

# UNIT I

## THE SILVER LINING

— Chaman Nahal

This piece of literary is written by an Indian English novelist Chaman Nahal (1927 - 2013). He won a 'Sahitya Akademi Award' in 1977 for his work 'Azadi'. Other novels written by him are 'My True Faces' (1973), 'Into Another Dawn' (1977), 'The English Queens' (1979).

'The Silver Lining' describes the story of a handicapped child and their parents' unhappy moments, until a guest who is similarly handicapped brings a ray of hope into their child's life. His views about judging a man's outward appearance is that 'A happy man who puts on an appearance of happiness may be crushed deeply within; while an idiot may be truly happy.'

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It is difficult to assess the range and quality of human emotions. Those with smiling, evergreen faces may have wormlike grieves gnawing at their existence, and a dull, idiotic-looking person may be blissfully happy. Life is a strange, humdrum affair, where even a few moments of peace snatched should be gratefully acknowledged.

I had recently the very pleasant experience of staying at a private Guest House in one of the hill-resorts. A friend of mine had earlier warmly recommended the place to me, claiming for it all the facilities which most of these boarding-houses advertise but generally lack. It was centrally situated-close to the post-office, close to the market, close to the bus stand-and was yet isolated and away from the common din. There were pleasant views to be had from there, it had an excellent cuisine, and was well looked after by one of the most charming hostesses one could find anywhere.

I discovered that the place exactly corresponded to the details described. But it was the hostess, particularly, and her husband and their little daughter who really proved to be the centre of attraction to me.

The lady belonged to the South, though she had married a North Indian. She was rather dark, but had a very pleasant face, all smiles and kindness. The husband was a huge, swarthy man, with large, bony limbs. He was extremely well-mannered and there was not a trace of that un-tempered roughness which one finds in most men hailing from the North.

Mrs. Bhandari, the landlady, took me in hand the moment I arrived. She looked after my luggage, gave instructions regarding my room, had a cup of delicious coffee improvised in no time, and then put me at my ease by talking to me informally about myself and my visit. I was completely won over by the family. It appeared as if I had known them for years.

While thus chatting with the two of them, I became aware of the slightly-built girl hiding behind the settee. She must have been about eight, and was sweet and charming like her mother. Her hair was closely cropped, with a straight fringe across the forehead, in Chinese fashion. She was in jeans and, in here half-sleeved loose jersey and high boots, looked a miniature jungle queen. But she was behaving a bit too timidly for one, and was trying to avoid me.

I couldn't help smiling. I saw that she was staring at me. I said, 'What's your name?' and beckoned to her to come to me.

The girl became immediately self-conscious, shook her head, and stood where she was.

I called once more, 'Hello! Come here, my dear.'

She blushed and again shook her head. After a second, she ran out. I thought I saw tears in her eyes.

I suddenly became aware of an awkward pause in the room, and, turning to look at the Bhandaris, I discovered that both of them were frowning, a painful look on their faces. Mr. Bhandari squeezed the arm of his wife, and said, apologetically, 'I'm sorry, Mr. Dhanda. You see, our daughter cannot hear anything, nor speak. That's why she didn't come to you.'

I gasped and muttered something about being sorry. I became confused and did not know what more to say. I was feeling ashamed at my forwardness with a child who was obviously not in a position to respond to my overtures of friendship. I vaguely felt I had wronged her and her parents.

It did not take me long to see that this was a situation the poor parents had to put up with almost daily. For every day one or two guests left and new ones came along. And, at the very first meeting, or soon afterwards, they would run into the child, be fascinated by her charm and beauty, and want to talk to her, to pat her, and so on and so forth. Every time it would result in the child silently smiling, sighing and withdrawing, leaving looks of agony on the faces of her parents. Often, it would lead to lengthy explanations as to how the calamity had come about, for many of the inquisitive visitors liked to know if it was from birth, or the result of an accident, whether anyone else in the family suffered from a similar disability; and if any treatment was being given.

The queries were answered by the parents haltingly and with obvious anguish. What struck me as the worst part of the situation was that the girl would be often gravely looking on, her eyes aghast with horror and self-pity, aware that she was the topic of discussion. She had no other pastime than to run around the house, or play with the servants. She did not go to school as there was none there to cater for her needs. They had tried to teach her at home, but without success. She could only hear faintly, without feeling much, when one shouted close to her ears; and she could speak nothing except utter animal-like cries of happiness and sorrow; or say crudely such words as 'ma-ma' or 'unc-ll'. All her other communications were confined to gestures with her hands, which brought a fleeting sensation of torture to her whole being when one failed to follow what she was saying.

To save the child from such repeated humiliation, I one day suggested something to the Bhandaris which the parents, after some trepidation, agreed to try. We decided to have bits of paper typed, and to hand over one of these chits, duly sealed in a cover, to every new visitor as soon as he entered the Guest House. The text of the chit ran: 'Our daughter is deaf and dumb. You may hurt her by trying to be friendly too soon, as she can neither understand nor reply to you kind words. You are requested to please give her time to approach you and make your acquaintance. Thank you.'

A line to the effect that they might be spared questions about her was removed by Mrs. Bhandari on the plea that it would not be compatible with her spirit of hospitality. As it was, she felt the note was not a very kind one to be given to people who were going to make her Guest House their temporary home. But she gave consent to save the girl the untold misery and helplessness she experienced every time a stranger approached her.

The ruse worked well, even beyond our expectations. Though a few sympathetic questions were still put to the parents, the poor child was spared. Later, the girl herself slowly became intimate with many of the guests. The Bhandaris felt relieved, and thought that at least one of their problems was temporarily solved.

But they had a strange visitor one day.

It was late in the afternoon and I was talking to the landlord about some packed lunch that I needed the next day-I was planning a short excursion, by myself, to a group of caves nearby. The landlord was in a hurry, arranging things for a new guest who had booked a room for the season and was supposed to be moving in any moment-arriving by the Mail train.

And sure enough, soon a young man came in, a porter carrying his luggage. He was barely twenty-five, clad in an ill-fitting tweed suit, with drooping shoulders and wide trouser-bottoms. Because of the journey, he looked untidy, his hair, his necktie, his shoes-all unkempt and needing attention. But he had a cheerful face and jet-black eyes sparkling with vitality.

Mr. Bhandari stepped forward and asked, 'Mr. David, I presume?'

The young man looked closely at his face, smiled and nodded.

'Room No. 18, please. Everything is ready.'

The young man again looked at him, smiled and nodded. He paid the porter, who bowed low-for he was not asked to return the change-and disappeared. The young man gave me a brief, friendly look and sat before a huge book, which the landlord had pushed before him, making the necessary entries about himself and his intended stay.

At this time, he discovered the sealed envelope containing the typed chit lying on the table, addressed to him by name. He took the cover and tore it open. This coincided with the entry of the landlady into the room. She hurriedly asked her husband if this was the new guest, and, having received confirmation, came forward and shook hands with the young man.

'Did you have a nice journey, Mr. David?' she asked, with her sweet smile.

The young man smiled and nodded nonchalantly, as if to say, 'Well, neither very pleasant nor very unpleasant.'

'Would you like to have hot bath immediately or tea first?'

The young man pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders obviously implying that one would be as good as the other and that he had no preferences.

Both the landlord and the landlady were by now slightly disconcerted by what they inferred to be their guest's pride and arrogance, since he had not even deigned to reply adequately to their polite enquiries.

The young man, meanwhile, took out the typed chit and started reading it. As soon as he had gone through it, he looked around, astonished. The little girl, Promodni, was at the moment playing in the courtyard. We could see her sitting near the flower-beds. The young man looked at all of us with a smile and darted out towards her.

'Now this is very strange!' Mrs. Bhandari cried out in protest, 'How rude he is!'

'He shouldn't have ignored our request like this,' the landlord put in, more mildly.

I, too, was a bit upset. For it was obvious that our effort to save Promodni's embarrassment from strangers was going to fail in this instance.

After a few moments, we all walked out to the verandah, and I was apprehensive of that impending look of anguish on the faces of the parents and the child.

The scene that confronted us was something we least expected to see.

The strange young man was reclining on the grassy ground and Promodni was sitting on his lap. He was showing her the flowers.

And suddenly, like the sound of a gun exploding, the shrill animal-like laughter of Promodni pierced the air.

The parents looked at each other with wonder and amazement.

'Our daughter has not laughed like this for years!' Mrs. Bhandari said.

Curious, we watched the two of them who were now walking towards us hand in hand. Promodni ran to her mother and danced about her with joy. She made her queer sounds of 'ma-ma! ma-ma!' and wildly pointed to the young man.

It was Mr. David who came to our rescue.

We soon realized that he was deaf and dumb, too!

His strange, ambiguous silences, his sudden rush for the girl on reading the note – all became instantly clear to us. It took us time to digest the news. And then, both parents broke into incoherent statements of profuse apologies that they had not noticed it earlier. Imagining the type of man they were talking to, they spoke in half-sentences and tried to convey the rest through gestures. But the young man had not the slightest difficulty in understanding them: he appeared to read their lips. He gracefully acknowledged their warmth and either nodded or shook his head in reply. For more complicated and lengthy answers, he used pen and paper.

The next day, Mrs. Bhandari was full of news. She talked as she had never talked before. She mentioned the stranger and the plans for the betterment of Promodni he had outlined to her and her husband. There were schools for such people, he had told them, though they were beyond most people's means. He had himself been educated in one such institution abroad; and had now returned to India to render the same useful service to others, by starting a school here. She almost broke down with gratitude when she said that he had agreed to accept Promodni as his first pupil. He had emphatically stated that the girl could, in course of time, live almost as normal a life as any one of us who had the powers of hearing and of speech.

Mrs Bhandari laughed like a carefree girl. She gave us an extra helping of jam and butter and honey at the table. She looked the happiest woman in the world.

## Glossary

- i. Humdrum — dull, boring, lacking excitement
- ii. Din — loud noise or commotion
- iii. Swarthy — dark skinned
- iv. Calamity — an event resulting in a great loss
- v. Nonchalantly — casually calm and relaxed
- vi. Deigned — to do despite a perceived affront to one's dignity
- vii. Impending — approaching, coming close
- viii. Ambiguous — vague, unclear
- ix. Incoherent — not logically connected, lacking coherence
- x. Profuse — in abundance or great quantity



## UNIT II

### THE TURTLE

— Pudalik Naik

Pundalik Narayan Naik (born 1952) is a Konkani-language poet, short-story writer, novelist, playwright, and screenwriter from Goa. He has 40 books and two films to his credit. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in Konkani for his work, Chowrang, in 1984, by Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. He was awarded the Gomant Sharda Puraskar for Lifetime Achievement in 2010. The story 'The Turtle' features in an anthology of short stories 'Ferry Crossing' edited by Manohar Shetty. This anthology introduces us to the true Goa, a place rich in history and tradition where the business of living is as serious and humdrum as it is anywhere else. Pundalik Naik in his story speaks of the humiliation of poverty, movingly described through his character Vasu, who is a poor fisherman.

As soon as Vasu stepped into the village the children crowded round him, yelling, 'Turtle! He's brought a turtle! Vasukaka has brought a' turtle!' Normally no one paid much attention to the children. But this time the word 'turtle' caught everyone's ears. Godmausi, who was shipping off the heads of dried shrimps, leaned over to get a better look. Shantabai's new daughter-in-law paused with her foot on the pedal of the sewing machine and poked her head out of the window. They stared from doors and windows, then out they came from every house to mill around Vasu, to goggle at the object in his arms. "It's ages since anyone brought a turtle to the Kharvadda," they breathed.

Vasu pushed his way into the house and gently lowered his burden to the floor. The turtle drew in its flippers at once, and like an insect retreating into its hole, its head withdrew into its shell. Everyone crowded round the creature, gazing at it in wonder. Shantabai's daughter-in-law pushed her way through the awestruck children, straining to get a better look. Most of them had never seen a turtle before

and those who expected to see a little creature, like a tortoise perhaps, were quite taken aback by its size. For the children especially it was as exciting as the first time they had set eyes on an elephant. A few people prodded the shell gingerly to see if it was hard or soft. Through all this the earth-coloured creature lay motionless on the ground.

Vasu leant against the wall, nursing his aching arm. He'd set out in his canoe early that morning, and as he let out the line for the first time he hadn't forgotten to say a prayer to his family deity. He'd baited the hook and dropped the line over-board, waiting patiently in the drifting canoe, but though morning passed and the afternoon sun began to scorch his back, not a single fish nibbled at the line. He had grown tired of the wait and was about to dismantle the line when he felt a sudden tug. Vasu tried to pull the line in and to hoist the fish on to the boat but he had to strain every muscle and use all his skill to remain in control. As one of the best fishermen of Kharvaddo and a descendant of generations of fisher-folk, Vasu was well acquainted with the behaviour of different types of fish. But what sort of fish was this, he said to himself, as he struggled to pull it in. Finally, after a hard struggle, he managed to heave the catch on to the canoe, which tilted dangerously to one side. Vasu stared in amazement at the turtle that lay in the boat. He inspected his bleeding hand, bitten deep by the fishing line, and wiped his sweating brow. He'd seen bigger specimens than this one, he reflected, but he couldn't remember anyone having caught such a large turtle on a line ever before. His father had netted a turtle once and he'd brought it home, much to the delight of everyone in Kharvaddo. People had streamed in to take a look at the creature much as they did to see the Ganesh idols on Chavathi. The house was decorated as though for a great puja as the turtle was worshipped and then taken out in a procession before it was released into the sea.

Vasu could barely remember all this, but his father had never tired of repeating the whole story, of how he had begun to prosper after that event, winning the fishing rights to the village pond. The catch was always plentiful and money seemed to flow in. It was around this time that Vasu's father had arranged Vasu's marriage with a lot of pomp and show, but he hadn't lived very long after that. Things were very different now. It was an impoverished existence for Vasu, his wife and their two-year-old son.

His wife beckoned him into the house and he followed her, not quite sure what he ought to say.

"What shall I cook now?" she asked.

"I caught that turtle. Nothing else. If I'd caught anything else I'd have got some money. In fact, I'd told Dambaab I'd get some fish for him.'

"And you brought that turtle?"

"I had to. I caught it on the line, didn't I?"

"You could have sold it. Surely someone would have paid four or five rupees for it. At least we wouldn't have to worry about food for a couple of days! What's wrong with you?"

Vasu was aghast. "A turtle is sacred to us fisher-folk. Have you ever heard of any self-respecting fisher man selling a turtle?"

But she was more concerned about the empty vessel on the hearth and nothing he could possibly say would affect her. All his explanations were like streams of water flowing from an upturned pot. Quite beside himself with rage, Vasu began to rain blows on the hapless woman.

"What sort of a woman is this!" he cursed. 'She has no respect for tradition. How many years is it since anyone caught a turtle, a sure sign of good fortune. How many people must be envying me today! Who knows, things may change like they did for my father. Money might flow in again! Maybe we can get new clothes and enough food to eat. Can one tell what lies ahead? Perhaps that is why I caught this turtle today; perhaps it is an indication of good fortune. . . and this' wife of mine! She's not fit to be the wife of a self-respecting fisherman! Sell the turtle for four or five rupees, she says!

Suddenly he remembered those woodcutters sawing planks from the jackfruit tree in Dambaab's field. They'd stopped their work as he passed by with the turtle in his arms.

"Will you sell that?" they'd asked.

"It's a turtle!" he had retorted scathingly. He had wanted to say much more: Does a fisherman ever sell a turtle? Would you ever sell the gods that you worship? But he had managed to hold his tongue.

"Look, we'll give you four or five rupees for that," they'd offered, drooling at the sight of the meat. But Vasu had walked on without a backward glance. His irritation had mounted with the heat of the noonday sun, his feet burned in the hot red dust

and the voices of the woodcutters grated on his nerves as they asked him again and again to sell the turtle.

"Has the puja been done?"

Vasu came back to his senses. There were two elderly men from the village standing before him.

They placed the turtle ceremoniously on a platform and decorated it in a manner fit for worship. The children were dispatched to fetch flowers. Meanwhile Vasu had a bath at the well, and as he dried himself he told his wife that he was going to worship the turtle, half expecting her to provoke another lengthy argument. But his wife merely indicated that everything he needed for the rituals was laid out already.

"What about the prasad?" she asked quietly.

"Prepare something from that coconut left over from yesterday," he said. He then performed an elaborate puja, worshipping the turtle with all the rituals normally reserved for the deity, in the inner sanctum of the house. Prasad was distributed to the children and everyone dispersed, only to reassemble at twilight to gape at the turtle all over again.

In the neighbouring houses fireplaces were lit to prepare the evening meal. But in Vasu's kitchen no fire had been lit since morning. His wife sat leaning against the wall, silently immersed in mending a fishing net. The child sat beside the turtle as it had done all day. Vasu squatted on his haunches with his head in his hands, hoping that his wife would break the silence. But ever since the quarrel in the morning she had withdrawn totally into herself.

Vasu stared at the hearth, at the cold ashes which seemed to taunt him and laugh at his helplessness. The container on the shelf, empty of rice, seemed to float down and pin him to the ground. The pot on the hearth seemed as empty as his fortunes, the black stand that supported it waiting for his flesh to be roasted on it.

Abruptly, Vasu sprang from his hunched position, and tucking the loincloth tightly about his waist, pushed his way through the crowd of children gathered around the turtle. Grasping the rope tied around the creature, he hoisted it up into his arms.

"Where are you taking it?" people around asked in consternation.

"To the sea . . . to release it there . . ."

He strode away purposefully, the turtle no longer weighing him down. Striding through the darkness, he reached the camp where the woodcutters were sitting, puffing on beedies. He flung the turtle down beside them and stood there silently with his right hand outstretched.

The woodcutters whispered to each other, their white teeth gleaming against their dark skins as they smiled broadly. One of them got up, and drawing out a single two-rupee note from the pocket of his shirt that hung from a branch, placed it silently on Vasu's palm.

Vasu set off, his cheeks burning as though someone had slapped him. His ears seemed to reverberate with the buzzing of the woodcutter's saws even though the sawing had stopped long ago. Clutching the money tightly in his fist, Vasu made his way to the shop to buy rice.

*Translated from Konkani by Vidya Pai*

### Glossary

- i. Retorted — to give a sharp and witty reply
- ii. Scathingly — harshly, bitterly
- iii. Sanctum — a sacred or private place set aside
- iv. Squatted — sitting close to the ground by bending knees
- v. Hearth — a fireplace
- vi. Consternation — amazement or horror that confounds the faculties
- vii. Reverberate — having lasting effect, to ring with echoes

