The Meeting Pool

It was Somi's idea that we should meet at the pool in ten year's time.

'When we are men,' he said, 'we must come back to this place. Ten years from today, Rusty—at midday on the fifth of April 1964—we must return to the pool. No matter where we are, or what we are doing, or if we are married and have children, we must meet at the pool. Promise?'

'Promise,' I said.

'Promise,' said Anil.

It was a schoolboy's pledge, and made in deadly earnest. As boys, we usually mean the things we say. And so we shook hands on it, and dived back into the water.

The pool had been discovered by me a few months earlier. I remember that it was going to rain... I could see the rain moving across the foothills, and I could smell it on the breeze. But instead of turning homewards, I pushed my way through the leaves and brambles that grew across the forest path. I had heard the murmur of water at the bottom of the hill, and I wanted to see the water and touch it.

Sliding down a rock-face into a small ravine, I found the stream running over a bed of shingle. Water trickled down from the hillside, from amongst ferns and grasses and wild

primroses. The rocks beside the stream were smooth, and some of them were grey and some yellow. A small waterfall came down the rocks and formed a deep, round pool of applegreen water.

When I saw the pool, I turned and ran back to town because I wanted to tell the others.

Anil and Somi were my closest friends. Anil lived in a crowded lane off the Dilaram Bazaar. He was wild and a little dangerous, subject to moods and impulses, but he had a certain animal charm. Somi, on the other hand, was sensitive, gentle in his ways ; but in common with Anil he had a sense of fun and an instinct for adventure. They usually chose the adventures we were to have and I would just grumble and allow myself to be involved in them. But the pool was my own discovery, and I was proud of it.

'We'll call it Rusty's pool,' said Somi. 'And remember, it's a secret pool, no one else must know about it.'

I think it was the pool that brought us together more than anything else. Somi was a beautiful swimmer. He dived off rocks and went gliding about under the water like a long golden fish. Anil's legs and arms were very long, and he threshed about with much vigour but little skill. I could dive off a rock, too, but I usually landed on my stomach.

There were slim silver fish in the waters of the stream. At first we tried catching them with a line, but they soon acquired the art of taking the bait without being caught on the hook. Next we procured a bedsheet (Anil removed it from his mother's laundry), and we stretched it across one end of the stream ; but the fish wouldn't come anywhere near it. Finally, without telling us, Anil fetched a stick of gunpowder from a fireworks shop. Somi and I were startled out of an afternoon siesta by a flash across the water and a deafening explosion. Half the hillside tumbled into the pool, and so did Anil; but we got him out, along

with a good supply of stunned fish that were really too small to eat. Anil, however, didn't want all his work going to waste; so he roasted his fish over a fire and ate them by himself...including their tails.

The effects of the explosion gave Anil another idea...to enlarge our pool by building a dam across one end. This was accomplished with our combined labour. But we had chosen the season of the monsoon rains, and one day a torrent of water came rushing down the bed of the stream, bursting the dam and flooding us out of the ravine. Our clothes were carried away, and we had to wait until it was dark before slinking homewards stark naked. We kept to the darkest alleys, but Somi was spotted near a lamp-post. He simulated the stance of a naked fakir and began calling for alms, and finally slipped in through the backdoor of his house without being recognized.

Other activities at the pool included wrestling and buffalo-rides. We wrestled on a strip of sand that came down to the edge of the water, and rode on a couple of buffaloes that sometimes came to drink and wallow in the more muddy parts of the stream. We would sit astride the buffaloes, and kick and yell and urge them forward; but we were never able to move them. At best they would roll over on their backs, taking us with them into the soft mud.

It didn't really matter how muddy we got, because we had only to dive into the pool to wash off the mess. If it was possible to get out of our houses undetected at night, we would come to the pool and bathe by moonlight. We bathed silently, because the stillness and eeriness of the surrounding jungle seemed to discourage high spirits. We saw several snakes, which came out to feed on the frogs that spent the summer nights in full-throated song. An impassive owl occasionally watched us from the branch of a big sal tree. Sometimes Somi would sing in a deep,

pleasant voice; and we would float magnolia blossoms down the moonlit stream.

I don't remember how we finally broke up; it was hardly noticeable at the time. In spite of our pledge to return to the pool as grown men, we never really believed that we would go different ways, that we would be leaving the pool. After about a year, Somi passed his matriculation examination and entered a military school. When I saw him about three years ago, he was sporting a fierce and very military moustache. Shortly after Somi left school, Anil and his family went away to Delhi, and I did not see them again. I could not visualise Anil in any conventional occupation, he was so wild and unpredictable. And yet, sometimes I wondered... Those who are rather wild when they are young, often grow up to be respectable people; while the quiet, reserved ones turn out to be perfect hellions.

And what of the pool, and our pledge to come back after ten years?

In April I happened by chance to be in the same part of the country, and I decided that I at least would keep my part of the pledge. But I could not find the pool. I found the ravine, and the bed of shingle, but there was no water. The stream had changed its course, just as we had changed ours.

I waited in the ravine for two or three hours, but no one came. I suppose it was foolish of me to expect anyone. Somi must have been with his unit, Anil occupied with the business of living. Probably they both had families. I was the only one who hadn't really grown up.

I turned away disappointed, and with a dull ache in my heart. Friends, and day-dreams, and even forest pools must succumb to the inexorable, deceitful journey of Time.

But I hadn't gone far when I heard the splashing of water and the shouting of boys; and pushing my way through a thicket, I found another stream and another pool, and half-a-dozen boys splashing about in the water.

They did not see me, and I kept in the shadow of the trees and watched them play. But I didn't really see them. I was seeing Somi and Anil and the comfort-loving buffaloes. And I stood there for nearly an hour, a disembodied spirit, romping again in the shallows of our secret pool.

Green Parrots in a Cage

A man wearing a large yellow turban stood at the gate. He was a tall man, middle-aged and had burning black eyes set in a wheat-coloured face. He carried all his belongings, change of clothes, blanket and brass vessel, in a shapeless bag slung on his shoulder. He had two parrots for sale, he said.

'No thank you,' I said, feeling sorry for the birds. It was a beautiful day and the cage was too small for them.

The tiny hand of my son, held lightly within mine a minute ago was now clenched tight. I looked down at the curly head of the sturdy little boy, aged three years. He stood beside me, solemnly watching the antics of the green parrots as they jumped from perch to floor of the cage and climbed up to the roof by their red beaks and knobby claws. The parrots had wicked black eyes and tiny mischievous tongues that fascinated us.

The man with the large turban smiled at the boy and spun the cage around to show off the beauty of the young birds. He raised his brilliant eyes to look at me appealingly.

'I need the money,' he said 'for a ticket home.'

That year many people needed money to leave the town for home, wherever home was. From the cut of his homespun clothes, baggy jodhpurs tight at the knee and ankle

and an intriguing short tunic that flared up from a high tight bodice like a ballerina's skirt, the man's home probably was Kutch, not far from Hyderabad Sind. I gave him the money and wondered if I need take the cage with the two parrots since I too would be leaving town soon. But I was afraid the Kutchee might be tempted to spend more time to sell the birds all over again. It was unlikely that he would release them.

My son brought the cage in, proudly and confidently, holding it aloft and kept it on the marble-topped table in the verandah. For a long time he leaned against the table and looked at the parrots, love entering his heart for them.

Love swam openly in his large limpid eyes as he watched me feed the birds with a green chilli and ripe guava and fill the small bowl with water. I barely saved my finger being nipped by a sharp beak and was blowing on the skin of my knuckles, calling the parrots a few unpleasant names, when my son, surprised at my shocked reaction and my language, offered them his podgy little finger.

While I dressed and bandaged it, I explained the anger of the little green parrots imprisoned inside a small cage.

My son heard me and understood the meaning of my words but such pleading trembled on the young face that I postponed my idea of going up to the terrace to open the cage door. It was already late afternoon. There would be cats about the place, my mother warned me.

Living in the heart of the old city of Hyderabad in Sind the only tree in sight grew in the compound of the mosque across the narrow lane. A hundred pigeons and at least one peacock lived in that tree. Green parrots, I finally decided, needed a large garden.

I thought of our orchard on the outskirts of the town with its many fruit trees, the little pond with the ducks and the old gardener, Ramai, whose special hobby was to look after the birds and frighten away the marauding crows and kites.

It took me a month to go to that orchard. The situation without was still somewhat tense they told me. But I was confident that our horse carriage was well known in the city. I must have driven over that bit of road innumerable times and knew every house and shopkeeper on the way. I was sure no one could possibly want to hurt a young, visibly pregnant woman travelling with a small son and two parrots in a cage.

However, Din-Mohammed, who had been with us a long time, refused to take the risk. He insisted that the orchard was too far out of town and quite some distance from the bridge, being situated on the other side of the river Phuleili.

'Release the parrots here,' Dinu advised 'or give them to the Maulana.'

Before I could agree or say anything about the required fruit trees he went to the mosque and brought the Maulana to the gate.

I had watched the Maulana dissolve into tears the previous week saying goodbye to my grandmother and my mother. Both my grandmother and my mother had come to the house and into the neighbourhood of the mosque as brides, and now they were leaving, going across the border to make new homes on the other side.

The Maulana did not weep saying good-bye to me, but he rested a gnarled hand on my son's head and promised to look after our parrots. I saw the grief in his old grey-rimmed eyes. I turned my attention away from them, sliding my gaze across the narrow lane to look at the many strutting white pigeons, their tails spread out like fans, oblivious of what was happening around them. The peacock, with a bedraggled long tail sweeping the mud-baked floor of the compound, sat on a low branch emitting loud ugly cries. Stupid things, I thought. I shook my head.

'I have promised my son,' I said gently, 'that the parrots will be given an orchard, a garden with a lot of

fruit trees. They are wild birds and will fly away from you. Someone will catch them and put them in a cage again and sell them.'

I thanked the old Maulana and bade him to look after my father, who, as the head of the Hindu community had decided to stay on to see to the affairs of his people left behind.

It was late afternoon when we got to the orchard. Din-Mohammed had, more or less, taken to his bed after leaving my grandmother and my mother at the station, and could not bring himself to sit in the coachman's seat, much less see where he was going; the tears kept coming into his eyes and impairing his efficiency.

I took Khansahib, the second coachman, a young Pathan, tall and fierce of loyalty. He drove the carriage at an even fast pace, his eyes alert, my son sitting in his lap with whom he kept up a conversation full of gurgling laughter. I looked about me, at the familiar landmarks, filling my eyes with them, astounded that they would always be there and yet I might never see them again. It all seemed a bit difficult to accept this strange exile, something that took place only in stories of ancient times told to children by grandmothers on cosy winter evenings beside the fireside.

The gates of the orchard were open. There was no one about. We called out the gardener's name, my son, the Khansahib and I.

'Ramai,' we cried, 'arey Ramai, where are you gone?' we were answered by a heavy silence.

A late sun slanted across the lawns and partly lit some of the trees, as in a painting. For a long minute I stared around me trying not to mind the oppression of the silence, fighting the madness that was beginning to overwhelm me. I dropped to my knees and placed the palm of my hand on the green grass. It was not easy. Merely looking at the sheer beauty of the place made me want to weep.

'Ma,' said my son, coming to stand in front of me, his plump hands flat on my wet cheeks, 'you said the parrots will jump with joy at the sight of the fruit trees.'

'Yes, son,' I replied and got up to put the cage in the centre of the lawn. Gingerly I opened the tiny door afraid I might get nicked again. But the birds, sitting firmly on their perch stared at me warily, blinking their white eyelids like wise old men. I brought my son to sit on the edge of the lawn from where we could watch the parrots fly out.

We sat patiently for a long time. The birds would not trust themselves to step out. They sat inside, feeling safe within the familiarity of the bars. Like us, they too waited in silence.

Time and again I had seen one of the parrots knock itself silly against the same bars in a vain attempt to break the cage open, to tear the place down. I had wondered if, like me, she was expecting and in desperate need to build a nest. It had broken my heart to watch her frenzy. I asked myself if a parrot could be born in captivity, within the narrow confines of a small draughty cage. So intense had been her anguish I had been afraid she might burst a blood vessel.

And here they were, the little fools, sitting pretty inside their cage and politely declining to come out.

I raised my face skywards and saw, to my amazement, many parrots, hitherto hidden by the many-toned green foliage sitting on various branches. A green tree made an excellent camouflage.

When I looked down again both the parrots had come out, one lingering beside the cage for a possible refuge back in it at the first sign of danger. But the other, bolder one hopped off, surprised at this new freedom of movement, for it promptly stopped hopping and looked dazed, as if clobbered on the head. I smiled, and heard my son give a

chuckle of delight. The next minute the parrots were gone. It happened so quickly that to this day, when I try and recall the incident, I cannot make out how one moment they were there, distinct birds and friends of many weeks, and the next moment I could not see where they had gone, having so mingled with the leaves and the other members of their tribe. There was no farewell, no parting.

Feeling sad and now really scared of the silence and the shadows that thickened with each passing second, I took my son by the hand and hurried away, giving the desolate, empty cage a fleeting glance. Halfway across the second lawn, I gave in to my impulse, picked up the child and began to run towards the waiting horse carriage.

And suddenly I was glad to be out of the place, for now the orchard was no longer a thing of beauty. It had become eerie and frightening. The fruit trees did not house green parrots with laughing red beaks and twinkling black eyes, but goblins and spooks that jeered and booed at us as we sped on the driveway, the horse's hooves thunderous on the gravel.

The Portrait of a Lady

My grandmother, like everybody's grandmother, was an old woman. She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her. People said that she had once been young and pretty and had even had a husband, but that was hard to believe. My grandfather's portrait hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing-room. He wore a big turban and loose-fitting clothes. His long white beard covered the best part of his chest and he looked at least a hundred years old. He did not look the sort of person who would have a wife or children. He looked as if he could only have lots and lots of grandchildren. As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting. She often told us of the games she used to play as a child. That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.

She had always been short and fat and slightly bent. Her face was a criss-cross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere. No, we were certain she had always been as we had known her. Old, so terribly old that she could not have grown older, and had stayed at the same age for twenty years. She could never have been pretty; but she was always beautiful. She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to

balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary. Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer. Yes, she was beautiful. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.

My grandmother and I were good friends. My parents left me with her when they went to live in the city and we were constantly together. She used to wake me up in the morning and get me ready for school. She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart. I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it. Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink pot and a reed pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me. After a breakfast of a thick, stale chapatti with a little butter and sugar spread on it, we went to school. She carried several stale chapatties with her for the village dogs.

My grandmother always went to school with me because the school was attached to the temple. The priest taught us the alphabet and the morning prayer. While the children sat in rows on either side of the verandah singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures. When we had both finished, we would walk back together. This time the village dogs would meet us at the temple door. They followed us to our home growling and fighting with each other for the chapatties we threw to them.

When my parents were comfortably settled in the city, they sent for us. That was a turning-point in our friendship. Although we shared the same room, my grandmother no longer came to school with me. I used to go to an English school in a motor bus. There were no dogs in the

streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.

As the years rolled by we saw less of each other. For some time she continued to wake me up and get me ready for school. When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me. I would tell her English words and little things of western science and learning, the law of gravity, Archimedes' principle, the world being round, etc. This made her unhappy. She could not help me with my lessons. She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures. One day I announced that we were being given music lessons. She was very disturbed. To her music had lewd associations. It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk. She said nothing but her silence meant disapproval. She rarely talked to me after that.

When I went up to University, I was given a room of my own. The common link of friendship was snapped. My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation. She rarely left her spinning wheel to talk to anyone. From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Only in the afternoon she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings. Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders. Some even sat on her head. She smiled but never shoo'd them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.

When I decided to go abroad for further studies, I was sure my grandmother would be upset. I would be away for five years, and at her age one could never tell. But my grandmother could. She was not even sentimental. She came to leave me at the railway station but did not talk or

show any emotion. Her lips moved in prayer, her mind was lost in prayer. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary. Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.

But that was not so. After five years I came back home and was met by her at the station. She did not look a day older. She still had no time for words, and while she clasped me in her arms I could hear her reciting her prayer. Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.

In the evening a change came over her. She did not pray. She collected the women of the neighbourhood, got an old drum and started to sing. For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors.[3] We had to persuade her to stop to avoid overstraining. That was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.

The next morning she was taken ill. It was a mild fever and the doctor told us that it would go. But my grandmother thought differently. She told us that her end was near. She said that, since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us.

We protested. But she ignored our protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads. Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.

We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud. After a few hours of mourning we left her alone to make arrangements for her funeral.

In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated. The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a blaze of golden light. We stopped half-way in the courtyard. All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirruping. We felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother's corpse off, they flew away quietly. Next morning the sweeper swept the bread crumbs into the dust bin.