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INDIA

THIRD PRIZE, CLASS B
IN THE 2009 COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION

TRACKS

Two tracks of footprints headed across the undulating sandbanks of the beach. One was straight and purposeful. With a measured stride and firm steps, it confined itself to the firm sand of the previous night's wash.

The prints of the second track were about half the size of the first but were never clear or full. Sometimes the toes and the front of the foot would be missing, at other times the heel. The direction was never straight. It would sometimes disappear into the water and sometimes wander up the slope. Yet it would always return to the first track.

Tracks and footprints have always captivated me. The geometric regularity of hoof marks of buffaloes heading to the pond, the prints of a hen and its brood crossing a yard or even the trace left by a line of ants crossing a wall, have all captivated me. With humans however, one rarely gets an opportunity to see an isolated set of prints.

I was on a vacation at my grandmother's house in a small coastal town of south India. The sea presents a glorious sight early in the morning. The sun fills the sky around it with a brilliant orange. Elsewhere, the aquamarine of the sea is separated from the azure of the sky by a thin band of silver at the horizon. Rays of light from the sun are caught by the clouds in myriad patterns of yellow and blue.

It was to capture these vivid colours in my sketch book that I set out to the beach early that morning. There wasn't a single soul on the beach. I had just settled down on the soft sand and spread out my things when I noticed the tracks.

The tracks were intriguing, to say the least. Where did they come from on this desolated beach? Where were they headed? Why at such an early hour? Are the two tracks related? Did the second set of prints belong to a normal person? I set out in hot pursuit (leaving a third set of tracks!!) but to no avail. The tracks vanished into a rocky hill at the far end of the beach.

With my curiosity aroused, I returned the next day. Again I had no luck! Already laid out on the sand was a fresh pair of tracks. As on the previous day, they vanished into the distance. The third day, I beat the Sun to the beach. I was rewarded for my perseverance, for the beach in front of me was untouched. I settled down to await my quarry. Shortly after sunrise I could make out two figures approaching from a distance. I waited with bated breath. As they came closer, I could hear the high-pitched chatter of a child. This was interspersed with the brief responses of a deeper voice. It was a young boy and an old fisherman.

The fisherman wore only a loin cloth. The white loin cloth and the thick white hair on his head stood out in sharp contrast to his dark skin. He had a fishing net in one hand. The other held a bamboo stick across the shoulder. A net basket dangled from the stick. He had his gaze straight ahead. Even while answering the child he scarcely looked in any other direction.

The boy was about eight years old. His only clothing was an oversized pair of shorts. He possessed abundant energy. For every step of the old man, the boy would cover three. Sometimes he would run ahead. If something caught his attention, he would fall behind. Sometimes he would plunge into the waves. Every now and then he would come up to the old man with a question or an observation. The old man's replies were brief but not unfriendly. They passed me and gradually disappeared into the distance, the old man with his steady stride and the boy hopping and skipping along. The mystery was solved. I breathed a sigh of relief and headed home.

Over the next few days, as I resumed my painting, I would often see the duo. I struck an acquaintance with them. It was the curiosity of the boy, Chandru, which started our friendship. He would question me about what I was doing, about my choice of

colours, why I mix colours and so on. The old man, would also join us and add a couple of his own comments.

One day I asked the old man, "Apanna (for that was his name), where do you stay? Where do you go so early in the morning?"

"I stay in a fishing village about two furlongs away. I am now too old to go fishing in the sea. I catch some on the shore itself with my net. There is a good spot beyond that hill, where there is plenty of fish. Early morning is the best time because fish come close to the shore."

"What about this boy? Should he not be in school at this age?" I asked.

"Chandru is my grandson" replied the old man. "Two years ago, my son and daughter-in-law passed away in an epidemic, leaving this boy behind. My wife died many years ago. So we have only each other in this world. I take him along because I need him to help me drag the net. As for schooling, I send him to the master who teaches children in the temple yard, every afternoon. We return to our village by noon. He can reach school on time."

"The master teaches him to read, write and count," continued the old man. "I teach him about fishing and about life, which are equally important. I may not be educated, but I have seen a lot in my life. My intention is to make him independent, as I will not be around for ever".

"Didi", I know English", Chandru chipped in, and proceeded to rattle off the alphabet and numbers. "Grandfather tells me that if I study well, I can get a job and earn a lot of money. I want to earn money and buy my grandfather a motor boat so that, he can go to the sea again."

The old man looked at his grandson with pride. It was a very touching sight.

Eventually my holidays came to an end. On my last day, I bid them good bye. I gifted Chandru my painting set. His joy knew no bounds. He reached into his grandfather's bag and drew out his treasure, an exotic conch shell. This was his return gift to me.

I returned to Delhi. I got busy with my school and friends. The conch shell ended up at the bottom of my bookshelf, slowly gathering dust.

I returned to my grandmother's town after three years. Memories of my beach friends returned. I set out early one morning to renew my acquaintance. Do they still go across for their fishing? Will they recognize me? With these questions in my mind, I waited for them.

For a long time there was no sign if anybody. As I was getting up to leave, I saw a figure in the distance. I waited to ask him if he knew of my friends. As the figure came closer, I recognized my young friend. He was now much taller, but there was no mistaking his face. He came forward with a broad smile.

"How are you, Didi? So you finally remembered us" , he greeted.

"Where is your grandfather?" I asked, peering into the distance.

"My grandfather is no longer with us. He died last year after an illness."

I was shocked. Not knowing what to say, I stammered, "I am so sorry. He seemed so fit last time" .

"You must be feeling very sad. How are you managing alone?" I blabbered quite foolishly.

He was very composed in his reply, "Grandfather told me not to be sad. I was very lucky to have him for my grandfather. He taught me to be self dependent. Of course things are difficult now. I have to earn for my food. I also have to pay off some loans taken during my grandfather's illness. I cannot go fishing into the sea because of my age. So I continue to fish as my grandfather did."

"I have managed so far, and I am confident that I will do so in future too. I can't go to school. But don't worry Didi, I study by myself at night. I will give the Matric exam next year. You see I want to remain just a fisherman. And now Didi, I must go as u an late for fishing. I will meet you again tomorrow" . He went striding down the beach.

My gaze dropped down to the solitary track on the beach. The stride was measured, the steps were firm and the direction straight.

* Didi – elder sister in Hindi