

The Gas Station Man

○ Suniti Pande

I met Jaspal Singh (Jazz) when he was working at the local gas station. I was new to Canada and so was he. After our first eye contact and “Hello, how are you,” we recognised each other as coming from the same neighbourhood in Delhi. After all, how often do you meet someone from the same neighbourhood after settling in a distant foreign country?

We felt the bond despite the fact that our old neighbourhood was home to many thousands of people, most of whom would hardly ever bump into each other there, except if they planned to meet. But, in Vancouver, coming from Kailash Colony in Delhi almost made us family.

The gas station was in a primarily “white” area of the Vancouver suburbs. I stood out with my dark Indian skin and hair, he, with his crisp Sikh turban and pointed gelled moustache, looked even more alien.

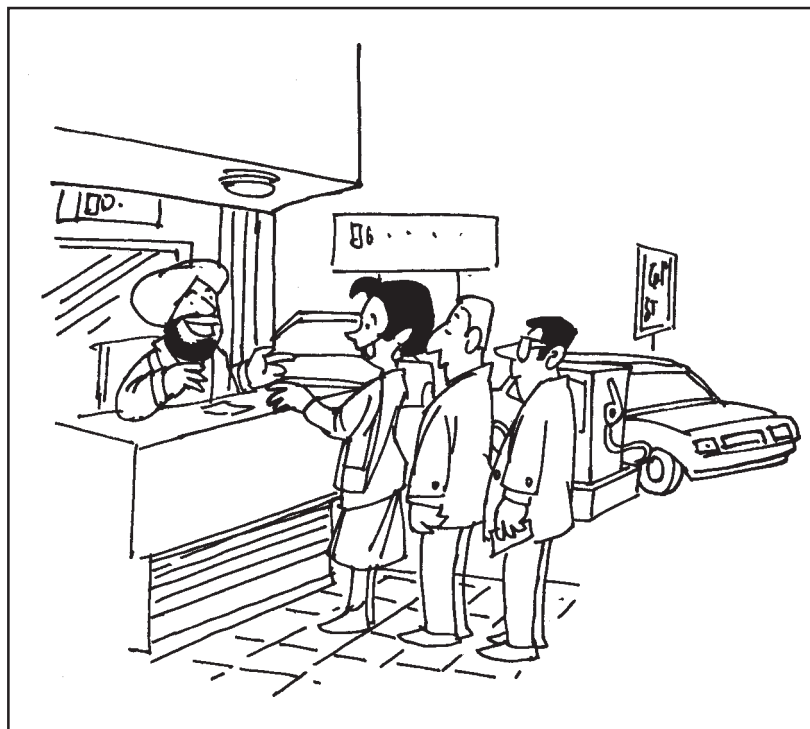
So it was natural that we should seek each other out. His eagerness to do so was apparent whenever I walked through the door. He would spot my car outside and I knew from the tilt of his head that he had seen me.

Punching in another customer’s sale, his eyes would follow me. He would rapidly rip the receipt off the machine and hand it to the customer, and in that same instant confirm my place on the line at the candy and

gum counter. He would smile at me as I approached. By the time it was my turn, he would be smiling even more broadly, the customer ahead of me puzzled by his exuberance. No sooner did I come face to face with him, then he would burst into “HELLIOOO and HOW are YOU?” And unless I was the only or the very last customer in the line, we had about two minutes to confirm our Delhi connection. He would fire off three or four questions in rapid succession. “How do you like Canada? How long have you been here? Do you have a family?”

By the time I got in an answer, he would be distracted by his work. A group of teenagers might come in or someone might ask how much something cost. It took us six months with my twice monthly visits to work out what the other’s job was. The first month was basically confirming how long we had been in Canada—six years for him, five years for me, that we both had families, he had a wife and two children and I too had three children.

After a few months, however, a strange sort of reserve began developing between us, as the gap



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in our circumstances grew even greater after our initial meeting. When I said I was a doctor, he seemed surprised. Maybe I looked down and out in my modest five year old 1000 cc Pontiac Firefly. Perhaps doctors are not supposed to talk friendly to gas station men. I certainly wouldn't in Delhi. But then Delhi is Delhi and Canada is Canada.

Also, it is true that in India I would have never expected to see Jazz working in a gas station. He had been a teacher at the Delhi School of Economics with a master's degree. Socio-economically, the gap between us was not vast in India and here in Canada we had a closer kinship—that of first generation immigrants from the same neighbourhood. A lecturer in economics punching in gas sales is a situation to be bravely borne, your story of early and heroic struggles to gain a foothold remembered as a tale to tell your grandchildren. In India, such humble beginnings or tumbings would be a matter of shame, to be hidden.

"You a doctor?" he asked, looking up suddenly from his cash register.

"Yes," I said. "Do you like your job?" he asked, pointlessly.

Perhaps buying time, trying to word his real question—how did you manage that? Don't all immigrants have to work their way slowly up the social ladder? Or did he mean to say he hated his job? "Yes" I said, "I like it" and waited for him to ask something more. He opened his mouth as if to ask, but was distracted by a group of teenagers.

"Teenagers," he said. "Always a problem."

I turned around and looked at the boys. There were four of them, wearing baggy pants, loose T-shirts, and baseball caps turned

around on their heads. I think their heads were shaven. About fourteen or fifteen years old, smirking and nudging each other, they looked harmless enough, but you never could tell. Last week an Indian man in Surrey had been beaten to death by four young skinheads. "One minute," he said to me, and walked over to them. He spoke softly and pointed to a sign on the door: 'Only three children allowed at a time in the store.' One by one the boys shuffled out silently.

"Last week, someone threw a brick at the door at night and I had to shut down the shop for two days for repairs. Now see, I have a video camera." He pointed to a corner on the roof. He tore my receipt off the machine in a distracted way, his eyes on the boys.

The summer was particularly warm and beautiful that year. The strawberries would be ripe and very red in two weeks. A busy time for farmers. Yellow schoolbuses full of migrant workers of all ages, some quite old, would travel the highway from Surrey to Abbotsford. Elderly Sikh women in loose salwar pants would shuffle from bush to bush on their haunches, heads bent under cotton shawls against the merciless sun. They were probably mothers



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and fathers of new immigrants, earning their keep. What did they expect anyway? Once a farmer always a farmer. That is what Indira Gandhi had said in the seventies when she was prime minister of India. "We are all farmers, or sons of farmers, or sons of sons of farmers." That had made my father nod vigorously in agreement. "She is right, absolutely and hundred per cent right," he said laughing, "One hundred per cent".

Anyhow that was long ago, I was in Canada, far from my agricultural roots. And I did not want to pick strawberries except to amuse my children with the U-Pick schemes at the Driedeger farm in Langley. I was a doctor, well-respected in the research field, on the cutting edge of modern medical knowledge.

June is also a time to enjoy the arts in Vancouver. Dance shows, music festivals, plays—a cultural buffet. One such June Sunday, in a relaxed mood, my wife and I were on our way to an Indian dance concert. We had become patron members of a cultural organisation called the India Music Society. We thought it might enrich our children's lives and give them a sense of who they were. Yes, Canada was definitely an agreeable place to live, we were well-respected, living in the suburbs, enriching our lives with culture, honouring our fellow countrymen regardless of their jobs or social positions. I looked at the mountains admiringly as I drove out of our double garage. "We have to stop and get some bread." said my wife. Maybe at the gas station, I thought irritably, looking at my watch. I filled up the gas tank, and my wife walked around the shop. Jazz was beaming, "It is so nice to see people wearing Indian clothes,"

he said looking at my wife. She nodded her greeting and smiled. I turned and looked at her.

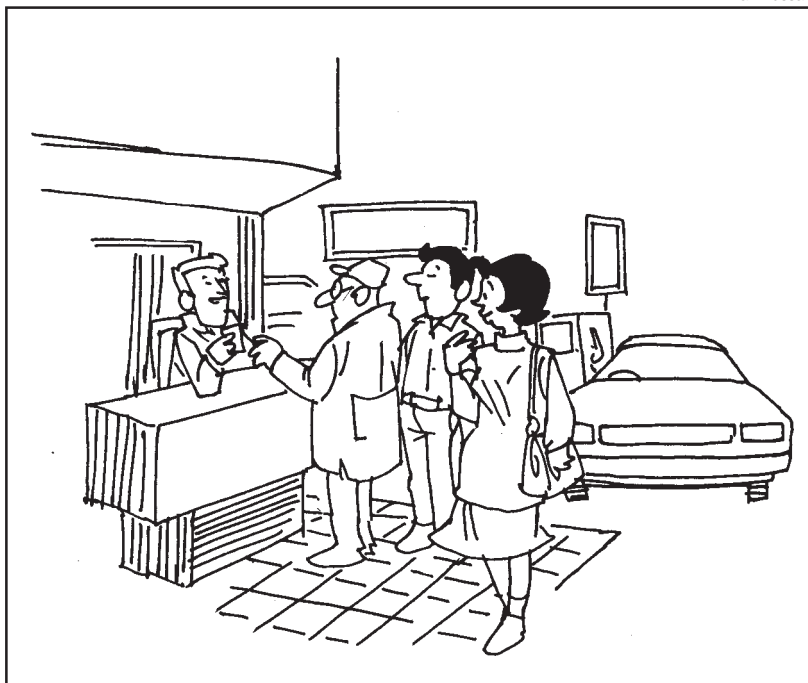
She looked beautiful with her amber skin and dark eyes, the gold and russet silk material of her sari floating lightly, catching the evening sun. We're late, I signalled to her. And as I got in the car, I saw Jazz's face tilted towards us watching. I did not enjoy the dance concert. The acting was weak and choppy in its execution. The dancers had no rhythm in their movements, and the intervals seemed endless.

Jazz's turbaned head, with his face tilted in the evening sun, made vague shadowy intrusions on my mind. Two weeks later, and there I was again, at the station. Jazz was busy, he did not look up. I felt a vague sense of relief as he asked his usual set of questions. But his line of thinking was different today.

"What age did come to Canada?" I thought quickly, "I was 39 years old," I said, puzzled.

"How long dju been here?" he said you with a soft Punjabi j sound as in the word, garage. "Three years." I waited. "When did dju last visit India?" "Last year." I was ready. "Did your children like it there?" Like it, like it, what's that got to do with it, I thought. "My children, yes, I suppose they did and didn't." He looked up at me and stared. "Well, they feel foreign there, they feel they are Canadians when we go to India, and feel they are Indians when we are here. Foreigners everywhere!" I laughed at my observation. It would have brought nods of understanding from my friends at the cultural organisation. Jazz only stared. I smiled and shrugged.

He smiled, but it was a quick polite smile which faded as he took my card. I decided to be proactive. I asked, "You thinking of going



back?" His reaction took me by surprise. It was as if I had incised an abscess. "Every day, every day I ask God why he sent me here. In Delhi dju know I had a job, not rich but still a good decent job. My wife's family?" I noticed the slight questioning inflexion at the end of the sentence, in the manner of Canadians. An upward lilt, as if asking, you know what I mean?

"My wife's family? They all came to Canada and I came with them. Her grandmother, she came 50 years ago from Jullunder, Punjab. Well settled now, with strawberry farms in Abbotsford. She sent for her sister's children. My mother-in-law was one of them. Sometimes I also work on the farm, but I am not a labourer dju know, an educated man dju know."

His voice changed to a deeper tone, conspiratorial, "I wanted to go to university here and become an accountant, but they told me I have to repeat..." his assistant interrupted him, wanting to know how to make a refund. He asked me to wait and helped the man. He

looked back at me abstractedly. His face had become soft and droopy.

His eyes darted about, ashamed of something, like a child who has realised he has wet his pants. He simply shrugged and pursed his lips tight. I avoided going there after that, making excuses to myself, visiting other gas stations which appeared to be more conveniently located.

After a month had gone by, I decided he had probably got over things a little, and sought out Jazz's station. I braced myself for the usual questions and thought up a story explaining my long absence. He was not there. Where was he? I looked at the young woman at the till. "Did you know Jazz? He used to work here. Do you know where he is? How long has he been gone?" I asked three rapid fire questions. "No," she said simply.

I looked at her with frustration. Where do they pick up such dumb workers from? The following days and weeks I could not get Jazz out of my mind. I felt vaguely uneasy about his sudden departure, as

though I was at fault. I looked for him everywhere. At gas stations in Surrey, at the Himalaya restaurant on Scott road, at Kamal video place, at the Fijian spice shop on Scott Road and at the berry festival in the self-proclaimed berry capital of Canada, Abbotsford. I scrutinised every face under a turban. Going east on the highway to Abbotsford, I thought I saw him one day. Maybe that man on a tractor ploughing British Columbian soil under the shadow of Mt Baker was none other than Jazz.

I scanned the papers for any Sikh related stories. I don't know what I expected to find. Suicide? Missing person? Race attack? After a picnic at Bear Creek Park with friends one Saturday, we decided to go to the gurudwara.

"Would you like to go to the gurudwara church?" asked my friend's wife, Sukhi. She was a third generation Sikh and spoke with a Canadian accent. She said gurudwara church for the Sikh temple, automatically, as if not expecting me to understand.

"It will be cornflour bread and mustard leaf spinach (*sarson da saag and makki di roti*) today" she added. "Chicken soup for the Punjabi soul!" I looked forward to the tangy creamed spinach curry and the soft golden flat bread. Many people from the community came for that meal on Saturday evenings. An evening of prayers, meeting friends, making contacts, and always the excellent food. In India, too, you could always expect a meal at a gurudwara. Every beggar, every madman, every leper off the street would be welcome and fed. Such was the practical spirituality of the Sikhs. After paying our respects in the inner temple, we took our place at

a table in the vast dining room. Sukhi's cousin, Kuldeep, came, pressing more roti on us. Kelly (Kuldeep) often volunteered his services at the temple. Since he could not afford to donate much money or food, he served the temple as a volunteer in the massive community kitchen. "One more, come on, one more, brother," he said laughing, carefully placing a folded roti in a corner of my plate.

As I wiped up the last of the curry from my plate, I felt full and happy in the warm hospitality of the temple, the gracious embrace of tree planters, berry growers, taxi drivers, shopkeepers and gas station men of British Columbia. "Kelly," I turned to him, "do you know that gas station on 82nd avenue in Langley?"

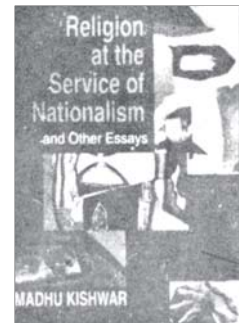
He nodded. "A new man called Jaspal Singh worked there. I wondered where he had gone, just suddenly disappeared after working there for one year." Kelly

thought for a moment, "He used to come here sometimes, not that often. Why are you looking for him. Does he owe you money? He lifted his shoulders as though in a question. "No, I owe him something." Kelly replied, "It is hard to keep track of people sometimes, so many coming and going everyday—maybe he found another job. Anyway, if you owe him something he'll find you," he said, pointing a finger at me. I felt restless, and no longer wished to stay at the temple. "What do you owe Jazz," asked my wife, puzzled, as we drove away. "An apology." "For what?" "I want to tell him how much I miss India, and wish I had never left. I want to tell him he should return to India and be a lecturer again. I want to tell him I am unhappy here." "Are you unhappy here?" she asked, surprised. "Maybe I am," I replied, "Maybe I am." □

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