

Short Story

Auld Lang Syne: By Musafir



Sorry folks for my absence. I was suffering from writer's block. It was not that I was vegetating due to lack of

ideas. On the contrary, my thoughts were sublimating to hundred different feelings due to the current bitterness in our society at large. Mind is like an automobile. Once they go out of control, you need to apply the brakes immediately. That's what I did.

While in idle, I reminisced about the days gone by and it occurred to me, "Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And auld lang syne!" (Robert Burns)

There comes a moment every day when my mind flies. Then, effortlessly, I am away, light as a feather to familiar valleys of my childhood then swoop up beneath my favorite hilltop trees and land on the Main Road, Ranchi. I walk a few blocks past refugee markets (now renamed as Shastri Market) and the post office. I stop for a while at the martyr memorial then hang left to enter my high school. That's where I met Niaz Mohammad. Niaz came from a poor Muslim family. His family was so poor that he often came to school in his sleeping pajamas. Niaz was a backbencher and didn't have many friends.

Most of us who came from well-to-do upper class families had our own circle and we avoided the boys of lower orders. I was different inasmuch as I have always been unconventional, curious and gregarious. I became friends with Niaz. I remember once skipping the class and going to a movie with him. The friendship didn't last long after my parents came to know about the incident from my teacher and friends.

Eighteen years passed by. I was now living in the USA. On one of my visits to Ranchi, I went to Kali Mandir (temple). It's the most revered

Hindu temple in town located on Church Road in a Muslim neighborhood. Yes, India is a really secular country. Anyway, while coming out of the temple, I noticed that my shoe needed a shine as it looked tarnished. I went inside a small cobbler shop. I gave my shoe to the cobbler who looked frail. He had a long ungroomed beard. He was donned in white pajamas and a white Muslim cap. After the business was done, I asked him, "How much?"

He smiled and said, "Not a penny from you Anil."

"How do you know name?" I asked.

"Remember me? I am Niaz," he uttered with enthusiasm. I talked to him for some time then left.

Years later when I visited Ranchi, I again went to the Kali Temple and got reminded of Niaz. So, I walked into his shop. I didn't find Niaz, but there was a young man in pajamas attending the shop. He reminded me of Niaz of school days.

"Are you Niaz's son?" I asked.

"Yes sahib (sir)!" He replied.

"Where is Niaz?"

"He died three years ago," the young man replied.

I asked him to shine my shoes then I asked, "How much?"

"Five rupees sahib," he answered.

I gave him ten instead. The other five was my debt to Niaz.

"Thank you sahib," Niaz's son said.

I walked away slowly with a moral doubt of another kind. Must we always beware of kids like Niaz? Does the rest of the world only have bad people?