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A Passage Home

...these thoughts were already there, stirring the placid stillness of ages.

--Jawaharlal Nehru

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Canada.**

They recognized me in ways I wasn't expecting, as Professor Bagh hinted at; and indeed, I was from somewhere else, if from the Amazon and the Caribbean. *Not really from Canada?* These Delhi University College of Arts and Science students held on to their ideas as they kept assessing me. *Indian, too, I wanted to be known.* And I figured they knew all about places with names like Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, as I hemmed and hawed, like my opening ploy. One or two looked at me ruefully. One student at the back of the class snickered. And yes, they'd heard about Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Cuba--the small island with the big revolution. Che was a genuine revolutionary they might have talked about with older colleagues and left-leaning professors. Marxists, Naxalites, ah!

I focused on my talk: on the Indian indenture system, and my background, not foreground: about my grandparents and great-grandparents having been brought from the subcontinent to the Guiana shores to work in the sugar plantations run by the British and other Europeans decades ago. Times changing, ah. Indeed, Professor Bagh thought his students would find me interesting. "It's their only chance," he urged.

"Only chance?"

"To find out who you are. Our people..."

"*Our?*"

I turned my full gaze to the students, once more.

Professor Bagh let out, "Yes-yes," and managed a wry smile.

India was starting to have this effect on me, with my self-doubt; a new temperament, like what I never felt before. Angst d'you say?

More snickers from the students. Professor Bagh rolled his eyes and appeared solemn; he'd used the word "diaspora"; but the students were skeptical of the term. To them it was just a strange concept, at worse, a nuisance. I persisted with my theme of indenture, like a made-up

tale, fiction I was peddling.

My being a writer, but what kind? Writing only about sugar-plantation experience and woes in growing-up in British Guiana, that far corner of the world? *Not really about Canada?* Memories...and myth tied to instincts: this verve in me. But Canada was no longer in my ken as I went on about the Indian indentured labor system: what first occurred in South Africa, as these students no doubt already knew.

Mahatma Gandhi's struggles on the Indians' behalf they'd contemplated. Indentured labor had been everywhere: Mauritius...Fiji.

Where else?

The class of eighteen-and nineteen-year-olds before me, and some tittered. One laughed loudly. I laughed too, like my tried-and-true manner of teaching. Handsome faces of the males, and the females: some attractive, but kept being coy in typical Indian fashion.

Professor Bagh smiled, agreeably. Now it was more than history with forebears in my ken. Ah, Bagh no doubt wondered what I made of his charges.

I kept thinking of a new way of getting through to them, the students. Now it seemed like all of India was before me, the classroom being in a whirl. Faces came closer, eyes glued to me—to my long hair, and how I gesticulated, yes. Bagh winked an eye. He rolled his head, typical Indian manner. I kept peddling my story, about history's long march. Yes, during the nineteenth century people from Calcutta, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Chennai had been taken to ships kicking and screaming to a far place from the Bay of Bengal, across the *kala pani*, the dreaded black waters. To Shangrila. *Really there?*

My grandfather being on that last ship, like my personally recorded history. *Tell them.* That first ship named the *SS Whitby* sailing for three or four months, then eventually arriving in British Guiana in 1838—a battered, almost broken vessel; and how those below deck moaned and groaned, some crying or screaming their hearts out when the waves rose higher; and some might have died, and their bodies thrown overboard!

What else? My grandfather...a hardy soul, a boy really, in that last indenture ship that came. *Not the first ship anymore?* Let these Delhi college students commiserate with me; I kept them enthralled. *Didn't I?*

The indentured ones, thin bodies wracked as they called out *Hi Ram!* Called out to Krishna, Shiva to save them from their ordeal. They also called out to Mother Kali—Calcutta's own—with

such power in her eyes to help the women especially in their travail. Goddess Durga also being invoked, see. Did the Muslim ones call out to Prophet Muhammad? Indeed the last ship sailed through the dreaded waters. *Aaaggh!*

More gods and goddesses appearing... disappearing.

When would the ship finally land in Shangrila? *British Guiana sugar plantation, welcome!*

The Delhi College students looked at me in awe.

Professor Bagh winked again. I tried sounding poetic, not dramatic. One boy, Rahul, with almost white hair—a Muslim among Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, raised a hand at the back of the class. Professor Bagh aimed his gaze at him. Yes, in new the atmosphere of student freedom no less I contemplated. The girls being demure, as the boys chaffed them, encouraging them to doubt me. They would?

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes-yes,” Rahul mimicked.

Professor Bagh was pleased I’d agreed to be his guest-lecturer: a relief from the drudgery of his own teaching. Frail, but dapper in jacket and tie, if pernickety-looking, he was. I imagined him lecturing in a sing-song voice, almost a drone. Ah, I mused on about how hundreds of thousands of Indians were taken to different parts of the world, as if I’d done my own body count; and about Indians now living all over Canada, note well. More places abroad where Professor Bagh himself had travelled, boasting about it to his charges. *America, yes?* He’d dwelled on Indian history from the time of the Mughals, and the the British Raj. The Indian Mutiny in 1857, that first act of independence—what his students knew about. *I also knew about!*

Rahul grinned again, and the others in the middle of the class laughed, Rahul leading them on to it. But I kept spell-binding them, I believed. Rahul, well, baited me, “It’s about yourself?”

“Myself?”

He nodded. “You’re not really from India.”

“I am, ancestrally—”

“What’s *ancestrally?*”

“My grandparents...”

“Never mind grandparents,” hissed another student.

The girls tittered. They were making me doubt myself. What phenotype? I laughed back with them.

Mohit’s turn, this boy with a white-cuffed hand shooting up from the middle. Professor Bagh looked distressed. I winked, as if to say I knew students’ ways...in Canada.

“Where did they really come from?” Mohit pressed.

“Who...?”

“Your grandparents, from India...where?”

Rahul was insisting on the same, their being a pesky twosome?

“UP, er, Uttar Pradesh...and Madras,” I said, again hemming and hawing. Didn’t I know exactly where my grandparents actually came from? Not Bihar...and they were Bhojpuri-speaking? The feeling welling up...of past days and nights. Yes, that last ship!

Professor Bagh was aghast: his own impatience, not prescience, about his students’ ways. I passed a hand across my long hair, then to the sides of my face. “How did they get to...Carabby?” another boy asked.

“Eh?”

“Where you said you came from.”

“The Caribbean, d’you mean?”

My forebears in that ship rocking in mid-ocean. *Where’s Canada now?* “Yes-yes,” taunted Mohit with shocking reddish hair. Others in the class instinctively clapped their hands. The girls became less coy. “It’s all the same, no?” Rahul hissed. *Caribbean...Canada.* Not really India?

Professor Bagh wanted me to say more about the suffering meted out to my forebears...as the mood gripped me. But these students knew all about suffering. In the teeming streets, old and new quarters of Delhi with slums, and people jostling everywhere with newcomers entering the city every month, and new ghettos being formed—the students knew it all. *When will it end?*

Why did I want to burden them, these students, with more tales of suffering? It was what they also saw on the TV screen, and in Bollywood movies: and maybe some movies were just necessary distraction. Professor Bagh stifled a yawn.

A new tactic: tell them about other people, slaves originally brought from West Africa to

the West Indies and the Americas; and about how my forebears ended up living among them. *Real Carabby?*

But these students knew about slaves and former slaves in America; they watched American TV re-runs of the popular *Roots* drama series. Didn't they? Bagh might have also evoked images of people from the east coast of Africa, Ethiopia and Somalia mainly, who came to India from long ago; and now, many that came to study. Indeed about early traders...yes, the Arabs. *Ever heard about Nubia?*

The girls in the class fluffed hair round their attractively fair and darkish-brown faces. I wanted them to dwell on the horrific journey of the African slaves, the many thousands who were kept below deck, and some thrown overboard to lighten the ships' weight during heavy storms. The dreaded Middle Passage!

More students yawned, pinkish epiglottis flapping, ah. Bollywood being yet on their minds: the glamour, song-and-dance routines.

Why not? I kept up a serious mien, with my own long hair as I looked like a hippie, maybe. *Dream on!* Professor Bagh made a whirring noise. The students slowly dispelled the myths I carried in me, I sensed, including about the Hindu deities.

Professor Bagh forced a grin. I gesticulated. Rahul's eyes burned as he listened more attentively. Rohit appeared stoic. The girls heaved in; they took a deep interest now. About actual indenture experience?

Not let the past be done with? Bagh knew all along how his students would react to me and might have set them up to it, like a form of gamesmanship. Did he? Yes, they'd been waiting for one just like me to come; and those in the Lok Sabha also being in on it, maybe, because I actually came from Canada- no longer from Guyana and the West Indies?

Christ, I wasn't even Asian?

I imagined them asking why I wanted to be like them. And yes, why my forebears – *coolies*—not return to India when their indenture period had ended? Why did they give up on India after so many years in Carabby? *Why?*

Tell them about how hundreds of indentured labourers who actually returned “home”...but many said their former houses had been blown away by the monsoon; and they no longer had relatives who recognized them. *They were alienated...lost!* And slave ships and the dreaded Middle Passage yet with me.

Rahul and Rohit saw confusion on my face. *Oh?*

I tried laughing again. *I did.*

Everything became a blur, as another student: a tallish boy, Dinar, raised a hand. Solemn he appeared. “Yes?” I prompted.

“Have...you?”

The ocean’s waves rising. Dinar’s manner indicated he was not a believer; his large horn-rimmed glasses rested on a long angular face.

But Dinar was genuinely interested in the indenture system and hated the British Raj, I knew. “Have I...what?” I coaxed.

The entire class became rivetted as I talked on about what Africans experienced. Dinar yet made a face. The others did, too. I was having an impact, finally. What would they ask next, their interest piqued?

I heaved in. The entire class heaved in. Professor Bagh looked hopeful.

Dinar’s next question: “Have you ever been to...Woodstock?”

“Eh?” Really surprising me.

One or two girls chortled at the back of the class.

“Woodstock, the rock concert in New York?” Dinar unconsciously raised his voice.

“Oh, Woodstock,” I echoed.

Was this part of the plan, setting me up...for a fall? I was indeed an *outsider*. Who...the real interlocutor?

“Tell us!”

“D’you mean...if I was really there, with a rock band?” I tried humouring Dinar. Professor Bagh grinned.

“Yes-yes,” came a clamour.

Red in the face I was, because of embarrassment. Before I could say *no*, another question came at me: “Have you met Pink Floyd?”

And another: “Have you met him with other rock-stars at Woodstock—like guitarist Jimmy Hendrix?”

The Rolling Stones and the Beatles, all being in the mix.

I started denying everything—what I knew, or believed. My mind in a whirl. Again I tried to imagine the indenture system and slavery, yet like fiction I kept peddling. The students were now insistent about Pink Floyd and Jimmy Hendrix, like young people everywhere would no doubt.

I kept on talking...about my grandfather as a young boy being on that last ship coming through the *kala pani*. Again I heaved in. Yes, how *the young boy* had trembled as the waves rose higher, and his distraught parents tried comforting him; but not comforting themselves?

Professor Bagh turned his head around. *He did*.

Woodstock: that mammoth gathering not far from New York City when rock-and-roll music ruled the day...ruled the world! Joan Baez, Bob Dylan. Peace signs fluttered as Beatniks with long hair and flaunting their unabashed free love, *dig?* My hand went to my own long hair. Odd, I saw these students being there, too...as if time didn't matter.

And an Indian maharishi spreading, well, peace and love? *Groovy*.

I summoned up more rock musicians. Blues artists. Jazz aficionados. My coming from Canada, the US, Europe, but not India?

Riffing...with jazz fans, in New Orleans...then being back in the Carabby with Bob Marley and reggae rhythms, soca, and chutney. Indian and African elements mixed in: the best of Trinidadian Sundar Popo-- like what these Delhi students wanted to hear.

Professor Bagh looked confused, if not disappointed.

Everyone moving north...west...not East? Not to the Caribby where I said I indeed came from. *Nor Canada?* Bhangra-craze in Trinidad and Guyana mixed in with other hybrid sounds...new renditions or arrangements occurring in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal.

Where...Canada? I tried keeping up with the different beats. *What's really Indie?* But India compelled me--to be here...but being nowhere.

A plump-looking girl with large glasses nestling her nose asked: "Is it true what you said about your grandfather?" She was now on my side. So unlike Dinar and the others, she was. She wanted to really know about my grandfather...who was more than a *coolie*; and, who did he grow up to be?

Tell her more details of the ship he'd been in; and was it called the *SS Whitby*...not *SS Lord Elgin*? How did my grandfather as a young boy react as waves rose really high and the ship struggled through the "dark waters"? *Did I ask him about it?*

Beena—the bespectacled girl—looked long at me. She did! And the ship’s captain and his mates were overbearing types? Tight-lipped as the English always were, see--like the one named Lord Mountbatten!

But Professor Bagh might have been waiting for this moment--the real lesson he no doubt wanted to convey to his students.

Odd, I imagined myself as a rock star performing at another Woodstock musical—like something trumped up...as I mixed in American sugar-plantation Muddy Waters and his moody blues. Strange, I also unconsciously thought of Canada’s boreal forests, and being face-to-face with a bear in the Lake Superior region. But I was yet in one spot, on firm ground.

Believe me!

Beena observed me, thinking she was literally on a moving-away ship...and looking at me from the deck as I was left alone in India...as the waves rose higher. The entire class was the ship’s crew, see.

“Come with us,” Dinar called out, as a foghorn noise rose; he was the Captain’s mate, tall as he looked. Rahul also called out. So did Rohit and the others. But only Beena understood my true feelings.

Professor Bagh again nodded. Yes, everyone in the crew was taking their cue from him and from those in the Lok Sabha. Woodstock I yet struggled with...here in India. And maybe I was letting the kids down by not joining them on their going-away ship--being in their own kala pani. I was betraying them, which they weren’t expecting. And indeed, I didn’t want them to cross the *dark waters*, as my forbears had done. But the ship inexorably kept going, leaving me stranded alone...in India.

I looked far into the horizon. *Being where...actually?*

Nowhere...but with those in the Lok Sabha, I imagined--as waves rose higher. See, now I was looking past Calcutta and the Bay of Bengal...then, Mumbai and the Arabian Sea. Unconsciously I touched my long hair. *Canada...calling!* New instincts because of what I now experienced, and my seeing India as a land empty of people. All the while I was here, alone, nowhere else.

BIO:

Cyril Dabydeen's books include *My Undiscovered Country* (Mosaic Press), *God's Spider* (Peepal Tree Press, UK), *My Multi-Ethnic Friends and Other Stories* (Guernica Editions, Toronto), and the anthology *Beyond Sangre Grande: Caribbean Writing Today* (Tsar/Mawenzi House, Toronto). Previous books include: *Jogging in Havana* (1992), *Black Jesus and Other Stories* (1996), *Berbice Crossing* (1997), *My Brahmin Days* (2000), *North of the Equator* (2001), *Play a Song Somebody: New and Selected Short Stories* (2003), *Imaginary Origins: New and Selected Poems* (2005), and the novel, *Drums of My Flesh*, 2007 (nominated for the IMPAC/Dublin Prize, and winner of the Guyana Prize for best novel). His work has appeared in over 60 literary magazines e.g. , *The Critical Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Warwick Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *The Fiddlehead*, and in the Heinemann, Oxford and Penguin Books of Caribbean Verse. He is a former Poet Laureate of Ottawa, Canada (1984-87). He has taught Creative Writing at the UofOttawa. He was born in Guyana, S. America.