

Monday, June 16, 2014

An Imperial Typewriter

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I

Vinesh studied his palms like a fortune-teller. Was it good or bad luck that had bought him to the city of Leicester? In Kampala and Porbandar before that, his hands had wielded shears that sliced fabric from long rolls of material in his father's shop. Elegant and dexterous, they had presented silks, cottons and chiffons to rich customers who came from far and wide. Now they were chapped and swollen, their lines pronounced.

Each day, Vinesh would take a handful of black letters from a white plastic box and press them, one by one, onto the silver metal keys of new typewriters. Ashok, Danny, Purviben and Nandani then checked the tension of the keys by typing, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy brown dog" onto the machine's ribbon-free cylinder. Whenever a typewriter was deemed jam-free, Vinesh passed it on to the next set of workers at Imperial Typewriter Company. It was in this manner, quick and methodical, that the East Park Road factory fulfilled its production quota of two thousand manual and electric typewriters each week.

For the past fortnight, however, production had all but ground to a halt. *The Mercury* called it "The Asian Worker's Strike". Vinesh could see them from the factory windows, friends from his own assembly line, waving their placards in the chill May air: "I can buy a Patel for £15. Not anymore!" they chanted, and "Down with bosses' freedom to oppress!"

Vinesh had not joined in. "I am a practical man," he told his friends. "I know when to

knock at the door and when to wait to be let in.”

Who could blame him? His wife Damyanti was seven months pregnant. The couple wanted to move out of the derelict terraced house they shared with nine others. They hoped for one of those “so so” rentals off the Belgrave Road. Vinesh had seen a new job advertised on the work notice-board and had already arranged an 11.30 am meeting with Mr. Snell:

**IMPERIAL TYPEWRITER INSPECTOR WANTED. ENQUIRE WITH FACTORY
MANAGER FOR FURTHER DETAILS.**

II

A stack of sealed brown envelopes sat on Mr. Snell’s mahogany desk. Beside them stood an antique globe and a photo of the smiling Mrs. Snell, her arms around a pair of blonde, toothless girls. Rectangular glass cabinets lined the office walls, the sort of cabinets one might find in a museum. Each one contained an Imperial typewriter, resplendent on a cushion of plush red velvet.

Outside the office, Vinesh could hear the workers chanting their discontent. Inside, Mr. Snell seemed distant.

“What can I do for you, Vinny?” he said.

“Sir. I would like to enquire about the advertised position.”

Mr. Snell lit a cigarette.

“Can I call you my friend?” he said, assessing his worker.

“Oh yes,” replied Vinesh. “Yes, Sir, of course you can.”

Vinesh shifted slightly in his leather chair. It squeaked. He remembered his wife Damyanti, which gave him courage.

“Sir, my credentials are that I have been working as an assembly line worker at Imperial for over fifteen months now and, I believe, having already owned and run a business in Kampala, that I can manage ...”

“You play cricket, Vinny?”

“Excuse me, Sir?”

“Someone in the canteen told me that you are a very good left-arm spin bowler. Is that true?”

Vinesh was delighted. He had no idea Mr. Snell was a cricket man. He played mainly with workers from Imperial. His friend Aamir would pass a timetable around the factory every Thursday afternoon so that workers could play whenever they weren't on shifts. There was Ashish, Bharat, Sanjay, Iqbal, Aamir, Rakesh, Amit, Caribbean Danny and Paul ...

“Tell me. Aren't the people you play with on strike right now?” said Mr. Snell.

“Well,” replied Vinesh. “Some of them. But I'm not ...”

“Some of them? That's what I'm getting at. You see, Vinny, you need to put yourself in my shoes. Instead of coming in here *asking* for things, you just need to think a bit more about what you can offer. If I were to promote you I'd be turning down dozens of honest, loyal workers. And then those same loyal workers would start to wonder: “Why has Mr. Snell employed that Indian man who spends all his time with strikers?”

“But I'm not on strike,” said Vinesh.

“No, Vinny. But you play cricket for the other team. You understand me? Now I've got letters here.” Mr. Snell tapped the stack of brown envelopes with his fountain pen.

“They're from Head Office, telling strikers that if they don't return to work tomorrow morning, they should come in and collect their cards. Sacked, the lot of them. And you can tell them that too. Tell them that from now on it'll be cricket 24/7!”

“I'm sorry, Sir, but I came only about the job,” said Vinesh. “My wife ...”

Vinesh's tongue faltered in his mouth. He found himself listening to Mr. Snell, whose voice had grown croaky with emotion.

“Imagine what it's like for me, Vinny. I've got Head Office breathing down my neck, clients cancelling orders, strikers outside ... it's not easy. Everyone wants to have a go at management but just try bloody *being* management. It's a nightmare is what it is.”

Mr. Snell's secretary poked her head round the door. Was he ready for his next appointment? His client was waiting for him in a nearby hotel. Mr. Snell nodded.

“Thank you, Deirdre,” he said. “Vinny was just seeing himself out.”

He watched on as Mr. Snell rose from his chair, grabbed his jacket and left.

Alone in the office, Vinesh's gaze fell on the typewriters inside Mr. Snell's glass cabinets. One of them was dated 1908. Another, in electric green, was labelled: **IMPERIAL TYPEWRITER GOOD COMPANION MODEL 4**. It was compact, modern and by far his favourite. He moved in to inspect it further. To his surprise, Vinesh found that the cabinet was

unlocked. He opened the glass door and ran his fingers along its keys. He lifted out the typewriter and weighed it in his hands. How light it was!

III

Vinesh charged down East Park Road, holding the green typewriter in his outstretched arms as though he were offering it to the world.

He forged past Victorian terraces with names like Jubilee and Albion, wondering what he would say to his wife. He wasn't any good at lying to her. She always saw right through him.

As Vinesh turned the corner onto St. Saviours Road, he lowered his hands and all but stopped. At least the strikers had a choice. As for him, he could never go back to Imperial. Mr. Snell might even call the police. The thought made him walk faster, whispering mantras his mother had taught him as a child.

He felt calmer as he reached Spinney Hill Park, with its tulips and elms. He sat on a bench, the green typewriter at his side. Blackbirds cawed above him and beyond them were the distant sounds of factories and cars. He ran his fingers across the typewriter's royal seal, then its unused ribbon and smooth, black barrel. He pressed one of its keys. 'i', 'i' it went. 'iii.' Perhaps he would use it to write his memoirs? His unborn child would learn about his father's shop in Kampala, the orange trees and rose gardens. He would write about the day he and his brothers travelled to the Odeon cinema in Jinja to see *Summer Holiday*. He would write about the exodus too; the soldiers who had put a gun to his head on the road to Entebbe airport, the relief he had felt on boarding the plane. He would tell the story of Heathrow Airport on Boxing Day, 1972, his very first day in England. He had never before seen snow. He played with the typewriter's keys.

Snow down

falling

cotton

like

wool

a

marvellous
sight
but
you
know
when
it
settled
it
became
so
black
and
so
muddy.
We
had
no
experience
of
walking
on
snow.

Vinesh tugged at the steel handle of the typewriter, as though shaking its hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said.

So many stories he would tell it, his new friend.

IV

As they sat on the bench together, Vinesh remembered more and more stories. There was his first Leicester job as a supermarket trolley boy, and the boss who sacked him for being too smart. There was the Anglican couple who took him and Damyanti into their home on

condition that they didn't cook Indian food. There was the job centre lady who told him that his qualifications meant nothing here, that he should go back to college to do A-Levels, him a thirty-one-year-old man! He recalled the morning he found work at Imperial too, of how grateful he had felt with so little.

There were tiny flecks on his light blue shirt. Vinesh looked up. Rain. Just his luck. He spotted a Pavilion in the distance, but a group of rough-looking teenagers were heading towards it. He inspected his friend, hoping it wouldn't rust, wishing it had come with a carry case. Again, he took up the typewriter, cradling it in his arms as he hurried along the path.

As the rain poured down onto Leicester, Vinesh headed towards the Melbourne Road and continued along St. Peters Road. He ran along Sparkenhoe, his soaked-through shoes slapping against the cold wet pavement. He crossed the little bridge near the old hospital with its heavy flow of traffic and clattered down a flight of steps just before Constitution Hill.

Vinesh walked without a destination in mind. Reaching St. George's Way, he wandered into a graveyard. Factory noise swelled and roared around him. No job, no money, the ways in which he still carried home in heart. Before she died, his mother was forever getting lost in Leicester's streets. She couldn't read English and the houses looked so similar. He imagined her now, wandering the graveyard like a ghost, asking passers-by in Gujarati to help her get home. *Kutro desh* she had called it. *Salo kutro desh*. That day Vinesh found her at a bus stop, crying softly into her umbrella.

The rain slowed. It must have been lunchtime because, just beyond the church, workers were running from teashop to cob shop with newspapers covering their heads. One of them pointed to Vinesh's typewriter, but he couldn't hear what was said.

He made his way to the corner of Rutland Street and Southampton Street. He found himself standing in front of a magnificent Renaissance-style warehouse. He would have taken it for a hotel were it not for the workers piling through the side door. FAIRE BROTHERS, EST. 1898, the sign read.

"Excuse me," Vinesh said to one of them. "What does the factory make?"

"Boots, shoes, laces, the usual bollocks," said the man without stopping.

Vinesh shifted the typewriter under his left arm and ambled into the marble porch. It sparkled like Aladdin's fairy cave.

"Yes?" said a secretary, "Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm looking for work," he said.

"Well, you've got to do it in the normal way," she said. "Apply like everybody else."

He thanked her, but as he turned away, something cracked inside him. He turned back to face her.

“Please,” he said. “My wife is pregnant. I need a job.”

“Go on then,” she said. “Wait here.”

He stood, dripping wet, with the typewriter in his hands. Footsteps approached.

“Can I help you?” said a bald man with a loud voice, “Looking for work, I gather.”

Vinesh nodded.

“Where are you from?”

“Uganda.”

“No,” he said. “I mean, work-wise. In Leicester.”

“Imperial,” replied Vinesh.

“You’re not one of them bloody strikers, are you?”

“Oh no,” said Vinesh. “I quit my job. Looking for something better.”

“Quit your job, eh? Is that ... a typewriter? I suppose they gave you that then?”

“The boss gave it to me to thank me for my hard work. He was going to give me a promotion.”

“That’s a pack of bloody lies if ever I heard them!”

The secretary laughed too.

“A man comes in and says his boss has gifted him a typewriter! The bloody cheek! You’re a liar and thief, that’s what you are. Now get out before I call the police!”

V

Vinesh boarded the 221 bus with his electric green typewriter. As he balanced it in his hands and searched for change, the conductor told him to hurry the hell up.

On the top deck, Vinesh wiped tears from his eyes. The bus crossed Leicester, passing factories, shops, pubs and churches. He watched from the window, cursing the typewriter.

He got down at East Park Road and made his way to the Imperial Typewriter Company. The rain had stopped and the sun was coming out. Vinesh’s heart opened when he saw his friends.

“Arre! Vinesh bhai!” said Nandani. “Shouldn’t you be working inside?”

Ashok put his arm around him.

“Oh ho!” said Ashok, pointing at the machine in Vinesh’s hand. “A very practical man indeed. He’s bought his own typewriter!”

“Why have you got that?” Purviben said in Gujarati, removing her spectacles to inspect it.

“I’ll tell you later,” said Vinesh.

“So why are you here now?” she asked with a curious smile.

“I want to join the protest,” said Vinesh.

There was a cheer. Danny put his arm around him, then announced: “This man and his typewriter will join the protest!”

At first, Vinesh took his place behind Ashok and Danny so that no one would see the stolen machine. He listened as Mr. Snell read the notice from head office.

“It has been decided that all strikers must return to their jobs or else come in tomorrow and collect their cards.”

Policemen lined the factory’s railings. They were expressionless, like Buckingham Palace guards. When Mr. Snell finished his speech, they linked arms. The strikers responded, surging forwards and shouting their slogans with renewed vigour.

“Down with boss’s freedom to oppress!”

“We don’t want your stupid job!”

Vinesh joined in, shouting as loud as his voice would let him. When Ashok and Danny pushed their way to the front of the picket line, he too made his way forwards. Vinesh no longer cared about the typewriter, Mr. Snell or the police. In that moment, he and the strikers were one. When Mr. Snell turned to leave, Vinesh raised the electric green typewriter and threw it at the Imperial Typewriter Company.

“Damn you!” he said. The typewriter arced through the cold May air. “Damn you!” As two policemen rushed towards him, Vinesh was enveloped in an ecstasy of cheers and hugs.