“Stones and Sticks and Suchlike” By Sunil Badami

http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2016/05/lms_20160510_0923.mp3

I've been called a lot of things. Especially growing up, being one of only three Indian kids at school, the others being my brother and a squeaky-voiced boy whose name escapes me now. Curry-muncher, towel-head, abo, coon, boong, darkie, nig-nog,golliwog. 'Black' followed by any suitable or just thunk-up epithet. Often all at once, accompanied by a Chinese burn or dead-leg.

My mother would always says, 'Stones and sticks and suck-like can only shake your skeletons. Just rise over it!' Which was even more irritating than if it had been said correctly. She was right, though - after being called anything and everything enough times, i stopped wincing. Even for dead-legs. 'Ya black bastard; kids would say affectionately, and i'd take it good-naturedly. Didn't want to appear a bad sport - especially when I wasn't any good at any sport at all.

But the one thing that always got under my skin was my own name. *Sunil*. My mother and Indian relatives pronounce it *'Soo-neel*'; my own broad accent makes it *'Sir-neil.'*

SUN-ill, Soon-ull, San-eel, I've heard 'em all. 'Sunil? Like *senile*?' Or that old playground favourite: 'Sunil? Like banana peel?' If i had a dollar for every time, how many rupees would that me?

Naturally, growing up, I didn't want to be a nigger, a coon, a darkie. I didn't feel 'black' anything. I just wanted to fit in.

'Why dontcha wash the black off, ya dirty black bastard?' playground wits would yell. And sometimes their parents too, although always with a *affectionate* chuckle. 'Perhaps if you wash hard enough, it'll come orf?'

And I did once, too: scrubbing my right arm with the floor brush till tiny spots of blood started weeping into the sink, discovering nothing but angry blooming red underneath. 'We're all pink on the inside, aren't we?' the day nurse at my mother's surgery said kindly afterwards, as though it were some kind of consolation, despite rubbing me with stingy alcohol. I wondered how Michael Jackson had managed it.

My father, who'd run off with one of the nurses at his hospital, hated Indians. He thought they were vulgar and ill mannered, unlike him and his new wife, who'd never been to India. 'Uncle-uncles and aunty-aunties,' he called them, laughing at the way we called them Uncle or Aunty, laughing even harder at their flared trousers and flat feet spilling out of sandals after his new wife had thrown out his flares and sandals and bought him a fashionable new Western wardrobe.

Still, he had to have rice and my stepmother's watery Clive of Indian dhal once a week - but only once a week, because according to her, curry stank the house out. She was a formidable housekeeper - probably more pathological than formidable - and their house always seemed too neat to be alive: the magazines at right angles to the coffee-table edges, the paintings all a similarly blurry pastel, everything reeking of furniture spray and air freshener.

My mother's house, on the other hand, was always messy, always redolent of the trinity that jostles you when you enter an Indian home: not Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva, but asafoetida, cumin and incense. And there was always a crowd in our house after my father left, all part of the same little South Indian clique who'd known each other since medical school, bearing saris, curries, sympathy and gossip. (Until we finally went back to India, I was convinced all grown-up Indians were general practitioners with degrees from Kasturba Medical College, Manipal University, Mangalore, Karnataka).

On hot, interminable Sunday afternoons everyone would gather in our house: the uncles setting up with their cards, little buckets full of change and plastic bankers' visors in the dining room, smoking fat, acrid cigars, telling bawdy jokes in Kannada - which, even if I could speak it, I wouldn't have understood anyway.

And the aunties in the kitchen, rolling puri atta into little balls with deft hands, their bagles jangling, before flinging them into hot woks, pushing children out of the way as those nuggets bloomed and swelled into crisp balloons. All talking frantically and loudly in English, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani: every sentence a masala of different vocabularies. And all talking about the one thing that interested them most: their children. 'Rahul is come first in his class, *hunh!He has state rank.*' 'Sangeetha is champion of tennis club, *nah*!' 'Preeti has finished her internship, and now only she's deciding between ortho or cardio.' 'When's she getting married, *nah*? I know a boy....'

When they weren't clucking over their children, they'd analyse their names' meanings. *Abby* meant fearless. *Gourangi*, wheatish complexion. *Rajesh*, KIng of the Gods - or God of KIngs. *Anant*, truth. *Padma*, lotus. As too *Rajiv*, *Padma*, *Pushpa* and *Arvind*. 'Flower-power babies,' my mother joked.

We, the above-discussed children, would try our luck near the wok, stealing puri flakes fallen out of the oil while dodging the aunties' grinding fingers as they tried to pinch our cheeks. Or taking pappadums or chaklis - crunchy wheel-shaped chickpea snacks - to our friends in the backyard (with an extra one for our troubles of course). We'd loll about, wishing for it to end: this endless unintelligible chatter, wishing we were somewhere else, wishing we were someone else. All or Aussie friends would probably be having barbecues - something unimaginable for us and our strictly vegetarian parents. And they

wouldn't have to translate everything into English in their heads, then back again before answering.

There were two boys, the Balgis, whose names were Jason and Andrew. I couldn't believe their luck. Sure, they looked Indian, but nobody ever got *their* namer wrong. Even my little brother had a Western name: *Monty*. His real name was Sumant, but when he was born, I was too young to say it properly. Mont became Monty. I stayed Senile.

I couldn't stand it: it was hard enough not being able to catch, let alone being a darkie. If I couldn't *be* less black, surely I could get a name that made me *feel* less black? If Sumant was Monty, why couldn't I be- well, *Nile*?

Neil. I liked it: it sounded like an astronaut's name. It sounded grown-up. We'd just started cursive writing at school, and I'd practise my new name for hours. Neil. Neil Badami. My name's Badami. Neil Badami. *The Neilster*. I told people to call me Neil, and nobody laughed like they did when I told them my real - I mean my other - name. Neil seemed to fit their mouths better, and I could feel their approval at the effort I was making to fit in. Still couldn't catch a cricket ball, though I was working on it.

At home, I was Sunil, trying not to eat my dhal with my left hand, trying to get my mouth around tongue-twisting Venkateshwara bhajjans at morning puja. In the real world, in the brilliant universe of my imagination, I was Neil. I fitted in. I scored a double century i n the Ashes. I could fly, dropping water bombs on playground bullies called Wesley and Boyd. Neil, like *unreal*!

Which would've been fine, until the afternoon my best friend, Kieran ('It's Indian name, no?' said my mother, thinking of *Kiran*, meaning the ray of light), started laughing about Neil trying to catch the ball Mark Keary'd belted for six

past the shelter sheds at lunch, coming a cropper on the handball courts. Despite Neil frantically trying to shoosh him in the back seat.

'Who's this Neil?' my mother asked. Then, seeing everything from the rear-view mirror, saying nothing. Even Kieran got it, as the car swelled with a hot puri silence. 'See ya, Ne - um, *mate*,' he said, scrambling out of the car. That silence bubbled all the way home, the steam threatening to burst, and I knew, as all children do, that's it's when your mother *doesn't* shout that you're in really big trouble.

When we got home, my mother sent Monty out to play, then sat me down in the kitchen. 'What is this?' she said, handing me a bowl of curds and sugar that somehow didn't taste quite as sweet as usual. 'Changing your name? Being a *Neil*?' She spat my unreal new name out like something bitter and stringy, too difficult to swallow.

'It's just that - I - um, I hate it. Sunil. It's too hard to say. It's too - it's too *Indian*!'

My mother looked out the window, at the bare backyard, the yellow tips of the grass, unmowed since Dad left, barely flickering in the yellow heat, the shy tops of the mango tree she'd planted peeking out over the weedy ruins. 'But Sunil is a beautiful name,' she said quietly, distantly.

'What's it mean, then?' I asked. In all the times I'd snuck into the kitchen and heard snatches of the name game, I'd never heard my name being explained. I knew heaps of Rajes, loads of Madhus, but nobody else with my name (apart, of course, from Sunil Gavaskar, the cricket player).

Something lit up in her eyes, faint but fierce. She took both my arms, holding them tight with her pinchy fingers. 'Sunil - beautiful name! You know Lord Shiva, God of Destruction?'

I nodded, a little afraid. Like fearful black Kali, Shiva frightened me, with his unkepmt hair, draped in leopard skins, a snake writhing round his neck, his turbulent temper reminding me of my father. Why couldn't our family worship Krishna, always laughing, always up to mischief?

But my mother was warming up to it, the explanation of my name. 'And where does Lord Shiva live?'

'On top of Mount Everest,' I muttered.

'Yes, highest mountain in the world - the world! - in India. Indian mountain,' she said proudly. 'And Sunil is breeze that blows at sunset on Shiva's birthday once every thousand years, blowing snow from his head-top into ice cave below, where the snow melts and flows down mountain and becomes what?'

'I dunno.'

She looked at me witheringly. 'Holy Ganga only, *poda*!' She slapped my thigh, looking triumphant. 'And you want to change this name to be a - a *Neil*?' She flicked her wrist in that contemptuous way only Indians can. 'Neil is what you do in temple to gods. You want to Neil for everyone else, too? Sunil is best name ever! Sunil is name I always wanted my first-born son to have. And you? Who are you? *What* are you? You should be proud!'

She smiled and sat back, her logic as round and delectable as a hot chakli.

I shifted a little under the weight of that, but it seemed to fit. As did my name, even though it might take some growing into.

'So?' my mother said after I'd finished my curds.

'It's a good name, I guess,' I said, smiling a little.

"*Best* name!' she cried, "First-class name!'

'Sure.' I didn't want to concede too much; if I allowed she was right this time, I'd hear about it for a long time to come. Like most Indian mothers, she had an elephantine memory for recipes, relations, festivals - and for being right. I could be living this down for years.

Even if I still found it hard to tie my Indian appearance to my Australia feeling (eventually settling for an awkwardly knotted hyphen to make me Indian-Australia or Australian-Indian, depending on the day), I didn't worry so much about my name anymore. No matter how people said it, I didn't wince: I knew what it meant. And when someone kindly said, ' SUN-el, that's an interesting name! What's that mean, then?' I'd usually proudly oblige (although I did once reply, ' Only if you tell me what Barbara means.).

And, although I hated to admit it them, my mother was right: I *was* proud. Even when, after finding out where i was *really* from, people tried their terrible Petter Sellers birdy-num-num impersonations; even when they made snide comments about immigrants on the train, loud enough for us to hear; even though no matter how deliberately I said my name, they still mangled it, it mother. All those Kylies and Brents and Kimbaleahs could keep their ordinary, unimaginative monikers: I had a name that had its own story, its own place: a name I shared with nobody, apart from the Little Master. Every roll call, I felt sorry

for Matthews B,C and H; everyone knew who *I* was. Every time someone mispronounced my singular name, I saw Shiva, serene and powerful on his distant peak, flesh-coloured breeze blowing the Ganges out of his hair

Years later, in a Bangalore bookshop, my future wife came across a book of Indian children's names.

'Do you think you're in here?' she asked.

'Are you joking?' I replied. 'I bet there's like a whole chapter or something - what with Mount Everest, the ice cave, Shiva's birthday, the Ganges and all that...'

It was a thick book with lots of names - many of which meat lotus. Past *Sudesha*, through *Sunam* and S*ujat, Sujit, Sukhwant, Sumitr, Sunay,* we finally got to *Sunil*.

It wasn't a paragraph, let alone a chapter. Just two little words: dark one.