

Slices of Life (A Short Story)

*Dr. N. K.Neb**

The visits of our city- based, rich relatives were extremely exciting for little children, young girls, and boys; it dampened the spirits of our elders. But it was not so when some foreign based aunt or uncle was to visit us.

The aunt would visit every two years to have a feel of her native land. Earlier a letter, nowadays an e-mail or mobile call initiated the preparations to make her stay comfortable. Today, the constant flow of greetings , a sparkling glow of excitement and the words that my mother often repeated while talking to our N.R I. aunt , indicated the obvious. It was Aunt Jetinder, alias Jenny to whom my mother was talking go on the mobile phone, “ I’m your sister.... a real sister You remember how I used to carry you on my back when you got tired on our way home from school.....” As the prolonged conversation over the phone ended my mother took a long breath and looked around so that she could tell to someone that she had had a phone call from Canada. She was happy to find me standing beside her and started telling me “You know, your aunt Jenny.... I mean ... Jeeto Is coming to India the next week..... I have been told that she would land at Delhi early morning on Monday. ... We should start collecting the things she likes..... keep the house tidy.... I have already asked your wife to wash the table cloth change the dirty oil stained bed sheets with the new ones we bought on Dipawali.... We’ll borrow the crockery from our neighbour Mrs. Sandhu..... There should be no hesitation in asking her When her sister in law visited her last month, didn’t she take a number of things from us to please her Even Kesro has offered to lend her silver utensils for the purpose..... I’m not going to let her come near Jenny when she comes.... Don’t you know how she tried to secretly persuade her to get her nephew married to Kesro’ daughter..... She otherwise looks down upon us for being of lower origin When it comes to going abroad, she is ready to do anything Anything.... Including wipe the adult soiled diapers of your Uncle. No.... we are not to trust her. ... I’ll look after these things myself. ... You only arrange leave for a few days to take your aunt around and accompany her to the Golden Temple as and when she asks.

I had seen these things repeated since Aunt Jenny’s visits to India had increased for the last three years. She was trying to get her son Garry, earlier Gurinder, married to an Indian educated, and wealthy Indian girl from her own community and caste. A few months back her son too had visited us.

He had different views regarding marriage. He told me that he no longer believed that the girl should belong to some high caste or not. During our conversation on this issue, he revealed his intentions. He told me, “Dear brother, Mom meri problem understand nahin karde ! (Mother does not understand my problem.)... Jaat ... paat is nothing! (Caste has no significance) One has to live in comfort or keep on arranging for others’ education Training or diplomas and courses of study.... It’s simply foolish....” After a brief pause, my inquisitive looks prompted him to elaborate, “What am I to do with the degrees and qualifications or name or fame of her family Am I to paste them on my face...? ... The looks also don’t matter much...., “When he said this, he discretely added, “There are many to serve that purpose.... Only they are not ready to make a family and look after the children...” On hearing this I pointed out, “It means, you are no longer interested in the girl my friend has suggested She is an M.A. in English and doing PhD.... She is beautiful and her father owns twenty acres of land.” He looked at me like an irritated teacher who looks at a dull student unable to understand a simple sum and said, “Dear brother... brother dear You know if I marry this girl This rich and beautiful girl..... I’ll have to spend for her education and upkeep for at least three more years and only then she will perhaps be able to get a good job.... Isn’t it better for me to marry a qualified nurse who is going to get a job right on entering Canada? Try to understand.... Why waste our hard earned dollars on useless things and not do something logical”.

The boy’s wish had been granted and his marriage with a girl half his height was fixed. Aunt Jenny was coming a month earlier to make necessary arrangements to solemnize the marriage.

Before her arrival we worked overtime to give our house a new look. Whenever she came to India she preferred to stay with us and avoided staying in a hotel or with the family of her brother-in-

law (husband's brother). She knew my mother would be ready to welcome her....free to go to the market for shopping with her and always nod her head in agreement to please her ego. It amused her to see an expression of wonderful delight on my mother's face whenever and whatever she talked about her comfortable, royal life in Canada. Aunt would visit the market accompanied by my mother and indulge in a shopping spree. Mother, with aunt's bags carried on her shoulders, cords of some satchels dangling from her arms and the polythene bags stuck under her arms would try to beat exhaustion with a sense of pride that she felt in the company of her NRI sister. Back home, mother would enjoy sharing the shopping details using extravagant expressions like, 'The other customers remained ignored and the shopkeeper hovered around us..... People looked wonder struck to see the aunt buy suits , sweaters, shawls ornaments and shirts", not realizing the fact that Aunt was collecting things that she found expensive in Canada or intended to sell to her neighbours having craze for Indian goods over there. Mother hardly ever realized her status of a virtual whole time subordinate and often remained unavailable for domestic chores. She was lost in the world that Aunt exuded.

She would occasionally take the aunt to show her over the village. She would giggle, laugh and talk waving her hand carelessly in the air and introduce the aunt to her friends at the other end of the village without failing to add, "These days I'm always busy shopping for her..... We get tired when we come back home..... Find time and have a look at the things she has bought She really knows how to enjoy life.... God has blessed her with a lot of money and a golden heart to spend." She would provide unsolicited details about Aunt's daily routine: how she gets up early, recites hymns, reads scriptures and is very particular about her diet and looks.

One day the Aunt's brother- in- law Mohinder, (her husband's brother) and his wife came to meet her. A two hour bus journey, their dust-stained faces, patched shoes and unkempt hair gave them horrible looks. They stole into the house taking cautious steps to reach the bathrooms unnoticed by the foreign guest. Having washed their faces, combed their hair and dusted their clothes, they ventured to enter the room provided to the aunt for her exclusive use.

The Aunt had, no doubt, noticed them arrive through the corridor still she kept on reading the newspaper as if she was unaware of their presence. As the couple entered her room, she turned her face towards them putting on an expression of wonder and joy, hardly able to hide her irritation, revealed by the artificiality of the smile she had put on her face. Though she was the younger one, the Aunt had conveniently ignored to touch their feet to show respect in a customary way. Not only did she remain glued to the news paper she was reading, she only expressed negligible response to their heartiest greetings and moved in the arm- chair uncomfortably. "It's very difficult to visit each and every relative during our visits to India; do *weekan ch kithe kithe jave koi* (where can one go during two weeks of stay).... Tell me about your son Sonu and daughter Gurman..... Did you like the C.D. player we sent you last year? We could not make it to your village and nor did you have the time due to your business season", the Aunt said as a way of continuing the chit chat. Uncle Mohinder wanted to say something but the movement of his wife's eyes conveyed her disapproval and he remained silent .The aunt yawned, "Here in India we get tired soon without doing anything..... I'm staying here like a saint.... These people look after me very well.... Otherwise Usually people here hover around their relatives settled abroad and look after them only as long as they see a chance of using them to send their sons or daughters abroad... or hope to receive some other favour the moment their purpose is served they neglect and ignore the same relatives without any sense of remorse or shame...."

Aunt's gestures and her sermons were enough hints for the guests to indicate their unwelcome status for her. Mother's words, "Sister Jenny and I got so tired today She asked many a times to let her go to sleep The people keep on visiting It is extremely difficult to have a moment of rest", made things obvious enough for the guests to leave the aunt alone. They looked at each other..... then towards me ... and rose to leave the chairs. I led them to the sitting- room and asked them to have tea and eatables. Mother remained there in the aunt's room. She was talking to her in whispers. She called me across the room and asked to pour tea into the cups. When she herself entered the room she told the visiting couple, "Jenny wants you to meet her before leaving She says she will go to sleep after some time..... in fact she needs rest much... What to talk of her I myself get tired she

has to visit a number of places ... do a lot of shopping In spite of all this she cannot think of going to sleep as long as she has not seen you off After taking tea ... you must take leave of her before you set off..... She has asked me to see that you people must meet her before going back.”

The couple felt proud for the insistence of the aunt to meet them, and hesitant to disturb her. They only half enjoyed their tea and did not even look at the eatables lest they should keep her waiting for a long time. They went inside Jenny Aunt’s room. She raised herself up on an elbow and turned her face towards them. As soon as they sat on the cushioned chairs, Aunt beckoned my mother and whispered something in her ears. Mother turned towards, them leaving smiles of expectations and suspense she moved towards aunt’s bag, dragged it, and turned its opening towards her so that its contents remained hidden from the guests.

The aunt kept shuffling the well -wrapped packets and then suddenly, just like a juggler going to produce some rarity out of the air, pulled out some clothes out of the bag. The aunt called Anita aunty to come near her raised her hands carrying the packet above her head and placed it in Anita aunt’s hands like something mysterious and meant to be preserved. Like a saint instructing his disciple about the use of a talisman handed the packet to Anita Aunty. When Anita aunty bowed her head to match her devotion to the blessings being bestowed , Aunt Jenny said, “Yeh..... *Haaan*..... You should get it stitched from an expert tailor others may ruin itI don’t know whether you like it or not I am an old fashioned woman I know little about modern ways.” Aunt Anita put her hands around and expressed her inhibition in receiving the gift promptly , “No.... No Didi, you have already gifted us with many things.... We came here only to meet you..... your love for us is more valuable”, carefully avoiding to say than the gifts lest the aunt take her words seriously and stop bringing something or the other for them during her annual visits. A benevolent smile spread on Jenny Aunty’s face and she said , “ You’ll like this, I have specially chosen this for you ... I would have brought more but you know a limited number of things can be brought due to the limits imposed by the airport authorities... Moreover....the gifts that our neighbors over there have sent for their daughter in India also added to the allotted weight. One has to accept such obligations also..... Next time I come, I plan to spare an extra bag for your gifts from abroad”, after a brief pause she continued, “I am here for three weeks You know The marriage of my son, your nephew has been fixed... You have to come No excuses All of you must come.... We have got several rooms booked in a very big hotel for you people.... We’ll enjoy together.... “

Carefully putting the packet in her satchel , aunt Anita and her husband, who already had caught the hint that it was time for them to leave, wished the aunt goodbye and looked at me as if asking for the favour of my going to see them off at the bus stand.

On our way to the bus stand, a thumb- sized hole in their satchel revealed its content. I immediately recognized the gift that Aunt Anita had received. It was one of those suits that Aunt Jenny assisted by my mother had bought for the purpose of giving presents to the guests who came to meet Aunt Jenny. Talking about this good bargain my mother had told me how they were purchased from a local shop selling imported goods in a sale announcing the offer ‘Buy one Get one Free’.

Aunt Jenny stayed with us for one week more and then went to Delhi to look after the arrangements for the marriage of her son. Garry, her son and her husband were to join her there. Uncle Tejbir, her husband, her son Garrya and aunt herself would talk to us on phone. Her conversation, though very long extending sometimes to half an hour would remain limited to the arrangements, shopping, hotel rooms they had got booked and her would be daughter- in- law.

The day of the marriage drew near. Our other relatives including my two little sons , uncle Mohinder’s children and our younger aunts ,nieces were all excited to attend the marriage and stay at a big hotel in Delhi. Children vied for new and modern dresses to match the occasion as well as the status of the family. Women were busy consulting their boutique attendants, beauticians and friends to select dresses, makeup, hairstyles, shoes that would go well with different ceremonies and functions related to the marriage. Some started visiting the beauty saloons or the hair stylists a few days before the marriage. Due to their attention on their preparations for the marriage party the household chores

remained neglected or ill attended to. Children started talking about the romantic setting of the hotel and imagined fantastic tales set against the unseen place.

Aunt's words, no doubt, said in a very tactful way, were enough to dampen our spirits, "All of you are reaching *naa* I won't listen to your excuses later on You have to come *Bas* We have already got rooms booked for you..... I don't bother about expenses..... money is just like dust on one's hands.... You make sure that you reach us in the evening You have to be there at the hotel by 8p.m. .. Get the seats in the train booked To avoid botheration get the tickets for the return journey on the very next day. ... It is a matter of two days only..... if your train reaches very early , you first reach us at my friend Nirmal's Bungalow and then in the evening you can go to the hotel from there." Our hopes to attend the ceremonies like Shagun , Ladies,s Sangeet etc. a day before the marriage were dashed to the ground , women felt deflated with all their efforts going waste and their dreams of the romance they were going to share shattered. Some criticized the aunt in subdued tones, "Who goes for more than a day or two nowadays.... She should have told us in advance What am I to do with the two more suits and shoes that I had bought for other functions related to the marriage..... The big people always think of their own convenience.... We are taken for granted They never bother about us.... I'll make our guests stay for a week when I get my son Bholu married." Nobody discussed the preparations for the marriage anymore. We started taking it as a kind of duty that had to be performed. However, the romance of the stay in a hotel kindled a new hope in all of us and the earlier excitement returned with a lesser vigour a few days before our departure for the marriage.

As suggested by the aunt, and the scheduled hour of the train we reached Delhi at six in the evening. We went to meet the aunt at her friend's house as we were not to reach the hotel before 8p.m. We were welcomed by the aunt, her daughter, husband, son and a few other friends of the family. They had just returned from a hotel where the Shagun ceremony was performed at noon the same day. While offering tidbits to us the aunt, with her eyes fixed to the door of the adjoining room took extra care not to let any one of us venture into the room where her foreign guests were staying. However, the Aunt could not succeed in preventing the children from having stolen looks at these guests who were no less than some rarities for these little angels planning to tell about them to their friends at school, "We saw some real, living *angrez* (English people,) , in the marriage party we have attended at a big hotel in Delhi..... We could also see them eating, moving around and laughing as we do! ". The aunt's repeated glances at the wall- clock kept us reminding about the time we should move out.

We hired auto rickshaws and left for the hotel. The children burning with excitement and expectations of having a feel of the hotel and the delicacies they thought were going to be offered to them over there. Their innocent queries, rustic outlook coupled with rural accent amused the auto drivers.

The multi-storey hotel building infused a sense of awe and wonder making all of us hesitant to enter the wide glass- doors guarded by a tall man supporting heavy moustaches wearing spotless uniform giving him the look of the mythical guardian angel to the doors of heaven or hell. Noticing our reluctance to enter, he smiled at us, pushed the door open and bowed a little to ask us to come in. Another man in a different uniform appeared as if from nowhere and moved towards our luggage. As he put one hand on a bag , the wife of my cousin stood guard and put a protecting hand against the bags to save it from being snatched, "No... No.... don't you touch these things We may be illiterate, we are not blind....." Suppressing my giggles I told her to let the man carry the luggage. I myself would have behaved in the same way had I not already enjoyed the opportunity of staying in such a big hotel to enjoy the hospitality of my friend who used to stay in such hotels as the manager of a very big business concern. Being the most educated amongst them all and having already elaborated to them about my visit to some big hotels, my companions trusted me. However, the woman having handed over the bags to the stranger still looked suspiciously at me.

With our luggage gone, we now moved towards the reception counter. The children in the meanwhile remained huddled to their elders, confused like stray animals ventured to the city. Some looked at the wood like floor tiles and walked very carefully lest they break under their feet. Some

kept their eyes glued to the woodwork and the wall hangings around. They found themselves in a wonderland. Laughter replaced with whispers and smiles turned into curious questions they talked in whispers ... the grown ups felt proud of having made the correct guess about different things and the use they were put to. They had come to enjoy but the atmosphere here was suffocating for them. Some dragged their feet on the floor to express their reluctance to go further into this mysteriously silent and lifeless place.

They felt relieved when they found us walking away from the reception counter accompanied by a man with keys of different rooms in his hands. Taking a few steps they stopped short. They thought we were moving in the wrong direction as there was no door or any other opening in the wall that faced us. Instead of saying something they just kept on gaping, ready to laugh at our 'folly'. Just then the magical wall revealed a huge opening turning into a sliding door divided from the middle. They all stood spellbound. Silently they followed me into the lift and kept on waiting for the time to come out of that pigeon hole. On reaching the fourth floor the lift stopped and we came out, looked at the doors, supporting different numbers and entered different rooms allotted to us.

I had hardly taken my shoes off and was about to switch on the TV when my cousin's wife accompanied by her two small kids entered the room, "Bhai Sahib, how are we to get out of this place if we need going out to get something from the bazaar near here....." Her words reminded me of my own confusion when I had used the lift for the first time and explained the whole process from pressing the button to enter to the moment one comes out. However, she did not seem convinced and asked, "Are we supposed to pay something to the man who remains sitting in it!". I told her that he is supposed to help the passengers in using the lift and asked her to go and tell him to take her to the ground floor whenever she wanted to go. She looked at me in a strange way and left the room apparently dissatisfied at my suggestions.

After taking rest for some time I went to their room to ask them to get ready for the party well in time. I was surprised to see the children laughing and jumping, their hands filled with chocolates and biscuits that they had taken from the racks in the room. I looked in the refrigerator and the fruit tray and the place where packed tin juices were kept. Nothing could be seen there. The children's mother noticed my surprised looks and my searching eyes and said in a bit hesitant way, "You know they are small innocent kids... they have taken these things that the aunt has had scattered in the room for us Moreover..... when everything is free herewhat is the need of forbidding the children from enjoying these delicacies." I immediately realized the mistake they had innocently committed and tried to take the eatables away from the hands of these children who were making a noise and eating carelessly like the members of mythical monkeys destroying the garden of Ravana. When I failed to dissuade them from eating them in wholesale I said to their mother, "Keep these things where they were....they are paid items....the aunt has arranged only for our stay over herenot for eating whatever we like or find here....if you want something you have to place an order for that Otherwise the hotel people will make you pay for this..." My words had an unexpectedly immediate impact. The children started unfolding their little hands and started pouring the chocolates etc. back to the shelves they had emptied Some even tried hard to extract the half- eaten candies out of their mouths, fished them out of their pockets and pulled them out of the secret pockets of the bags they had brought. Though it all pained me much but I knew that they were too expensive for these people to pay and they could have the same things from the market at much cheaper rates. I asked them to go to the market and buy whatever they liked..... even those very items that I had made them put back.

They felt insulted, looked at me defiantly and cursed the aunt openly for making such beguiling arrangements. The woman said, "We may be poor but we have to feed our children...We have come here to attend the marriage, not to lick these big buildings.... I myself will go and bring something for them to eat..." Sensing their anger and holding myself responsible for not having informed them to take some eatables with them for the young children and the things being extremely expensive in the hotel, I slipped out of the room.

A few minutes later, I heard gasping sounds of a woman outside my room. I stood frozen and still when I noticed that my cousin was standing at the stairs with packets of eatables in her hands.

Impulsively, I went out to ask what the matter was. She spoke breathlessly, “I wanted to bring something for the children I used the stairs instead of using that closed roomwith a stranger of a man ...for help....” Instead of saying anything as way of explanation I preferred to keep mum.

Now prayer after prayer left my mouth wishing an end to my agony due to these innocent sufferers. I could blame neither them nor the aunt. I could simply wish their return home soon and safe.

Before going to bed I went to their room to be finally assured of their comfortable stay I was so shocked that I did not know whether I should pity them for their ignorance, sympathize for their inability to pay for expensive eatables etc. family for their poverty or curse my aunt for putting them into this situation. As I entered their room, my cousin was struggling to snatch the remote of the TV from her little son. She even slapped him to keep him silent. I could bear this no longer and came back to my room.

I heard a knock at the door of our room. I thought the boy must have done some other mischief. When I saw the boy it confirmed my doubt. But his words petrified me when he entered the room and asked innocently, “Uncle, may we switch on the TV installed in our room “? When I looked at him in surprise, he added, “Mother has sent me to ask you if it is free or we’ll have to pay for watching TV also”.