Last Christmas in Bandra

-Aravind Adiga

We lived in bandra when I was a magistrate in the city court in the 1970s. The judge's official quarters were in an old building near the end of Waterfield Road - the loveliest place my wife and I ever stayed in. Our landlady, an elderly Goan named Mrs Rego, grew coconut palms in the front yard, and the ocean was just five minutes away, on Carter Road.

My tenure ended in 1979; in April that year my wife began to say: “Shouldn't we think of buying a place close by?”

We even went looking around Pali Hill and Turner Road, right where the film stars live. Don't imagine from this that I had lots of money stashed away in Switzerland. Far from it, I was an honest judge. But people had given up on this country in the 1970s. Every young man wanted to pack his bags and go to America. Real estate in Bombay stayed down that decade, and by 1979 a nice place in Bandra was, for the first and last time since India's independence, within the grasp of an honest citizen of this country.

My friends still ask me: “Why didn't you buy something back then, at those rates? You'd be living today next to the film stars.”

I'm not one for films; what I miss are the churches. We are not Christians, my wife and I, but we might as well be. When I was growing up, down south in Mangalore, the priests at my Jesuit school would bring me in to Catechism class and put their hands on my shoulders and declare: “This brahmin's son has the Old Testament in his blood.” And then, would you believe it, I was made to narrate to the bored Christian boys the myths of their own holy book: of great King David, of Samson the strong; and of Solomon the wise.

And I have no doubt that something from those stories of the patriarchs stayed in my head, and that was the reason I became a judge.

Most of the cases in the city court are petty matters - family disputes, property cases - a simple matter of reading the fine print of the law. But there were criminal cases too, and here it was a matter of exercising a faculty beyond the law books: compassion. When the police shoved a fellow in dirty clothes before me and said, this man has stolen money from a hotel or a businessman on the Linking Road, my first question was: “Did you give this man a fair chance to tell his story?”

Between the police and the poor, I knew whom I preferred to trust. For this reason there are still officers in Bandra who, when my name is dropped in their presence, will shout: “That bloody south Indian judge!”

I had an official car in those days, and an official driver, a Christian named Antony. In the evenings, while I was still thinking over the day's cases, Antony would drive me home, slowing down and changing gears as we came to the gate of Mrs Rego's house. Not far from the gate there was an open garbage heap, and the car's headlights would flash on it. Amidst the garbage lying in the heap, there was one item that always caught my eye - a pile of clipped chicken's feet, thrown there every evening by some butcher, which were always shaking to and fro, like something living, as the rats ripped and chewed them in a frenzy. When I saw these chicken feet, I always thought of how the Sultans who ruled us in our barbaric past administered the law according to the Sharia, chopping off hands and legs of so-called criminals and piling those limbs in a corner of their so-called courts of law. Then Antony drove past the garbage dump and into our beautiful home, and a certain feeling of satisfaction came over me, to think of how much progress our country, despite all its problems, has made, and how I, in my small way, was part of that progress.

My honesty did not pass unnoticed. It is a recorded fact that the great barrister Rustom Kyani himself said to the Law Minister of India: “This young man will sit on the Bombay High Court very shortly.”

Yet I was passed over for promotion; the government did not want too many honest men at one time on the High Court. The news hurt me; but rather than mope in the last few months of my tenure, I was determined to enjoy my work to the fullest.

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One of my more unusual duties came every other Saturday - when I was required to sign off on the documents presented by foreign couples adopting children from our orphanages. All the other judges hated this work. Some felt that it was beneath their dignity; others thought it a humiliation that foreigners could come and bid for our children, as if India were one big bazaar of human flesh.

I have nothing against foreign adoption. My wife and I have not had children and I know what it is to pray for a daughter or son at night. If someone from England or America wants to take a poor Indian girl to a better future elsewhere, what right do we, the rich, have to say “No”?

One Saturday I came into my chambers to find a European couple waiting for me, along with a social worker from the orphanage named Mrs Saraswati, whom I had seen before. The Europeans were from Germany, but the husband spoke enough English to answer my questions. He was an engineer at a good company; she showed me photos of their house in Germany. The boy was sitting in between them, looking happy, in a bright green shirt. A bit dark skinned, and I wondered why these Europeans had picked the darkest child in the orphanage - nevertheless, he had an intelligent face that was fully deserving of a future.

Mrs Saraswati handed me the papers for my signature. In these cases, a social worker always has to come with the proper documentation and answer the judge's questions.

“Where are the signatures of the parents?” I asked her.

“The child has no known father, your honour,” Mrs Saraswati said.

“And mother?”

She hesitated.

“Mother will not give her consent to the adoption, your honour.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. Without the mother's consent, how was the adoption possible? Mrs Saraswati saw my appalled face and said: “Mother is a scavenger. She left the child with us at birth. She has never seen him since she gave birth. All the social workers love this boy, he's adorable. We are so happy he was picked by this couple. Please, your honour. We beg you to bend the rules just this once and give this boy a home.”

“What is the mother's objection, if she never sees the child?” I asked.

Mrs Saraswati was a social worker with integrity, who never took money, and never handed out favours. She thought about her answer, and said: “I think, your honour, she is a selfish woman.”

I instructed her to bring the scavenger woman to my chambers the next evening. We had been speaking to each other in Hindi, so I turned to the Germans, and said in English: “Everything's fine, just trust me.”

The next day Mrs Saraswati returned with the mother to my chambers, and I saw her face, and started.

I have mentioned the garbage dump right outside my judge's quarters, the one with the chicken feet left in piles.

I have not mentioned that there was also often a human being in that dump - this very human being now sitting in front of me. The same wild scavenger woman whom I had seen there picking thorugh the garbage for something to recycle, and who would sometimes turn around to stare at my car as I passed her, with a snarl, as if she were some kind of humanoid hyena, was the one who had given birth to that little boy in the green shirt whom the Germans wanted.

“Why won't you let your son go?” I demanded.

“Speak up, the judge is talking to you,” Mrs Saraswati said. But the woman just looked at the ground.

“These foreigners will take him to a good home. They will feed him well. Give him clothes.”

The scavenger woman still avoided my eyes. A faint smell of garbage escaped from her and filled up my judge's chambers.

“Well?” I shouted. “Speak up, I can't sit here all day for you.”

“He's my son,” she said.

“You never visit him. You don't even recognise him. Why don't you let him get an education in life?”

“He's mine. I gave birth to him.”

There and then I thought, this person before me was not a mother, who is meant to show selfless love for her children, but the incarnation of selfishness, like the dog that sat in the manger. I was filled with hatred for all the poor of our country, who live like animals, vote for the most corrupt of politicians, and insist on staying poor and dragging this country down.

“Show me your hands!” I shouted.

Mrs Saraswati prodded the woman. “Do as the judge orders.”

The scavenger lifted her hands up; I seized them and hammered them down on my table.

“What are these marks on your arms?” I asked. I had dealt with scavengers before, you see.

Of course she said nothing.

“They are rat bites!” I shouted, pointing to the black welts that ran up and down her arms, and down into her fingers. “They eat you alive when you forage through the garbage. Is this the life you want for your son? Do you want his arms to look like yours one day?”

The scavenger finally looked at me - a look of shining hatred in her hyena-like eyes - and then, to my surprise, she burst into tears. I was ready for anything else, that she should bite or scratch at me, but not this, and I was paralysed.

“Tell the Germans to go home. There is no hope for them.” I shouted at Mrs Saraswati, on my way out of the chambers.

The next day, to my surprise, Mrs Saraswati came back with the papers of adoption, which she put down on my table.

“She is illiterate, sir - so she allowed us to take this from her.”

In the place where the mother's signature was required, there was a large, gleaming inky thumbprint.

A big smile spread across the social worker's face as I signed my name next to the huge black mark.

“You're the best judge in the whole world, sir,” she said, fighting back her tears. “We are all so happy that the boy is going with those Germans.”

A few days later it was Christmas Eve, and my wife and I, as we did every year, went to the church of Mother Mary of the Mount, the most beautiful church in all of Bandra. I had given the driver a week's leave to celebrate Christmas with his family. I drove up to the church myself, and then the two of us waited in line with the Christians to enter. Inside we looked at the beautiful paintings on the wall, which told the life of Jesus. I remembered the old stories I used to recite to the Catholic boys in school - of Samson the strong, Solomon the wise, and of Nathan, the honest one, who pointed a finger at David and said: “You, King, are the guilty man.”

After that my wife and I followed the lines of Christians out and we stood near the shrine of Mary outside the church, and watched the ocean and prayed there with the Christians.

It was dark when I drove us back, and I had the headlights on at full beam; just as we were about to come home, I stopped the car, and dimmed the headlights.

“Why have you stopped?” she asked.

I could barely speak, so she loosened the buttons on my shirt and fanned me.

“There is something there,” I whispered.

“Where?”

“In the garbage.”

The car had come to a stop right in front of the garbage heap. My wife squinted.

“It is just a dog.”

“It's not a dog.”

“Turn on the headlights and I'll see.”

“No. I won't. It's not a dog.”

My wife looked frightened now. She dropped her voice to a whisper too.

“It is just a dog - a black dog. Will you wait while I get a doctor?”

Just then the garbage shifted and moved; chicken limbs tumbled about.

“It is not a dog there,” I said, and my fingers clung on to her forearms to stop her from abandoning me.

Thankfully, she knew how to drive - I had insisted on this after marriage, as a progressive husband - and so, though I was helpless from terror in the driver's seat, she was able to steer the car with her right hand through the gate, and bring it to a halt in front of our house.

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We left Bandra in March of the new decade. In the mid-1980s, when Rajiv Gandhi had become Prime Minister and was trying to clean up this country, word was sent to me that the Government was sorry for its mistake and I was welcome now to take my rightful place on the High Court. I felt vindicated, though for private reasons I could no longer accept such a position.

Nor have I, in all these years, been back to Bandra, though we live these days only a few kilometres north of it, and my wife tells me, every Christmas, that it really is time we paid a visit.