

## **LETS GO HOME, DARLING** **(Ghar Chalthe Hain, Darling)**

Mrs Neerja Ratan looked at her watch. It was 6:0'clock. She was an hour late. She must make a move. There was no point in waiting.

She's very punctual, and this quality has been imbibed by her son, Anshu who acknowledges it as does everybody else. Perhaps that is what Mallika resents. On occasions, Neerja ji tries to explain, "*Beti*, afterall, I've given birth to him, and a child becomes an inseparable part of the mother from a drop of blood to her very soul. It's but natural that he will inherit her characteristics. Traits are hereditary. Can anyone change the law of nature? Qualities should be a matter of pride, rather than embarrassment..." Monopolistic capitalism! She begins laughing at the fact that her subject, Economics, barges in everywhere.

A teacher will always remain a teacher, abiding by strict discipline. Neerja ji did things in a systematic manner, only after careful planning. She tried to follow a set pattern, and when that was violated, she got upset, as she was at the moment. She got up, had a glass of water, and began strolling about. Her eyes fell on the photograph of Anshu and Mallika, taken at the time of their wedding; Mallika, in the traditional red, bridal dress, was laughing, while Anshu, as usual, was quiet. He's very serious and focused. His meticulous temperament and organizational capabilities reflect the jet age, with aspirations to fly into space. He does things with supersonic speed, in a high-tech style; it looks as if a machine is at work rather than a human being; an automatic machine that has been programmed to send out only those signals that have been fed into it... work just moves ahead... an automation! There's no scope for thinking, and hence no place for feelings either. When he speaks on the phone, it seems that the computer is prompting him; even if there is disturbance on the line, and we can't hear his voice, we know he must be saying the things we've got so used to hearing; the ears have adapted themselves to what they will hear, rather what they are expected to hear; they know what will be said from across the seven seas.

When everything is so well set, then why can't he be contacted on phone? After all, he was to call up today. Agreed, science has made such tremendous progress, that a person can hide in the remotest corner of the earth, but when he communicates, it will seem as if he is sitting before you. However, distances will ultimately make a difference. These oceans, mountains, stretches of land, deserts all shrink into nothingness. The conversation that I have with my son is almost like the national anthem in the sense that I've learnt it by heart the same words the same expression no intonation whatsoever: "Hello Mom... how are you... how is Dad... what's going on... everything is fine... yes, Mallika is fine..." Sometimes an additional sentence or so gives a sense of achievement, and rings in the ears for days to follow.

Seven long years ! How time passes! So much has changed! She looked into

the mirror. She had suddenly grayed in the last two to three years her whole head seemed to be covered with snow, and she sometimes felt that her entire being was sinking under the weight of that snow... inert as in hibernation. With the season changed, the snow would melt, the winds would change their direction, branches would shake off the torpor and come to life, leafless trees would acquire foliage and flowers.... bright coloured flowers, fluttering and dancing with abandon in the wind.

As a child, her Anshu too never walked straight... he hopped and jumped like a rabbit.

She had to go out today so had asked Lalta not to come, otherwise he would have finished with his physiotherapy by now. It was always the physiotherapy that suffered on account of a busy schedule as if it were the most futile thing. Naturally, there would be no respite from joint pains. What if Anshu suddenly turns up and stands before me? Just imagine... what's the harm in imagining... he would be stunned, wouldn't he! Her gray hair! Slight limp! Pain in the joints does affect mobility. She stood before the mirror, and looked at herself... the wrinkles below the eyes insisted on returning even after she tried to straighten them out with her fingers. She's becoming old, and nothing can be done about the wrinkles, salt and pepper hair, doddering gait; they must all be accepted.

"*Sare jahan se achcha*" rang the mobile. She hurriedly took it out from her purse, and switching it on saw that it was Ratan ji calling: "Come soon... what are you doing? Everybody is enquiring after you... Yes, they are going to begin... you better hurry..."

She must make a move. She was an hour late. Looking out of the window she saw her driver standing near the car, gossiping with the neighbour's maid-servant.

Why hasn't Anshu rung up? His wife must have definitely created a scene. I haven't heard from her for years, but Anshu phones regularly every Sunday, between six and seven same day, same time. She smiled to herself ... and the same sentences... the same duration as well. Everything well-decided... thought out and planned. This is what happens in America... nothing is done spontaneously. People don't visit one another. The whole week is planned out. Anyway, India too is following in the same footsteps. In our country too, people meet only after prior arrangement over the telephone, atleast decent people do! It is resented if you casually drop in like and uncouth rustic, Mallika resented a number of things as well... These likes and dislikes are like a food chain... they maintain the balance in nature. The first makes place for the second, the second for the third, and so on... Neerja ji felt she was digressing... She tried to tell herself, "Where are you, Madam? Return to reality! You have to go somewhere."

It didn't take her more than ten minutes to reach the Information Centre. The dais was all set. She was grateful that the electricians were not on ladders trying to fit bulbs at the last moment as they are wont to do. However, the chairs on the stage were all vacant. Shambhu ji came forward with folded hands. Though they were not commemorating a happy occasion, the function has been organized on festive lines.

Afterall, a convocation is a convocation just as a party is but a party. It's difficult to differentiate whether people are celebrating a child's birthday, or his naming ceremony... or his grandfather's death anniversary? The menu comprises the same: *puri-kachori*, *raita*, *chutney*, potato vegetable, pumpkin... In cities these kinds of parties are things of the past. There's no saying how long such *pangats* or community feasts will continue in village either.

Neerja ji wondered why the backdrop of the stage looked strange. She then realized that banners were usually black or colored, but here, the entire wall had been covered with a white sheet, and the white banner simply merged into it. How ludicrous! Hadn't they noticed? Perhaps that's why they had put a red border all around the banner to set it off. The letters stood out... "Beyond Space". It looked as if someone had splashed blood across the snow. Why does everyone want to relive that accident?

She recalled the incident that had taken place just a year ago. The corridor of a hospital... Alok wrapped in a white sheet with spots of blood. He had met with a fatal accident. He was a twenty-one year old bright boy who always stood first in class. The college was proud of him because he brought innumerable laurels in debates and creative writing: he was a born speaker. His parents, Shambhu ji and Sarla, were Neerja ji's friends and neighbours: She was his teacher. They were like a family, and for him to pass away like this was a great tragedy for all.

He was a wonderful boy who could join his juniors in fun and frolic and listen attentively to the discussions of his peers as well. He read the newspaper cover to cover, and having spent all his pocket money on books and magazines, became broke and looked to his mother for assistance. All this was apparent, but there was something he kept secret. No, it was not a love affair! Even if there had been one, no one could have guessed. Besides his friends, Principal, and teachers, girls had also come to his funeral: they had sat with his mother. After a few months, Shambhu ji went to Neerja ji's house with a thick file tied with red tape, on which was written in bold letters "Just Casually-Sometimes", and below, in a corner, was his name "Alok".

"Bhabhji, just take a look. Yesterday, Sarla was sorting out *Munna's* cupboard, and she found this in the top shelf". He opened the file and gave it to her saying. "I had no idea that my *Munna* was a writer."

Neerja ji began to turn the pages... *Munna's* handwriting on sheaves of ruled paper.

"I never found out that our *Munna* did anything else besides studying."

"Have you read it, Shambhuji?"

"No Bhabhi Ji. I just flipped through the pages. His mother hasn't even looked at it. She asked me to show it to you saying that she couldn't bear to read it, not knowing what he may have written about himself.

Only a mother can understand what it is to lose an only son. If somebody has never had chilblains, how can he understand the discomfort... has Shambhuji seen my chilblains... she quickly hid her feet.

"Bhai Saheb, leave the file with me. Oh, he may have written love stories or

poems inspired by sentiments and ideals. At this age one's imagination is fired by aspirations and passions. Everything is seen in a different light, and trivial incidents assume new significance. When a talented child is stimulated by such feelings, he usually picks up a pen. He is restless to bring out these powerful emotions.... However, people who have begun with love stories and poems have turned out to be great writers and litterateurs."

"Bhabhi ji, please go through them and give me a feedback."

"My Anshu too had started composing poems when he was in Intermediate. The M.Sc. exams were round the corner, and he would have a new poem in hand everyday. I used to pull out poems from his books and under his pillow. After minor corrections, I asked him to get them published in magazines, but he refused saying that he had a long way to go before that stage. And, Bhai Saheb, how well he wrote.... Like any mature poet! I can't say what's the position now. My Anshu is indeed very talented..."

Suddenly Ratan ji began coughing and choking. When Neeraji turned towards him, he glared at her, and she stopped talking. Had she said something indiscreet? After Shambhi ji left, he said, "Are you crazy! The bereaved man had come to talk about his son, and you began eulogizing your progeny!"

She felt embarrassed. Sometimes one gets so distracted that things go awry. Had she really been imprudent? Did Anshu not write poems? Now, ofcourse, his poetry too had become alienated. She has asked him about it once, only to be told, "No Mom! Where is the time!" Indeed, a poet someone to recite his poems to. Who will be write for? It seems as if seven years have stretched into seven lives! She hasn't seen his face... just heard his voice over the phone... only a few sentences on the phone... and a long long wait... Ratanji is magnanimous: he doesn't mind anything.

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As Neerja ji perused Shambhu ji's Munna's file, she was stupefied. Wonderful! She could't belive it was Alok who had penned all that. Just two months ago they had celebrated his birthday.

"Now you are no longer a teenager! Alok Sharma, a grown-up young man..." He had indeed become tall, and she had to stretch herself to reach up and pat his shoulder.

"That's it Aunty! This is my last birthday celebration. I've grown-up now, so no more parties."

"No doubt, you've become a big man..." said Sarla ji, putting a piece of cake into his mouth.

Neerja ji kept admiring the mother-son bond. "Oh Sarla ji, what does it matter if he doesn't want to celebrate, do you think his friends will spare him? You will have to entertain them."

Who could have imagined that at his next birthday there would really be no party, rather a convocation, not of friends only, but all the important people of the city, not at his home, but at the Information Centre?

Alok's file contained a novel that he had completed, another that he was

working on, some essays and satires. It seemed strangely surprising that his novel "Beyond Space" was not a love story as one would have expected from a young man of his age. Anyway, that was a blessing, otherwise, she would have materialised and whisked him off across the seven seas.... "giddi-ap... giddi-ap... giddi-ap": lashed him on... 'make money... giddi-ap. giddi-ap... giddi-ap'... spurred him on... "have a wonderful time... giddi-ap.... Giddi-ap.... Giddi-ap"! The rider could have been a Mallika, Geetika, Vartika.... Girls have lovely names.... And she began recounting them... to complement the 'Limca Book of Names', she compiled a 'Neerja Book of Girls' Names'.

She had again digressed. The is what had happened – whenever she was alone, her mind grew magic wings and took off.... one thing led to another and she found herself in ravines and caverns. Oh, poor Alok was no more in this world. Where would he have gone. Who would have taken him away She's really gone crazy.

So, in the novel, "Beyond Space", a twenty year old youth is talking about farmers, their homes, their homes, their wives and children. He discusses their suicides in an attempt to find their killers, and identify the complex motives that impelled them to take such a drastic step. When did he go amidst them? Where did he see their life style? When did he interact with them? Afterall, what sort of an individual was Alok? He was not inspired by that weird Michael Jackson who had enslaved the hearts of thousands of young people world-wide. He did not lose his head over the scantily clad Britney Spears or Bipasha Basu. He didn't subscrib to the 'Mr. India Contests' or concern himself with the vital statistics of the semi-nude, provocative contestants at Beauty Pageants. He didn't aspire to bag a fifty-thousand package by the time he was twenty-two, or chalk out scheme to explode myths propogated by the Corporate Sector to make people billionaires overnight. What is... no, was our Munna? A person with the experiences of a senior citizen. That's why he ceased to be... he had thought out everything there was... nothing remained besides. What more was he to live for? His farmer was dying .... being buried alive while looking beyond space. So, he also departed, leaving everything behind.

Neeraja ji perused the entire file, and then discussed it with Shambhu ji. It took two days to read out the novel to him. He was stunned beyond words. It was simply incredible! Sarla ji just cried and cried... it can't be gauged how much she heard.... what she comprehended. Weep as much as you can! We women are destined to weep. Some are apparently drowned in tears, others nurture a cancerous growth, hidden from sight, which steadily continues to ooze, devastating the very soul and spirit. Such intense mist... thick fog... it's asphyxiating!

Shambhu ji is indeed very bold! On the death anniversary of his son, he has ignored all the traditional rituals... no *pangat* or feast... no *havan* or reading from the scriptures. He has spent money instead on getting his son's novel published. It is a most befitting memorial to his Munna, introducing him to the world, and thereby immortalizing his memory.

"Beyond Space" is to be released. Alok's Tai ji, a farmer, has come from the village' The State Minister for Education and Culture, Girija ji, eminent personalities



of the city, writers, and intellectuals are all there. The book is presented to Tauji. Girija ji delivered a long lecture on the plight of farmers and the political scenario; she also talked about encouraging talent in youth. She had to leave early so left. Writers, senior citizens and Alok's friends are paying tributes to him. It feels good to see them eulogizing seemingly insignificant incidents of his life. Shambhu ji has announced the formation of an "Alok Trust" which will cater to the cultural uplift, financial assistance, and promotion of literary activities among young students and writers. The hall resounds with thunderous applause.

Neeraja ji is moved to tears. Shambhu ji must be given credit for the way in which he is going out of his way to receive guests as if it were his son's wedding reception. The occasion could easily be mistaken for a celebration if not for the expression on Sarla ji's face. All the invitees were welcomed in the traditional style, with garlands of fragrant, red roses. Various organizations of the city, and important personalities, all paid homage with flowers. Lamps were lighted to honour Goddess Saraswati. The video-camera was on, and occasionally it lighted up the faces of individual speakers.

Sarla ji's eyes were brimming with tears. "So many people have come! They are praising Munna's book. If only this had happened in his presence, it would have been something different. What's the use of it all, now that he's no more. It seems so pointless and futile, Bhabhi ji...." She covered her face with her Sari's *palla*.

Neerja ji held her hands, embraced her, and tried to console her. "Sister, try to have forbearance. You are fortunate in that he remained with you as long as he was alive. Today so many people are remembering him."

A number of people had spoken, and she had listened attentively, but it seemed the words had gone with the wind, not affecting her at all. Time and again her gaze rested on Sarla ji. On such occasions why do people start delivering lectures as if they are in a class-room? But if they don't do that, will they stand up to mourn, lament, and indulge in *maatam*? Moreover, a year has passed. He had to go, and he's gone. That's how the world moves on. When someone passes away, there's no mass suicide; people try to stand by and condole those left behind.... Neerja ji was having a monologue with herself, and a film was moving in her mind as usual.

Suddenly she heard her name being called out. She was nonplussed because she had declined to speak. Her mind had been wandering .... flying at the speed of light .... over rivers and seas .... mountains .... sands of deserts .... lush green meadows. She was being invited to speak. Afterall, she had been Alok's teacher, his mentor, friend, philosopher and guide! She was the first person to read his file, the prime witness of "Beyond Space"! It was she who had edited it for publication. She had seen Munna grow into Alok Sharma, his childhood merge into youth and college life, his student days take him beyond the bounds of space and time. Who would know him better? She was not only his teacher, but his dear Aunty as well. Everybody was impatient to hear her.

Neerja ji is a good teacher and a dedicated social worker, attached to many organizations. She is a good speaker, proficient in the use of words. It was she who had first floated the idea that his novel should be brought before the public on the occasion of his death anniversary. It would be the best tribute to him. Society at large would remember his contribution. People are forgotten but their works live on.

She was overwhelmed, and her voice was quivering. She yearned to give vent to her powerful emotions. Such a burden! So many questions! Unanswered questions! Divers questions! This is compassion in the true sense of the word... the sorrow of one person being shared by the entire community. Where is the person called God? He's merely stone! Does He snatch away versatile children like a jungle wolf that is least bothered about the plight of the parents of his prey. She suddenly turned to Sarla ji and said, "Look, this is Alok's mother from whom he imbibed values. Sister, you are lucky that you can shed tears at least. There are thousands of mothers and yearning fathers whose sons have reached the moon.... become stars.... the Pole star.... no doubt you see it everyday, but it remains beyond reach...." She began drifting on a rapid current of thought and speech, floating in whichever direction it took her, not able to control herself.

She became conscious of murmurs in the hall like the buzzing of flies. She looked down at her watch ...Yes, it was time.... but she had not really exceeded it. Thick clouds were rising within her, and she wanted to go on speaking, people like her and appreciate her declamatory prowess. She too is particular about-not boring them with discursive speeches, sticking to the precept of short and to the point. Bui today was somewhat different: "Kalpna Chawla was a promising girl, lost in space. No doubt it was tragic, but what difference did it make? Who was affected by it? Her mother and father will mourn for her all their lives. Her fragments will remain scattered in space till time immemorial... Similarly, Alok Sharma has gone on a quest beyond space...."

Once again, she realized that her voice was quivering, and tried to get hold of her self before continuing: "There are some who go far away of their own free will... across the seven seas. They are also on a quest.... in search of something. Mammon! They barter their happiness and peace only to get lost in the milling crowd of the *bazaar* where they cannot even be contacted. Time can be ruthless, and appears in divers guises. It can tantalize as a hedonist deadly or a chaste and ravishing *Kalika*.... a rose bud or something equally fascinating only to crush an individual and the promise of youth... No one has the right to deprive parents of their children ....after all, what have they done to be accorded such a-penalty?" She suddenly choked and couldn't speak further, standing transfixed, with tears flowing down her cheeks.

Restlessness in the hall subsided, and there was pin-drop silence. A convocation being a congregation of people is conducted along specific lines. Besides a lecture is not a lesson that has to be learnt by rote for purposes of examination. Neerja ji,s long-drawn speech with numerous digressions had given

people the opportunity to talk] But, it was disconcerting to see a person like her, burst into tears, all of a sudden, in the middle of her interesting and emotional talk. Everyone was taken aback and didn't know how to react.

Hitesh ji, the compere, was moving forward, when Ratan ji, who had been standing in the rear with Shambhu ji, quickly overtook him, and putting his arms around his wife, said in a controlled voice: "Neerja ji is very sensitive. She was very fond of Alok. She has played a very significant part in planning and organizing today's programme. It's but natural that she should be overcome by emotions on such an occasion..."

Neerja ji allowed herself to be led off stage. She was dazed and confused. The *pallu* of her *sari* was trailing, and almost touching the ground. She picked up the corner and began rubbing it over her face.... perhaps, something had again gone awry.

"I... I... I didn't mean to...." The words stuck in her throat.

Ratan ji consoled her, and putting his arms around her waist, escorted her out into the fresh air: "Doesn't matter, darling. you are tired. Let's go home."

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