



Satya

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Received: 10-APR-2014

Accepted: 10-MAY-2014

Published Online: 20-MAY-2014

Abstract

Satya loved to tell his stories. As often happens, as he grew older, his own children grew weary of them. Being around more often than they were, I heard many; all but his last one. In retrospect I wish I had listened more carefully. Kept notes perhaps. You don't realize the worth of these things until you no longer have them.

Keywords: Narrative; old age; listening

“Will you stay for a drink?” he asked.

He had been in hospital for a week; bleeding from stomach ulcers caused by the pain-killers he had to take. He stood with both hands propped on the dining table to raise his shoulders and give his permanently over-distended lungs space to breathe – without much success. I heard the sibilant whistle as he exhaled slowly through pursed lips – another trick he had learned in order to overcome his obstructed airways.

“Not today. You're just back from hospital; we'll drink when you are better,” I said.

“You're refusing my offer of a drink?” he asked incredulously, disappointment writ large on his face. He shook his head in resignation, mumbling an expletive under his breath. It was a familiar

gesture; I had even learned to provoke it from him occasionally. It said “if it's come to this, there's no hope for the world.”

The next day he was dead.

Satya loved to tell his stories. As he grew older, as often happens, his own children grew weary of them. “Come, Papa, we've heard that one before” was the common refrain; and they returned to whatever they were doing. Unknown to them, the old man quietly honed his story-telling. His language skills were extra-ordinary: he could speak English like an Englishman; his Urdu could put a Lucknowi nawab to shame, and his Hindi was of the born and bred UP-wallah that he was.

Finding an audience was the hard part. When your illnesses leave you so

Cite this article as: Singh N. Satya. RHIME [Internet]. 2014;1:19-21.

breathless that a walk to the bathroom is an ordeal, you become confined to your own home. Moreover, if the lures of the TV do not tempt, and religious discourse leaves you cold, some ingenuity is essential to keep you going. I suspect that is why he offered me a drink that first time many years ago.

I took the phone call at around six in the evening. "Can you come over?" he asked. "I need your help with something." Then, almost as an afterthought, "And Oh! Can you buy a 25 watt bulb on the way?"

We lived in the same colony, less than a kilometer apart. I arrived to see a dejected looking Satya and his wife, whom he lovingly called 'Begum Sahiba', at the dining table awaiting my arrival. Soon I learned that together, they had spent the last hour trying to change the dead bulb in the bathroom. He could not reach the socket because he was unable to climb the stool to get to it; and he would not let her do it because he would not subject her to the indignity! Finally, the bulb had slipped from his hands and broken, scattering shards of glass all over the bathroom floor which she had then had to clean up.

I took my time changing the bulb and, in an effort to lend some respect to their labors, tried unsuccessfully to make it seem more complicated than it actually was. When I was done he insisted that I wash my hands with soap as if it would wash off his guilt of having asked for help.

"Never thought I would need help changing a bulb," he said, with that signature shake of his head. "How much did the bulb cost?"

"Two rupees and twenty-five paise," I replied.

Ignoring my protests he proceeded to extract two rupees from a wallet kept ready, and the exact amount of change from a little box filled with coins. For him it was not the amount but the principle that mattered. This respect for money and debt was a prominent facet of the man. On the few occasions that he asked me to drive him anywhere, the first stop was always the nearest filling

station. He would insist that the tank be topped up at his expense, regardless of the distance he had to go, and the level of fuel in the tank.

He popped the question after we had exchanged some pleasantries: "Will you stay for a drink?" Taken unaware, I fumbled for the right answer. Was he being polite? I did not want to get into a situation where it might seem as if I was being compensated for my services. Yet, to refuse might sound rude. It had taken me more time to walk to his house than to change the bulb. I reasoned that I could spare the time; and the couple did look like they could do with company. I allowed myself to be talked into staying.

"There are glasses and a napkin in the cabinet. You get them ready, I'll join you in a minute." He pointed to the cupboard behind him. It took him a minute already to hoist himself to his feet and shuffle off towards his room, using each available support – the edge of the table, the top of a cupboard, the door frame – as sort of a trellis to help him along. I looked helplessly towards his wife. What was I expected to do with the glasses? And where had he gone?

She smiled at me benignly. "He's gone to bathe, and he likes to polish the glasses before using them," she said handing me two already spotless glasses and a napkin. "You can polish them while you wait."

I did as I was told – doing something helped to keep me distracted and occupied. Soon enough, he emerged from his room in a starched white kurta-pyjama and a whiff of cologne, hair neatly combed. The ceremony continued.

"What will you have? Whiskey?" he asked.

"Yes, whiskey will be fine," I replied. He told me where it was. As I returned to the table I noticed he was polishing the glasses. "I've already done that," I told him, somewhat unnecessarily.

"I just told him that you have," chimed his wife.

He held the glass up to the light and squinted at it. Then he continued polishing off an imaginary spot. Ritual

complete, he laid the glasses neatly on the table – seemingly a measured distance apart, and equidistant from the edge of the table. He poured me a disappointingly small drink, capped the bottle and asked me to replace it in the cabinet.

“But aren’t you having any?” I asked.

“I only drink rum,” he replied. “There’s a bottle of rum there; can you get that for me, please?”

He poured himself his drink, exactly the same size as mine. “Water or soda?”

I told him I preferred water.

“Plain or cold?”

“Plain,” I said.

He started to pour water from a jug; “Tell me how much.” I watched as he slowly poured water into the glass; my pitifully small drink becoming increasingly pale as the level rose. “I think that will do,” I ventured, when it was about two-thirds full. He quietly filled his own glass to the brim.

“Have I told you about the time when...”

“No. You haven’t.”

In retrospect I wish I had listened more carefully. Kept notes perhaps. You don’t realize the worth of these things until you no longer have them.