University of London Goldsmiths College at New Cross off Lewisham Way in South East London. That whole week was so taken up with plenaries and seminars and what have you that I could hardly come up for air and renew my bond with that wonderful city once again. That had to wait for a little over four more years and what prompted that was another story.

[Chapter Six >>](#)