

HomeComing



Susham Bedi

HINDI SHORT STORY

THE HOMECOMING

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WHEN THE HIGH-PITCHED whirr of the aircraft's turbines started, it felt to him as if some tiny, frightened bird had rapidly fluttered its wings inside him. He was overcome with a foreboding that he would never return to this piece of earth again. After all the wrangling and haggling, the small amount he had managed to recover only served to remind him more forcefully that he had come away virtually empty-handed. The words his father had spoken to him years earlier swam into his consciousness, "Look Siddharth, every homecoming has two sides to it. One is like a Festival of Lights, while the other is like a Mahabharata. When Rama returned, they celebrated the Festival of Lights, but when the Pandavas came back, the epic battle of the Mahabharata took place. I tell you, the Festival of Lights makes a mockery of the true nature of a homecoming; it is its idealistic, pretty face. The real face of homecoming is one smeared with blood and ash, a true Mahabharata."

Suddenly he felt as if a red-hot iron skewer was being driven through the soft flesh of his heart. He pressed the left side of his chest with one hand and sucked in a deep breath. His wife and children, who'd awakened at four in the morning to get ready to catch the plane, were dozing off in their seats. The feeling of being pierced with a skewer intensified; he placed his other hand over the left side of his chest.

This had not happened to him before — at least not sixteen or seventeen years ago when his father had made that comment to him. At the time, he treated the remark as if it were just another one of the moral platitudes which his father was fond of pronouncing daily. Nevertheless, on this particular occasion his father had repeatedly tried to drum it into him. "If you want to go overseas and work, then forget about just coming back here any time you please and expecting to find everything exactly the way

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you left it. Look, son, a lot of things change with the passing of time — people's minds change."

But his father's comments had seemed completely off the mark on this occasion too. "What are you talking about, Dad? You can't even imagine how close Gurpreet and I are — that guy would lay down his life for my sake! How can a person have doubts about a friend like that? Even at the mention of my leaving you see tears welling up in his eyes."

"All right," his father said with exasperation, "you do as you please. But I think you ought to at least take the precaution of getting your company registered as a private firm, so no one person will be able to gain control over it. Or if that were to happen, then at least you wouldn't be up for liabilities."

"Dad, Gurpreet is saying exactly the same thing. You're always being needlessly pessimistic — you only see the dark side of everything."

Although Siddharth and Gurpreet had not been friends since childhood, their friendship did date from that milestone in young men's lives when, having finished college, they first set foot into a foreign world and start creating a new life for themselves. Both of them had gone to work in the tea plantations of West Bengal's Jalpaiguri area — for the same company, on the same day. Moreover, both of them were from the Punjab and single, and the company had given them the same bungalow to share. The two men soon came to be on such close terms that they would set off to work together and then afterwards return home together as well. They even managed to acquire the same friends and enemies — although the truth was that Siddharth had such a pleasant, easy-going nature that it was rather difficult to come by many of his enemies. Gurpreet, however, would lose his temper over trifles and start picking fights with people. As a result, Gurpreet's enemies ended up becoming Siddharth's enemies too. Despite that, there were still a few smart people who were able to discern the differences between the two of them.

Gurpreet traced his ancestry back to an aristocratic family of the Punjab. When Gurpreet was about nine years old, however, his father terminated the *lila* of his life during a bout of drunkenness, and Gurpreet then

had to be brought up by his police officer uncle. To this day Gurpreet was incapable of raising the slightest murmur of protest about anything in the presence of this overbearing man. Siddharth's father was a respected journalist in a smallish town, a man of integrity and intelligence who also had friends in high places. In short, although the two men's family backgrounds were different, this did not affect their blossoming friendship. Once, after they had gone out to see some film about two friends, Gurpreet had remarked to Siddharth, "Man, our friendship is like that: totally pure — but make sure no girlfriend ever comes between us!"

Siddharth took to heart what Gurpreet had said and made a point of staying away from any woman Gurpreet flirted with. And Gurpreet for his part did the same with regard to Siddharth. As a result, no quarrel about women ever arose between them.

At the appropriate time, the two friends celebrated their respective marriages in grand style. Both their wives were tall Punjabi girls who had the fair complexions, fine features, and hour-glass figures of film stars. Since their wives shared the same interests in everything from the rising cost of vegetables to the latest hair-fashions, there was always a lot for them to gossip about. As for their husbands, they would spend their free time happily cursing their company's bosses and devising business plans for the future.

In those days the managers and assistant managers who worked on the tea plantations lived in considerable luxury. These Indian sahibs had, in fact, inherited the last remnants of the pomp and grandeur that the British had formerly surrounded themselves with. They had huge bungalows (although these had started to leak somewhat with the passing of time and the incessant monsoon deluges), cars (an Ambassador or Fiat instead of a Rolls Royce or Mercedes Benz), as well as cooks, cook's helpers, bearers, personal attendants, sweepers, gardeners, and watchmen who were all employed to attend to the many household chores - in addition to the nurses and maids who came later on to take care of the "infant lords."

Both wives reigned over their platoon of domestic servants in full regal splendour. During the day the two women would attend coffee and "kitty" parties, while at night they played flash, bridge, or bingo in the club.