

Phoenix

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The invitation felt strange, stranger still because MG had finished writing his first short story, a futuristic piece on how he had led South Africa to freedom. He knew his narrative in parallel time was an act of wishful thinking.

South Africa hurt; it hurt even more when he read the history books which called him a big landowner; hurt even to read what he had written in his old letters. He realized how racist he had been. So, when the letter came, he was not ready for it. It was an invitation to a seminar in South Africa, courtesy the Ford Foundation, and included a visit to Phoenix Farm.

South Africa, his South Africa, was an unfinished hypothesis, something -he had hurried away from without testing. He left it because the theosophists irritated him. Polak and Alfred West were too intense, too Hindu and too, Christian in a way he could not be, too ready for goodness. A bit like Charlie Andrews later. A goodness that didn't understand evil, or couldn't sense paradoxes, that wouldn't realize that Holism and Apartheid were twinned objects.

He felt embarrassed about South Africa, the embarrassment of a happily married man who sees an old flame who had ditched him, standing as lovely and beautiful as ever. Suddenly old scars surfaced. Forgotten wounds began to itch South Africa. Pity it didn't have a Walt Whitman to sing its song. 'I sing the Body Apartheid, South Africa'.

He felt Mandela towering above him. It was strange. Kings didn't feel like kings but chiefs struck him with awe. There was a magic, a *mana* to them. Kings were too bland and secular. MANDELA. He felt the raw presence of a strange man, like Tagore felt before Yeats; a sense of someone who had seen more and felt more. Mandela, there was a drumbeat in every syllable an inner thumping that made his heart beat faster.

They had asked him to write a paper about 'Freedom at Fifty' and to provide a sense of South Africa through an Indian lens. How could he explain that democracy was simpler in another time? There was a clarity to majority rule and the nation-state. Yet, he envied South Africa. There had been no partition there. There was

forgiveness and justice, something Indian law, unlike Indian films, could never combine. It was like the old Hindi movies where the mother forgave her violent son, who was arrested anyway. But the story held. South Africa was healing its wounds from within, something the Partition never allowed and that he could never understand. Jinnah was not a patch on mules like Botha and De Klerk but De Klerk and Botha had not split a country while Jinnah had. He wondered if he hated lawyers because of Jinnah or because of his own trained [92] incapacity for law. Lawyers, like tea, had been the ruin of India but here was South Africa, where law was fundamental to the new imagination. Equality before the law was a sacredness here.

His passport was new. In fact, he had acquired it in the last minute, fresh as a baby without a single mark, a single stamp, and that almost proved his downfall. His passport could not be cleared without 'AN EMIGRATION CHECK NOT REQUIRED'. The lady leading the delegation panicked, muttered something about illiteracy and rushed around like a poodle snapping helplessly. But it was eleven at night, and her friendly bureaucrats at Delhi would all be fast asleep. Suddenly MG found the inspector grinning at him, the large quizzical grin of someone who had read a bit of history and was convinced it should repeat itself. 'Go and be damned, but come back in fifteen days', he said. 'Gandhi in South Africa', he snorted over his tea while our seminarist blushed crimson. He straightened his new tie and rushed past the security check. Bombay was hot and he could feel the migratory bird in him flapping towards South Africa, to Johannesburg as beautiful as the seventh symphony. He stopped, startled, wondering where he had acquired his sense of music and poetry. Silence, he had understood earlier, but music was for him the *charkha* spinning, music was only a hymn. Suddenly the music in him was as large as Table Mountain, huge, bleak, stark and sensuous with the white mist cascading through. South Africa was already doing things to him.

History had taught him that seminars like Round Tables were eventless affairs. Nothing happened and yet everything happened around it. It was the zero that made the rest of the conversation possible. This seminar was stiff as any other and began with the false affability of introductions. 'Mahatma Gandhi, NGO activist', he said. There were indifferent nods. The old lady next to him felt he looked familiar. He blushed. Nothing hurts like history forgotten. Now, he wished he had buried himself like Garbo, created a mystique which prevented forgetting.. Hide before the world forgets you; become Garbo, the public secret that remained, eternally private. Strange, what lessons memory teaches you.

The boredom, the long sonorous boredom of the seminar was wearing him down. The redundancy, the repetition, the monotony of it. He loved his idea of *maun vrat*. The silence of scholars would be so welcome. There was something about social science that was so empty, so unforgiving. No words for love or pain except welfare.

No sense of touch or smell. MG wished social scientists would read the New Testament, for he felt it was social science at its best.

The speakers were talking about democracy. He regarded it as a regime of clichés. Clichés were tired truths which had lost their bite, mushy as a thornless cactus. Democracy—there was too much Greek in the word to be a Third World term. His mind was floating like a pendulum between words. He wanted to put it down as an aphorism, something tight, pungent and lethal, something that linked democracy, apartheid and the seminar. Modernity, he thought, had invented only two forms of consciousness—boredom and terror—and democracy was the space between them. He wondered sadly if democracy should ban the seminar like Plato banned the poets. Everything was a project today, even people. When social scientists wished to evade themselves, they embarked on a project. Authoritarianism began with a questionnaire.

[93] The Chair was ringing the bell. It was lunch time and he was wondering if he had mentioned 'vegetarian' on the questionnaire they had sent him.

He sat toying with his salad. He always thought secretly that it was the salad that had destroyed England. If civilization was a transition between the raw and the cooked, then the salad was a reversion to barbarism, a theory of vegetarianism without a notion of cooking. He hated the lettuce, guillotining another curl with his knife. The pacifism of the lettuce, he thought wickedly and then smiled, for what salads destroy, desserts redeem. He loved the gentle freshness of fruit and ice-cream and wondered if he could ask for more and then opted for a coffee. Its opulent blackness appealed to him, reminding him of the *Kashayams*, the bitter potions he loved to recommend to nationalist leaders. Only Sarojim Naidu refused them, preferring her honey and lime. He thought sourly that her diet explained her poetry. Anyway, he never liked the nightingale. India to him could only be represented by the crow. The crow was Birbal and Tenali Raman, the comic with that touch of dread. The crow, he was sure, was Ramana Maharshi's bird. The faithful brought the peacocks later. Crows, they probably felt, were not religious enough. Peacocks in paradise sounded alliteratively true but a crow was too prosaic for heaven or hell. He remembered the ravens at Phoenix Farm walking cockily as in some later existential play.

He knew it was thirty miles from Durban but suddenly he was not certain. Or was that Tongaat, the village where his relatives lived, ignorant of Ruskin. Motoring down the roadways, which felt part Bombay but more Boston, he thought about roads.

The road was once a religious metaphor. It was the scene of pilgrimage as tired feet moved from one source of sacredness to the other. But, all that was over. His notion of roads was old as St Paul, probably older as the Romans had made roads the symbol of their policies. Now roads were the new imperium and the pilgrim had given way to the tourist. He saw them all around him glued to every window demanding their money's worth at every site. It was they who determined what history shall remember.

He remembered wryly that the strange Englishman at Cornell had got it wrong, arguing over cocktails that nationalism had created imagined communities. It was Tourism that did that. Tourists were border crossers in a way nationalism would not allow. Tourism was a sublimation of the crusades. Conquer the world and come back with a trinket. All the imagined communities were on tourist maps. These were virtual communities before cyberspace was born.

He thought tiredly he must update his *Hind Swaraj*. Even the aphorisms sounded stale. He wished he had written it after he had read Kafka. He was sick of Ruskin's wide-eyed innocence. Deep down he chewed quietly on his new name, Gregor Samsa Gandhi. He wondered why the old pamphlets, the theological and political manifestos, failed to move him. They read like constitutions for another era. But poetry grabbed him and felt more theological than the old tracts. God died only in theology. He trembled, worried that the mush called the post-modern was entering him.

He was thinking that Apartheid could not exist without roads. Roads kept together, what man kept apart. But he was not sure. A nervousness was creeping [94] in as the tourist car raced towards the settlement. He realized it was only thirteen miles outside Durban. The dirt track into the area was virtually the same, the same stone culverts with black Africans still waving lazily like extras in a film. The guide's voice cut in like a director's saying: 'A few months ago you couldn't enter this place. Violence had torn the communities apart. Blacks had squatted on part of the settlement. We are trying to get the two communities together. In fact, you are going to the Community -Centre to see a video on it.' The bus swished to a halt near a roadside vegetable shop. Goats were the only other reception committee. MG gazed at the vegetables and they disconcerted him. They were piled in clusters and appeared unreal. Like a Dutch still-life where even the cabbage appeared waxed. He wanted to reach out and touch them to feel he was real.

The Community-Centre was a shed with two rooms, a large office and a hall with a blackboard. The chalk had not been wiped clean and a video stood expectantly next to the board. A young Zimbabwean, a white film-maker, was talking excitedly about Paulo Friere, claiming he had applied his techniques in the film. 'I told them it was

their film and they should own up to it...We had one problem though. We didn't know whether we should show naked Zulu woman dancing and, we decided to leave to you...' Smile. Triumphant radicalism pleased and politically correct. MG needed to go to the toilet.

It was like a doll's house, so perfect and so functional. The toilet was a machine and you literally plugged yourself into it, so snug was the design. It was clean and felt clean and there was none of the English hypocrisy about deodorants He always loved toilets. He sat for hours in them because of his constipation, drinking tumblers of warm water. On coming out MG smelt cigarette smoke, All the women were smoking happily, talking into cellphones. Something he would not have permitted. It suddenly came to him that his Phoenix farm was a patriarchy. He remembered how he had sent Polak and West back to find wives.

The crowd walked quietly down the mud track towards his printing press. A few yards away stood a stone table, a built-up area with just a floor plan. 'This was Gandhi's house', said the guide. Cameras whirred as the imagination ceased. Only he stood still. The printing press was gone. The name 'PRINTING PRESS' was still in feeble pink atop the building but nothing else remained. He could hear the click of compositor plates and remembered he had them in four languages, although he never used the plates in Telugu. MG remembered that he was a rich lawyer at Durban who only came down for the weekend. Phoenix Farm was his suburban dream and it was Polak and West who made it true. All he could remember at first, was them and the snakes. They used to scurry around confidently but he knew they were gone. He sat on the floor of his house thinking of his nephew Gokuldas. who died at Phoenix Farm. It was this death that he could not understand and accept. Gokul, so much dearer than idiot Harilal.

A woman flung a huge and guttural welcome. HELLOOO. There was a little school close by and the children wanted to sing for them. 'Come and visit us', she shouted again. There was an abandoned bus outside, burnt in some old Apartheid war. But the children had repainted it in parts and the nursery [95] drawings shone with absent-minded happiness. He was angry. They had taken over his history. This was not his utopia but a school and he knew he was being childish.

The group gathered for a final speech next to a truck painted with a huge hamburger. The guide stated, 'we have formed a new committee, a peace group, and we have decided to build the press. Ila Gandhi has decided to be one of the trustees. She is Gandhi's granddaughter.' MG ignored all this, walking around looking at the washing strewn on the line, the plastic kegs of water, corn growing in desperate tufts near the lane. He noticed the men were missing and asked about it. The man next to

him laughed good naturedly and said, 'This woman used to chase them out, to go and fight.'

MG was tired. 'Nostalgia kills', he mumbled to himself. He wished he had not walked back into history. There was a wisdom to Science Fiction. It evaded history by moving forward. The future is one country that cannot mourn or grieve. The last straw came as the bus raced back across the mud track, braking before an old hut lined with tin boards. Scribbled one the wall in faded paint was a graffiti: 'Don't Trust Gandhi'. The bus laughed weakly and moved on. There was a formal dinner that night and everyone was looking forward to it.

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The next day was like a serial, three quick vignettes cascading into each other. The morning began with two Afro-American speakers, heads of colleges, presidents in fact, talking about social science and education. They sounded sincere and honest but it was bad social science and worse, made America boring. MG wondered why Americans were so dull. America was what economists call a Giffen Good; it drove better ideas away. Only immigration rescued it from mediocrity. When the black American talked, he sensed no anger, no Dubois or Luther King, just social science. It felt like a report of an IQ test. Auden had said it all: 'thou shalt not commit a social science: or submit to questionnaire'. Actually it was worse. MG felt when social scientists are honest, they are lethal. Somewhere he felt the roots of authoritarianism lay in this language. It was like the old riddle. How do you combine terror and trivia? Answer, create a bureaucracy or start a social science project. Apartheid was a string of social science projects. The speaker rattled on talking about Affirmative Action, as if it was the latest patent medicine. MG scribbled. a note to himself. Never take the serious, seriously. These speakers were too American to see South Africa. South Africa was history in motion. It was the first new nation of the 21st century. American felt stale. MG realized South Africa was the only idea that survived the twentieth century. The Bolshevik Revolution was dead. Perestroika sounded empty. Indian democracy was rusty. Mao was dead; Castro, just longwinded. Only the idea of a free South Africa was marching dancing into the 21st century. The only utopia that survived humanely into another era. And, here were the Americans trying to export the American revolution. The trouble was the Americans never understood the statute of liberty was a one-way street, a symbol of the hospitality within. It wasn't for export. Transplant it and you get [96] Vietnam or the Shah's Iran. The speaker finished, to be consumed by the feminists in the crowd. Mahatma Gandhi was feeling more cheerful.

That day, at lunch time, there was a special speaker. Albie Sachs. Sachs along with Joe Slovo and Ruth First was legend. A living icon. His right arm had been blown by

a car-bomb, while he was out running. Sachs, in fact, wrote a quiet book about how he went back and completed the run. He spoke of Africa, of himself, of simple choices during the movement. Is paper for books or for toilet-paper, and reminded everyone it was a hard choice. The clarity was startling, the lucidity of thought resonating the lucidity of English. He talked of terror and torture. Under Apartheid, torture was a career. MG then realized something. Torture is the only deconstruction of the self post-modernism cannot understand. You don't find post-modernism in a concentration camp. Humour, laughter, death, pity yes but for that one needed the Havel and Solzhenitsyns. Or the Coetzee, Malans and Gordimers. Here the novel could survive. Sachs had done something similar. He had talked about diversity without trivializing his pain.

That night. there was a second speaker, a woman called Demeter. The South Africans were wary for the first time. Dinner was served and the wine looked delicious. MG looked at it longingly. It was at that time she stepped to the podium. She spoke on Diversity and it was eerie. It was like Eliza Dolittle reciting the Communist Manifesto. She recited every word as if enunciation was more important than truth. The text was indifferent. It could have been 'The history of all struggles hitherto is the history of class struggle.' Or, it could have been 'The Rain in Spain falls mainly on the Plain.' It didn't matter. It was surreal. It was as if the tortured body of apartheid had been replaced by a barbie doll. Barbie with a Ph.D. The Eliza Dolittle of Radicalism. She loved her own performance because the audience was not necessary, Narcissus carrying her own mirror along tittering happily. Yet, one couldn't have missed her for she was a collector's item.

That night he spent at a winery. The officialdom of the seminar had given way to conversation by candle light. But MG was morose. There were shadows to Apartheid he needed to understand. He looked at the woman next to him, an activist who hardly spoke. He asked her 'how do you feel?' She laughed and said, 'like a tree, ninety-percent dead but still reaching out'. She reminded him of another woman he met at Latvia, who loved Eliot. He had asked her, 'what will you do now that the revolution is over?' And she replied 'Oh!, I can go back to being a woman.' MG felt strangely uneasy. There was an echo of that same passion here. It slipped out. He asked her 'what frightens you now?' She laughed and talked of other things. Of cricket which he never understood, of born-again Christianity, of music and wines he hadn't heard of. And then as the table broke, she answered him. 'I love music. Between madness and music, the passionate can survive. I can stand anything. I can survive if Einstein is wrong. I can live if Gandhi were too. But I couldn't live if my Bach were wrong. That would terrorize me.' MG was not sure he understood but he sat still savouring it along with his first glass of wine.

The final moments of the seminar were quieter. March 21st was Sharpeville Day and to commemorate it, a group of students enacted the massacre. Even as [97] the mauve bodies fell in amateur heaps, the attention had shifted. The drama was elsewhere. The Africans in the audience were weeping, crying in remembrance and helplessness, weeping with dread that it may happen again. MG was distraught but it was not the black bodies that he saw falling but Indians dying at Jalianwala. Sharpeville-Jalianwala fused in his head and he realized that Indh had lost fifty years of its revolution.

Flight 750 to Bombay via Mauritius was a passenger short. The last desperate paging had been met by silence and a shrug.

MG was already on the bus out of Durban. A small Japanese truck dropped him outside the settlement. He stood for a while on the mud road, walked past the little bridge, past the culverts, beyond the vegetable shop, towards the press. It was empty and he found the silence lonely. An old man came up the steps and greeted him. 'Robert Henry Polak Jr., he said. 'My grandfather told me you would be back one day.' He handed him an old hammer and a nail. Gandhi took off his coat and whistled, something he hadn't done in a life-time'.