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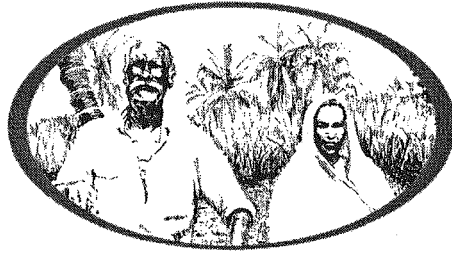


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Ben's Funeral

The phone rang around dinner time on a cold Canberra day. Kamla, my younger brother, spoke from Adelaide. He appeared cool and collected as usual. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, he said he had some sad news to convey. I waited expectantly. Ben, our older brother, has had a brain haemorrhage, he said. I was stunned, and wanted more information. We all knew that Ben wasn't well, but none of us quite knew what the problem was; certainly we had no idea of its seriousness. Kamla was as puzzled and anguished as I was. One of Kamla's doctor friends had told him that if Ben pulled through the next forty-eight hours, he might be all right. Otherwise...the thought went unspoken.

By now, my family had gathered around me, hushed. The tone of my conversation with Kamla had suggested that something was seriously wrong. They were as shocked as I was when I told them what had happened. Yogi was anxious, tearful. She knew from her studies that a brain haemorrhage could mean death, or perhaps worse, permanent brain damage. Either way, the situation was horrible. Helpless, she began to cry.

I, too, lost my composure and leaned on her shoulders. My wife Padma regained her balance to say that we will have to wait and see, just wait and see what unfolds, hinting that one of us might have to fly off to Fiji soon. Niraj, just eight years old, stood uncomprehending, bewildered, his innocent face stained with tears. The children were experiencing the first family tragedy in their young lives, and they were deeply distraught. That night, Niraj slept in our bed and I slept in his. Just before midnight, I noticed a slight flicker, a momentary dimness of light in the room. A premonition of some sort perhaps, or was my exhausted mind playing tricks?

The last time I saw Ben was in June 1992, when I had gone to Fiji to cover the general elections. As usually happened on these occasions, I had gone to Labasa for a day to see father. As my taxi stopped in the compound, where I had disembarked a hundred times in the past, father came out. He embraced me and kissed me on both cheeks, but asked me not to enter the living room of the main house, not yet. Something was going on. Mohan, my cousin, was sitting on the mat with a short, dark, shrunken-looking man, an *ojha*, a spirit man. A big bowl of yaqona and a carton of cigarettes were lying about in the room. Almost instinctively, I headed toward the kitchen. I asked Ben's wife, my *bhabhi*, what was up. This man had come to have a 'look' at Ben, she said. Obviously, some one had cast a spell on him, and the *ojha* was going to get to the root of the problem.

About half an hour later, Ben came out to meet me in the kitchen, where I sat sipping sweet light black tea. Hugging me, he began to cry as I hadn't seen him cry for as long as I could remember. In fact, never. He was very sick, he said to me, tired of life. That scene still haunts me, the sight of my older brother, sick, helpless, weeping. He seemed so completely alone and desperate. There were times, he said, when he felt like taking his life. He hoped he would go soon, with his dignity intact. I muttered some words of consolation, and enquired more about his illness.

He invited me into the living room, where I met the *ojha*. My first impressions were hostile. My pointed but polite questions revealed that he was from Bua or some such place, unemployed. His furtive glances, his reluctance to look me straight in the eye, suggested that he was very uncomfortable in my presence. So, what was the problem, I asked him. Well, someone had 'done something', he said unhelpfully. What, I asked. He didn't quite know, but he sensed something. Oh yes, I thought, but he was also getting money, gifts, bowls of free yaqona and cigarettes as well.

These bloody tricksters, they materialise out of nowhere, and like vultures swoop upon the gullible and desperate in their moments of need.

I didn't say much, out of respect for father and Ben, but both Mohan and the *ojha* knew what I thought of the whole thing. Another time, I would have skinned him alive.

Father was an uncomplicated, trusting kind of person who could be persuaded to believe in these things. But Ben? I never thought he believed in this humbug. Ben read my thoughts and seemed a bit embarrassed. But what could he do, he said. He had tried everything, even been to Suva to get the best medical advice, but nothing seemed to be working. So, like a drowning man, he was clutching at every passing straw. The doctors couldn't diagnose his illness, so in desperation, with father at his side, he turned for relief to the forces of the underworld. Ben was losing his eyesight, and eye specialists, even the best ones in the country, couldn't understand why. And he was losing his memory, too, becoming forgetful. That was why he had taken leave from his job at Vinod Patel's hardware store, afraid that momentary losses of concentration, more and more frequent, might land him in big trouble.

Next day, I saw my cousin Vijay, the (real) doctor, and asked him about Ben. He couldn't be sure, he said in his cautious medical tone, but all the symptoms – the failing eyesight, loss of memory, sudden attacks of anxiety – pointed to hypertension. I was perplexed. Hypertension? In Labasa? Ben? I now can't recall what I told Ben, but I do know that I warned him against relying on those bloody quacks. He agreed. I think I also said something to the effect that sometime soon, we would get him over to Australia for a proper medical checkup. The remainder of that morning we spent talking, wandering around the town, running into family members, having coffee. It was like old times between the two of us, relaxed, close, happy in each other's company. In the afternoon, we borrowed a friend's car and drove to the airport. Ben and father saw me off. It was an emotional farewell, with the usual promises of seeing each other again soon, the urgency now heightened by Ben's deteriorating condition. I stood sheltered in the dusty terminal as he drove away towards town in the yellow Datsun, leaving behind a cloud of red Waiqeile dirt. That was the last I saw of Ben.

Ben had seen me off at that airport so many times in the past. I still remember vividly the first time I left Labasa. It was to go to the University of the South Pacific in 1971. Virtually the whole extended family from various parts of Vanua Levu had come to the airport in a hired bus to farewell me. Ben had cried then, for that was the first time any member of our family had ever left home. Suva, where I was going, was a strange town in a strange place, and I was so green. Three years later I left for Canada, and he was there then as well, crying for a younger brother going to a

distant, alien land. Then to Australia, and later India and Hawaii. So many departures and so many arrivals and so many disruptions. Ben was always there, solid as a rock, standing by the dusty airport fence and waving me goodbye. And he was always there when I returned, ready with goat curry-and-rum parties that went long into the night.

Ben was three years older than me but that somehow seems not quite right. I always thought of him as much older, for the responsibility of educating and bringing us up had rested on him from an early age. Poor fellow, his childhood was truncated to serve the interest of his siblings. Ben was bright at school, but he was a bright boy in a family of bright boys. He passed his Entrance exam but didn't go to secondary school because father couldn't afford the school fees and the bus fares. Actually, that is not quite true. He did attend Labasa Secondary for two terms, but was forced to leave it in the third. After staying home for several weeks and helping on the farm, during which time he had missed valuable school work, father, at mother's persistent urging, asked Ben to return to school, just in time to sit the annual exams. But Ben refused. He would be humiliated, I vaguely remember him saying, knowing that almost certainly he would fail when all his friends, no brighter than him, would pass. I still think he made the wrong decision.

Soon afterwards, a new chapter opened in his life. Ben began work as a grocery hand at ND Rana, the general grocery store in Labasa. His salary was \$4.00 a week (or was it a month?). Unable to afford bus fares from home and with no one else to stay with in town, Ben rented a small room at the back of the ND Rana warehouse, where he slept next to rotting onions and potatoes. It must have been a wretched time for him, but he didn't talk much about those dark days. It was all a learning experience, an apprenticeship, he said, and left it at that. Then, he joined Ashik Husain and Company, a hardware store, where he remained for a long time. He had picked up book keeping on the way and knew the nuts and bolts of the business very well, earning the trust and affection of his boss and his friends. Those were happy years for him, at work and at home: secure employment and a growing young family. In later years, he moved to other jobs, but by then I had left Labasa.

The hard lessons he learnt early in life shaped Ben's vision. He did not want any of his siblings to go through what he had experienced, insisting that we all should complete our education so that we could stand on our own two feet, as far away from the shadow of petty humiliations and poverty that had damaged the lives of our parents. He could easily have decided to go his own way, after he had got married and had his own

family, leaving mum and dad to fend for themselves, or having one of us look after them. That, after all, was and still is the trend. But he stayed put while we travelled on. For that I am more grateful than I can ever put in words. His compassion, concern and generosity of mind and spirit are, for me, his enduring legacy.

Kamla, Sam and Rajen, my younger brothers, will, as they sometimes do, tell their own fun-filled stories about their growing up together in Tabia, or boarding in rat-infested houses in the town. They had more fun with Ben than I ever did. Fun is not a word that comes to mind when I think of Ben. After I left Labasa in 1971, I returned home only intermittently, pursuing education in a world that was as far removed from my siblings' as it could possibly be. Distance and different social and personal experiences increased the gulf between us. But later, especially in the last ten years, Ben and I had become close, not necessarily as brothers, perhaps more importantly as friends. We confided in each other about family matters. He trusted my judgement. I think he also took some pride in my accomplishments. To plant a tree and see it blossom had always given him a feeling of satisfaction. I wish I had told him more often how grateful I was to him, how much I loved him. I thought we had plenty of time, no need to hurry with plans for a big get-together of the family. Now those plans will remain merely as reminders of things never to be completed.

In Canberra, early next morning, Kamla rang again. Bad news bro, he said, simply; and I knew the end had come. My knees sagged and I had a lump in my throat. Of course, I will go, I told Kamla who himself was making arrangements to fly out of Sydney later in the day. I put the phone down and looked at my family now gathered around me. We held on to each other, and shared the dreadful news. Despite their comforting presence, I felt alone, unsupported and helpless in an alien society, away from one's extended family. Uncharacteristically, Yogi took charge, and made my bookings. I would fly out of Canberra later in the day and, with Kamla, take the Qantas flight to Nadi that night.

I met Kamla at Sydney airport. We talked about Ben, but grief is personal, and airports, even at the best of times, magnify isolation and solitude. Among thousands of people, waiting for beloved ones to arrive from overseas, on their way to vacations, conferences, family reunions, with gaiety and laughter, movement and excitement, you stand alone, lost in thoughts of a world that has vanished.

Kamla told me what his doctor friend had said. If Ben had pulled through the next forty-eight hours, he said, he had planned to fly him over to Suva, get expert advice and the necessary medical insurance papers in

order, and then fly him over to Australia. I was touched by his concern and amazed at his ability to think so clearly and strategically. It was at the airport that Kamla told me of the dream he had the previous night. Feeling that something was not quite right, he had rung Fiji to talk to someone in the family, perhaps Ben himself? He couldn't reach him, so had left a message for a reverse call. The phone did ring early in the morning, and woke Kamla from fitful sleep. It was a call from Labasa alright, relaying the news of Ben's death.

We reached Nadi late, past midnight. Since we had to take the early 7 am flight to Labasa, we took a taxi to Suva immediately. The driver appeared to be a speeding maniac, puffing like a chimney, his eyes red from lack of sleep and his dark, leathery skin cracked by excessive kava drinking. In Suva, we met Rajen and his family, and Kamal and Subhas, my nephews. It had fallen to Rajen, the only one of us then living in Suva, to make the travel arrangements and the 7 am flight was the only one available. Labasa had, for the first time, won the inter-district soccer competition, and a lot of its supporters from throughout Fiji were returning home for celebration on Saturday. We were lucky to get seats at all.

From the air, Labasa looked its usual self, a sleepy, shimmering little town surrounded by a sea of green cane fields and embraced by the snaky Qawa river. As soon as the plane landed we took a cab home. We had travelled this road so many times in the past that I knew its every corner and turn. On it, so many years ago, I had learned to drive in Ben's battered old maroon Cortina. In those days the roads were more treacherous because they were not tarsealed. A slight pull of the gravel around a bend and the car would land in a muddy ditch, as it did on several occasions, especially when we had a few bottles of beer under our belts. What fun, what agony.

Ben was not a patient teacher. He would get terribly cross when I did something silly, such as changing gears without pressing the clutch! How could one do so many things at once, pressing the clutch, changing gear, holding the steering wheel steady and looking ahead to avoid oncoming traffic, I would protest. But I learned through my mistakes and eventually got my licence on the second try. I looked after that damned car well, secretly hoping that my good deeds might earn me more opportunities to drive. As we passed the rivers I remembered how Ben and I had tried to learn to swim. And impromptu picnics at the beach which had to be abandoned because some Fijians threatened to beat us up for trespassing on their property. And fierce soccer matches in dry paddy fields. How father would fly into a rage and thrash us with chapki when he saw our injuries or found out about childish adventures.

Then we reached nine miles and turned onto the road leading towards home. I can't exactly recall what went through my mind. A tin shed had been erected and there were some close relatives and village folks sitting around. As we disembarked, father came forward, disconsolate. I couldn't save my son, he said to me, as if he were somehow personally responsible for Ben's death. Then, from the direction of the kitchen came the heart-rending wailing of women. My widowed sister-in-law was there, dishevelled, disoriented. Roshni and Reshmi, Ben's two daughters, and our eldest sister came forward, their eyes red and their faces anguished. Arvind, Praveen and Ravin, Ben's three sons, were sitting at the edge of the verandah, weeping. We all embraced in mutual anguish. Things will turn out all right, I remember saying. We are all together in this. We are a strong family. We'll take care of you. But words are empty at times like this. What can one say to a woman whose husband has died so unexpectedly, to young children whose father is no more?

Father told us what had happened. Ben had been out in the field, helping prepare a plot of land for planting rice. After about half an hour, he returned home, ate his breakfast and then complained of a severe headache. Suddenly, he began vomiting blood and soon afterwards collapsed into a coma. Immediately he was rushed off to the hospital, but it was all too late: Ben died at the hospital that night, without regaining consciousness. Just imagine a father's unfathomable agony about his son's condition, the waiting, the endless waiting for some news, any news from harassed nurses scurrying across the corridor, Ben lying unconscious in some impersonal hospital room, the terrible, merciless suddenness of it all. At least he went quickly, we consoled ourselves, no consolation at all. There is something jarringly unnatural about children going before their parents.

Later in the afternoon, father and I went to town to buy material needed for the cremation. He insisted that he and I do this together. He needed me by his side. We needed each other. Fortunately there are stores which specialise in these things. They know what is needed, in what quantities. Yes, twelve bottles of ghee will do, a dozen packets of camphor, five packets of incense. They had a standard list, and in no time, we had what we wanted. Then to buy fresh garments to clothe the body. It is such a strange, incongruous thing. There we were, father and I, buying new shoes, socks, shirt, tie and pants for Ben. Father was adamant: he was going to send his son off in the finest clothes. Only the best would do. Cost was of no consequence, he said, as tears rolled down his creased, unshaven face.

What must have gone through his heart as he bought all these things, I cannot say. I knew, as I watched him, that in a similar situation, I would

have cracked. I looked at my illiterate father and felt for him from the bottom of my heart. He had endured so much grief in his life: death of his beloved girmitiya parents, loss of two children at birth, mother's death a decade ago, and now Ben's untimely departure. Poverty and the betrayal of friends and relatives. Yet, through it all, he had remained a tower of strength and reassurance to all of us. What courage of the heart amidst such wreckage and ruin.

The last time father bought clothes for Ben that I can remember was when Ben was getting married. That was in 1970. I remember that occasion well. It was the first time I was given what seemed a princely sum, I now can't recall how much, to buy myself a pair of trousers. I got myself tight, dark green terylene pants and a pair of black shoes, my very first. After Ben, I was the next in line for marriage in our family. As Ben's younger brother, I would sit with him in the *mandap* throughout the ceremony. Perhaps some girls from my school might be there. Who knew whose eyes would be on me! There had been such excitement then, such happiness at the prospects that lay in store for me. For my father, it was a son's wedding. He was walking in the clouds. Now, twenty years later, we were clothing Ben again but for a different purpose. And without the warm, comforting presence of my mother.

By late afternoon, when we returned from the town, a crowd had gathered at home. Families and friends and village people. I was struck by their spirit of community at a time like this. Like a well rehearsed play, everyone knew what to do. Since no fire could be lit at home until the body had been cremated, village people brought hot food, tea, bread and fruit to feed the bereaved family. They did not need to be asked: it was the way things were done. I had forgotten how tragedy in a village brings people together. People introduced themselves as they came and sat down in the shed, assessing me with sidelong glances, a stranger who was once one of them. How things had changed. Boys I had grown up with were now middle-aged men, though in my mind's eye, they remained frozen at a past moment. Children I had once terrorised as the school prefect were now householders, married with children of their own. These tiny tots came forward to shake my hand and called me grandfather (*aja*). Some village folk had moved away to other places, and perhaps a few had migrated to Viti Levu; but most were still there, darker, greyer, withered sons of the soil. I felt strangely uncomfortable among them.

In the evening, the village gathered to sing *bhajan*, simple rustic religious songs about man's purpose in life, the entanglements of *maya*, the illusory world, the indestructibility of the soul, the permanence of grief in human

affairs, the importance of *bhakti*, devotion, the everlasting mercy of God, all intended to console the bereaved. We picked up the verses and joined in, to the accompaniment of harmonium and tabla and *dandtal*. Yaqona flowed in copious amounts. People in the village had drunk yaqona for as long as I could remember, but not in this quantity, surely. Now, I was told, many people had become addicted to this mildly narcotic drink, which can produce a soporific effect. As one fellow told me in a matter of fact way, there were some people in the village who secretly prayed for a tragedy like this, for then they could be assured of yaqona for a fortnight or more. I thought he was being cynical, but he had a point. Everything has a price, I suppose; and giving people yaqona was a small thing for their consoling company in our moment of emotional need. I am glad the people came. Their conversation and recollections of old times with Ben lightened the atmosphere, and helped me to reconnect emotionally with the place of my birth.

The next day began early, businesslike. A few people left for the cremation ground to prepare the funeral pyre from wood collected from the forest the previous day, and some of us left for the hospital to get the body. We waited outside the mortuary for about half an hour for two other bodies to be washed and dressed and taken away. Some delay was caused by one group which had bathed the body but had forgotten to bring the clothes. We ambled about and chatted across the street, waiting for our turn. Then we went into the morgue. There 'it' was, on a cold, grey stretcher. The eyes were closed but the mouth was slightly open and the forehead furrowed in pain. It must have been a difficult death. I broke down. Ben had aged considerably in the last five years, I noticed, the hair on his chest grown grey. I had forgotten that he was a big man, handsomely proportioned, fleshy. But no one talked of Ben, the man, now; they talked of 'the body', something cold and impersonal and distant. The body had to be washed and dressed, and we all took our turn. A job to be done, so businesslike.

I remembered the last time I had 'bathed' Ben. That was when he was getting married, and we had to perform the ritual of bathing and feeding him, because custom demands that on the day of his marriage, the groom should have all his needs taken care of. For that one special day in his life, he is the undisputed king of the castle. My day in the sun would come one day, hopefully in the not too distant a future, I dreamed. I recalled the gaiety of that moment: how the women of the family had taken turns to rub *haldi* (turmeric) on Ben, and tons of glistening oil too. I remembered how Ben had mingled with the crowd clad in his turmeric stained white tee shirt and *dhoti*, how mother had sung sad songs about losing her son to another soul.

And I remembered especially well how we had splashed him with buckets full of well water till he begged for mercy. Mother had to intervene to protect her soon-to-be-married son from our water treatment. It had all been so much fun then, so innocent.

An hour later, the body was ready. We placed it on a simple home-made bamboo-and-reed structure. This had been Ben's wish. He had told people that he did not want his body to be cooped up in a casket. He wanted to go to the funeral pyre in the traditional Hindu way. Perhaps he had seen the end coming. There was a time when caskets were commonly used; that was how we had brought mother's body home a decade earlier, I remember. But things have been changing in the last few years. Now people are going back to the traditional ways of cremation. Expense is part of the reason, but also I think a resurgence of interest in culture and tradition. We put the body on an open truck, with about a dozen people sitting around it, and left for home. We drove slowly, around twenty miles an hour. Cars and trucks coming from the opposite direction stopped or slowed down as a mark of respect for a man making his last journey. This was new in Labasa, and was very touching because it was so unexpected.

Hundreds of people had gathered at home by the time we arrived, women sitting in the shed and men ambling outside. Nearly all members of my extended family were there, some of whom I had not seen in more than two decades, or at least since mother's death a decade earlier. Inside the shed there was loud, unceasing wailing. The women of the family were almost hysterical with grief. There was not a single dry eye as far as I could see. I went around the crowd and greeted friends and relatives with a simple handshake. What was there to say?

Around midday, the pandit arrived. He was a youngish man, in fact had been Ben's classmate. What conjunction, saying final farewell to his classmate. He delivered his funeral oration with practised eloquence. A soul is the gift of God, eternal, indestructible. Death simply means the departure of the soul for another life, for Ben a better life. He was a good man, the pandit said, a dutiful son, a responsible brother, a devoted householder, a friend of many. Why he had to go so early, no one knows. God works in mysterious ways. We are all hostages to our karma, cogs in a cosmic wheel. Ben's former fellow workers brought a wreath, as did Roshni's classmates from Labasa College. This was something new. As I recalled, wreaths were associated with Christian funerals. Labasa was changing.

After an hour or so, it was time to leave for the cremation ground. A slow, sad journey, stopping periodically to light camphor along the route. The funeral pyre had been prepared earlier in the day. About a dozen

coconuts had been slit in half and placed at the bottom of the pit, apparently to catch the ghee and keep the fire going. A truck load of wood had been carefully arranged. Whoever prepared the pyre had done it many times before. We placed the body on it. Then, as the *paṇḍit* chanted some *shlokas*, sacred words, from a book covered in red cloth to wish the departed soul well on to its next journey, and after we observed a minute's silence, Arvind, Ben's eldest son, lit the pyre. Custom demands that only the eldest son perform the last funeral rites. That is why a son is an absolute must for all Hindu families. Arvind led the way, and we joined in, lighting the camphor and pouring the ghee. Within minutes, with a fast wind blowing, the pyre was alight, the heat getting increasingly intense. We moved away, and stood in silence in the shade of some pine trees, as flames, pure and purifying, leapt into the sky.

Half an hour later, people began to scatter and leave. We stayed on for an hour or so more, and then walked back home. As we walked across the Tabia school grounds, I remembered the great times we had there as children, arriving early in the morning for a game of soccer or *gulidanda* before classes began. I remembered, too, the house competitions, the compulsory midday siestas, the singing lessons, and the beatings by teachers, some of whom, such as Master Bhujang Rao, struck terror in our tiny hearts. This was the late 1950s and the 1960s. I remembered how Ben and I had to share our school lunch from the same aluminium *sispan*, and how he used to hate that. I was a nuisance to him, an embarrassment, in the way younger siblings can be, always saying the wrong things at the wrong time. There was no secondary school in Tabia then as there is now. Those who passed the dreaded Entrance exam went either to the Labasa Secondary or to the lesser option (as it seemed) of Sangam High.

Next morning, we went to the cemetery to complete the final rite, collecting bones and ashes for disposal in the river. Nothing much was left except bits and pieces of the upper parts of the body. Ultimately, all journeys, however grand or humble, end here, I thought. That funeral pyre is a great leveller of hierarchy and status and power and wealth, reducing all to ashes. How profound the ancient truths: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It was a deeply humbling experience to contemplate the impermanence of life. A whole vanished world flashes past your eyes in the blink of any eyelid. You think of all the things you should have done and said, of all the missed conversations and opportunities. You think of all the laughter and fights of your childhood years, the little secrets you shared, and little pranks you played on unsuspecting others, you think of the good times past, and how time moves on. So quickly.

After placing flowers and bones in the river, at exactly the same spot where we had placed mother's last remains, we trudged back home slowly. As we crossed the rice fields and passed the mango trees we used to invade during the fruiting season, we laughed and talked about the old days, telling stories of our pranks to children born much later. At night, village people came home to sing *bhajan* as they would for the next thirteen days, the traditional period of mourning, after which life would return to a semblance of normalcy.

The following day, Kamla and I had to leave Labasa to return to Australia. Saying goodbye is always a difficult thing, don't you think? But saying goodbye to your widowed sister-in-law and her orphaned young children is impossible. We embraced each other through tears, with promises to keep in touch. I left more conscious than ever of my new responsibilities and obligations, and diminished by Ben's death. Another familiar, dependable signpost had gone from my life forever.