

Aqueil the Newspaper Boy meets the Angel

Aqueil always got up early, no matter what. He had newspapers to deliver to ‘VIPs,’ who were, as he informed other boys proudly, very important people, and who knew what ‘national impact’ it would have if he went about his business late, and a great sahib couldn’t get to the phone on time? With such considerations energizing him, he always stole out of their three-room tenement without disturbing Ami, for she would insist on making him a cup of tea if she saw him leave. She worked hard enough, as it was, stitching petticoats on her old sewing machine, for prompt delivery by ten at Model Fashions.

As he pedaled happily up the steep street, his pyjama ends carefully tucked up to prevent grease from the cycle chain soiling them, the long striped shirt of his father’s flapping in the breeze, his hair carefully tucked into his white cap, Aqueil would hum some recent film hit, just braking the cycle with one foot to toss a thick newspaper into a driveway. When he had first got the job, he thought it would be impolite to do so, and would enter the gate respectfully and try and ring the door-bell. But once or twice he had got bitten by watchful Alsatians, that had come roaring from the back, disturbing everyone in the commotion. The Sahibs didn’t like being woken up by him in any case, and had ordered him ‘to just toss the paper in, for God’s sake.’

But the birds were all up long before him, and though he could give proper names only to very few, such as the crow, the pigeon, or the sparrow, he recognized them all by shape and colour, and wondered how they knew when they should all fly together, and circle so perfectly, far, far better than the cars on the road, which always got into a jam.

One day, he might have a car, well, that didn’t seem likely, but at least he would get an auto like Abu had. When he thought of his father, his eyes would cloud over, remembering that thick black beard he had nestled up to as a child, that big wide smile, and the smell of tobacco, when he came home from work in the evening, with vegetables for Ami, and a small packet of sweets or biscuits for him and his sisters. How they would all run round their father while he held the packet up, laughing, turning, till he would give it to one or the other with strict instructions to share. They had not been well-off, like middle-class well-off, but they always had something to eat everyday, and at Id, new clothes, and biryani.

He didn’t want to think about food, for that would make him come over all weak, and he still had several streets in Jubilee Hills to cycle up and through. He stopped for a minute, and took out that special *paan* he bit into when hungry. He would not think of the past, it was the Will of Allah, as Ami said so often, but why would Allah want to deprive them all of Abu, who was such a good man, he would go to all the houses in their little *basti* on Id, or Divali or Dassera, to greet everyone. Everyone liked him, but then... those men who had come were not from their *basti*, that is what Ramprasad Bhai had told Ami. When he himself would die he would ask Allah why, and he would meet his Abu happy in heaven at last, after all those years of hard work with his auto. Aqueil stopped and

blew his nose forcefully, and wiped his fingers on his pyjama. He knew he should not have done so, but he did not have a handkerchief, never had one. He looked around, it was going to be a beautiful day. The morning was cool and fresh, and the gardens on every side of the tree-lined street were bright with late-season flowers. What grand houses they were! But most had very few people living in them, aside of course from the servants at the back. The hills stretched back a long way, with lines of beautiful, modern apartments and high-rises building up on the horizon that formed cyber-city. Perhaps, he could one day become a computer programmer. Some months ago, he had tried to save a few rupees from his meager pay, lying to Ami that he had bought samosas with them, and had 'invested' in lottery tickets, but he had never won, and he stopped buying the tickets one day when he saw his mother stitching the torn kameez of his little sister.

Well, God was Great, he had no doubts about that, and he tried to lead a good useful life as Maulvi Saheb had advised, and he never missed Friday namaz, God would look after him, so why should he worry? To worry, as Maulvi Saheb had said, was not to put full faith in God, and that was no right for any Muslim. He had only one more long street to do, then he would go home, dust his precious cycle, and then hurry off and see if he could get any *hamali* work at any of the construction sites. Thinking of school was out of the question, though he had been in Ninth Class when Abu had... when those men had come...his father's staring, surprised look, blood all over the khaki uniform...he shook his head clear of all thoughts of the past. He was the *only* man of the family, and he *must* be strong.

He was on the crest of the road by the park and he always enjoyed going roaring downhill, his feet off the pedals. Just as he was going to give himself a shove off, Aqueil remembered that a brand new club was being constructed just on the other side of the hill. Perhaps, he could get some work there, that would be fun! Turning his cycle round, he pushed his way up the steep side of the road through the eucalyptus trees, to look down on the club site. As he got to the top of the rise, panting with the exertion, he was surprised to see a Saheb sitting on a granite boulder, and looking at the breaking dawn. He couldn't make out who it was, the figure got all blurry. Everything went blue, and light flashed in front of his eyes. He dropped his cycle and sat down in amazement. Slowly, very slowly as in a dream, the figure turned to look at him, its eyes bored into Aqueil's head, and he saw in a numb daze that the figure had two huge blue wings, which opened slowly.

"You must be an Angel," gasped Aqueil in Urdu, for at that moment that seemed to be the most reasonable explanation.

"Yes, I am," said the Angel in English matter-of-factly. "Aqueil, you want to study, and become a Big Man, and look after your Ami and your sisters, do you not?"

Aqueil nodded.

"Well, then, I shall speak to you in English, you have to practice," continued the Angel contentedly. "Now tell me, what would you most like to do?"

“ I want to travel round the world,” said Aqueil, “ I want to go to America, and Europe! I want to learn things, I want to be a scientist and explore!”

“ There are some things you should not explore!” said the Angel sternly.

“ My science teacher says,” started Aqueil, “ that is when I was going to school,” correcting himself quickly, “he says we must experiment, try out everything, the path of discovery is endless...”

The Angel shook his head. “ Your teacher, or rathe, your former teacher, is both right and wrong, mostly wrong.”

Aqueil felt a little depressed. The Angel was talking like the Maulvi Saheb, and though he respected the old man a great deal, the Maulvi was after all old-fashioned.

“ Well, you are an Angel, so you must be right, but the *angrez* explore everything and they are now very powerful?” he ended with a question.

“ Leave the *Angrez* out of this,” said the Angel gravely. “ They will reap as they have sown. But you are a Muslim, well, not yet, but you wish to be a good Muslim, I can see into your heart. So remember there are boundaries to exploration that *you* may not cross.”

Aqueil reconciled himself to a long, boring sermon.

“ This will neither be long nor boring,” said the Angel with a smile. “ Now remember, the first boundary you may never cross is the Boundary of Hatred. You must never explore hatred in your heart for any persons, whatever the evil they have done. Allah will punish them. But, my son, you may explore Pain in your heart, but you can do so only if you have Love for people.”

Aqueil looked bewildered. “ I don’t understand,” he said timidly.

The Angel looked deep into his eyes, till Aqueil was dazzled. “ I think you do,” said the booming voice. “ Yes, I am sure you do, for you are a good boy at heart.”

“ You will experience much suffering,” said the Angel. “ You already have suffered more than any boy should, but there is more in store on the path of Life. Whatever the suffering, you may never taunt your God. Never explore the Devil’s domain, and challenge the Most Compassionate, the Merciful God.”

Aqueil bowed his head in fear. “ I... I never would,” he quavered.

“ Look deep into yourself,” warned the Angel, “ and you will see you were on the brink. Your mother has cried aloud sometimes that she wished she was dead, but her love for

you, and your sisters, has kept her from that dreadful sin. Thank God always for the gift of Life, and let him decide when to call you to Heaven, that is not for you to say or plan.” Aqueil whimpered, for the angel had so clearly seen into the darkest corners of his soul, which he tried so hard to hide from himself.

“ This world is beautiful,” continued the Angel. “ Never explore the world of dejection, which casts its dark shadow on all this beauty and makes it look worthless. Breathe in the world’s beauty made by God, mar it not with your petty moods.”

Aqueil was beginning to understand vaguely. He nodded, his head still humbly bowed.

“ Explore not the illusion of the power of men, which makes it seem that presidents with nuclear bombs and vast armies command this earth,” said the Angel sharply. “ You are equal to any man, for you and he were made alike by God.”

“ But the Big People...” began Aqueil.

“ Let them be big,” said the Angel patiently. “ Your worth and their worth only God knows, and your good nature, if you remain good, outweighs all the outward show of power, which will destroy itself in time. It is God’s will.”

They looked at each other in silence for a while. Sensing a question in Aqueil’s mind, the Angel continued.

“ Explore not the lusts of wealth,” said the Angel softly. “ Even if you earn much money, and you will, I can foretell, let not its extravaganzas eat into your soul till you begin to believe your needs are vast. Money, the sweat of other hands, comes to you on trust, so that you may help other persons struggling in life.”

“ Yes, I will! Yes, I will!” said Aqueil eagerly, for this injunction he understood readily.

“ I know you understand me now,” smiled the Angel, “ but I want you to remember this my warning years later when you are rich, and ‘exploring’ the pleasures of the flesh. Be restrained, but not afraid.”

“ Look at me, Aqueil,” said the Angel seriously, “ you will never explore wastefully the comforts of women. Promise you will return more than you receive in affection, honour and duty.”

Aqueil felt a flush rising, but his eyes were fixed by the Angel, and he nodded.

“It is time for me to go, the dawn breaks upon the earth,” said the Angel standing up, “but before I go one last warning. Never, ever, explore the arrogance of your own generosity. If you do good, do so humbly, for no merit belongs to you, you do only as God made your nature to be. This could be your greatest failing, Aqueil, your discovery

of your own goodness. Remember always, and to remind you, I shall brush heavenly incense into your nostrils with my wings!”

Like peacock feathers, but more resplendent, the Angel’s great wings unfolded and brushed against Aqueil’s face, like a splash of water. It was water! He felt the sting of water as it fell on his face, and ran down his collar.

“*Arre!* Boy! Get up! Get up! What has happened to him? Is there a doctor?” As he fluttered his eyes open, he saw a group of men, mostly early morning walkers, in shorts and fancy trainers, standing round him, some annoyed, one or two looking concerned.

“ Ah, he is awake! He is all right!” said someone in English. A large Memsahib in walking shoes, pushed her way through the crowd and bent down, her face looming large before his unfocused eyes.

“ What’s the matter with you, heh, what – is –the matter, *bache?*” she asked in Urdu. “He’s skin and bones, just look at his state,” she said in English, turning to the crowd. Then her face was back close to his. “ Have you eaten anything? What did you eat? When did you eat last?” Her questions were ringing in his head.

“ I ate this *zarda paan*,” he stammered out at last. “ I needed to keep going to... to deliver papers on time.”

“ Here drink this, this is an energy drink,” said the Memsahib, producing a fancy plastic bottle. In between gulps, she was able to get him to tell them that he had missed his meals for two days. Yes, his father was dead. Ami worked, but had not been paid for two weeks, he didn’t know why, something to do with the accounts officer being on leave. Yes, Ami did cook everyday, but there was not much for his sisters, so he had pretended he ate while at work. His father’s friend, Rashid uncle, who also drove an auto, had given him those *paans*, to tide over the difficult days...

Most of the crowd had moved away. The large Memsahib was also walking away with her husband. “So this is the real face of your India shining, no one cares for the poor! The statistics are there for everyone to see, I shall mention the case of this boy in the seminar today...” The Memsahib had disappeared round a bend in the road, and her loud voice had grown indistinct. Aqueil looked anxiously round for his cycle. It was right behind his head, and seemed all right, he must have somehow passed out, stupidly...

A short, round balding Saheb, dressed in white singlet and shorts was standing in front, watching him. Aqueil got up hastily, balancing himself from falling, and picked up his cycle.

“Do you think you can ride it?” asked the Saheb coolly.

“Yes, Saheb, I am all right now, I must have slipped,” said Aqueil awkwardly.

“Here’s my card,” said the Saheb, bringing a card out of his wallet, stuffed into his hip-pocket. “Can you read English?”

Aqueil nodded. “I was in Ninth, Saheb.”

“Very good, come to my office at ten,” said the Saheb briskly. “I will give you a job in my company canteen. You will work everyday, including Sundays, and be ready to serve breakfast by seven in the morning. We all have to work hard to make any money. You will have free time from ten in the morning till four in the afternoon. You shall go to school and finish Tenth. Later, we will see. I shall pay you three thousand rupees a month, starting today. If you work very hard, and I receive good reports from your superiors, I may even consider giving you training for desk jobs, but that is up to you.”

Aqueil stood still, turning the business card between his fingers. The Saheb jogged on, and was gone. Aqueil looked at the card. It was one of the newest IT companies that had moved to Hyderabad from America. And the card said Shivaji Rao, M.D.! Slowly, he walked down towards his home. Three thousand rupees a month, and a chance to be educated, to may be even... but he would not day-dream. He would not tell Ami, till he was sure of everything, he didn’t want to raise her hopes and then disappoint her. She had suffered enough. And as for his sisters, oh! he would buy them real good clothes, educate them, yes, he would, and then find them good husbands... in time, not now. He would see his Ami had a nice house... suddenly he remembered the Angel, he thought he had seen when he was unconscious. Well, real or not, it didn’t matter, he would remember, he would remember every single word of that strange dream; it had made him a man, it had made him a Muslim, not just on the inside, but deep within as well, just as old Maulvi Saheb had wanted.

The End