

Strangers

Why do two strangers become buddies? What is common in them which makes their wavelengths click so wonderfully? This has always been a mystery to me. Maybe it was written in the divine plan that Kasam and I, absolutely unknown to each other, would meet at the Elphinstone Club Cafeteria and become thick friends, unknowingly and inexplicably.

Our association had begun after a chance meeting at the Cafeteria of the Club House. It was in the eighties that we met, we got along marvelously and then went on to play Cricket for the same teams. He was mild mannered, cultured and had an extremely polite, affable personality. He was a good batsman, a steady bowler and a brilliant fielder in the covers. We played in the Kanga League, games which began on the second Sunday of July, up to October.

We started playing alongside, first for the Elphinstone Cricket Club in the B-division, and later on for the Garware Club in the G-division. He was a great judge of the quick single; he batted at five and I at six and we shared many a partnership. I had a terrific time batting with him and our understanding and quick running between the wickets would leave the opponents harried and harassed.

Later on, playing in the lower division was fun and we got to play, rubbing shoulders with our childhood Cricket heroes, with giants like the late Polly Umrigar and Bapu Nadkarni in our team. It was like a picnic every Sunday and both the stalwarts, narrating stories and anecdotes of their playing days would keep the atmosphere in the tent, lively and in good humor.

There would always be a joyful camaraderie and bonhomie among all the members of the team. First slip Umrigar, second slip Bapuji, third slip me and wide gully, Kasam. That would be our

cordon behind. What more can one ask for! Kasam was in the Paints business and after a few years as we drifted apart, and as we got engrossed in our professions and families, we lost touch with each other and yet, when my mind would wander aimlessly, I would think about him. We would greet each other on festive occasions but eventually the exchange of greetings got cut off with the passage of time.

Ten days ago, I was conducting my outdoor at Raheja. I had just finished seeing my last patient. As I walked out my office, I switched off the lights in the room and got out. My telephone rang. It was a call from the ER (emergency room). I answered the call. The Emergency Registrar was on the line.

"Sir, I am Dr Nadia here."

"Yes Nadia, tell me."

"Sir, there is a patient here and he had hurt his left great toe and there is a bleed from the wound."

"Please take him to the minor OT and I shall be there in five minutes."

I went down to the ER, and examined the patient. The nail of his great toe had been avulsed and there was fresh bleeding from the wound and beneath the nail bed. I gently helped the avulsed nail to come out, gave the wound a thorough wash and applied pressure on the raw area to arrest the bleeding. As I did so, I got talking to the patient and to his wife, who was standing close by.

"Hello, I am Dr Sunil Vaze, I am a Surgeon here," I greeted the patient. "May I know your name, please?" I asked him.

"I am Abdul Merchant," he replied. "Merchant? Hmm, you are a Memon, right? Memons are a business community, isn't it

"Yes, we are. But I worked in Tata Power"

"I know Merchants are Memons. I had a friend who was a Memon and his surname was also "Merchant"."

"Oh, really? What was his name?"

"Kasam, Kasam Merchant."

" My younger brother's name is also Kasam." It may have been some other Kasam Merchant, I thought to myself. Even then, I continued with the conversation. I was curious to know if there was any connection between 'my' Kasam Merchant and 'their's'.

"Oh really? Where did you and the family stay?" I inquired.

"At Crawford Market."

"Did Kasam work in Killick Nixon?"

"Yes, he did."

My eyes lit up. It was confirmed that our Kasams were the same. Yes, it was indeed the same Kasam who played Cricket with me in the eighties, forty years ago. All of a sudden a vivid recollection of my association with Kasam and of our bygone Cricket days had pleasantly unfolded within me.

"And, you stayed on the lane behind Badshah Cold Drinks?" I asked. "It was at Lohar Chawl, I think."

"Yes, we did," he replied.

"I have come to your house for an afternoon tea and snacks. And, if I remember correctly, your residential phone number was 342168. Am I right, Abdul bhai?"

"Yes, yes, of course, of course, of course it was indeed 342168. I am simply amazed by your memory, Dr Vaze."

We had a hearty talk, a delightful revival of fond old memories. I suggested to Mrs Merchant that we should talk to Kasam. She called up Kasam, she spoke to him for a while and without identifying me, she handed the phone to me.

"Salaam alaykum, Kasam Miya", I addressed him cheerfully.

"Wa alaykum asalllam," He acknowledged. "Who is this?"

"Kasam, this is Sunil, Sunil Vaze."

"Arre, Tu kya Kar raha hai udhar? What are you doing there?"
He exclaimed.

"Arre! Abdul Bhai, your elder brother, is here at Raheja Hospital with an injured left great toe and I was called to see him.

We got talking and he was pleasantly surprised about the long-standing association between the two of us. We recalled those old times and spent some absorbing moments chatting with each other."

"Small world, Sunil." Kasam replied.

I opened the wound. The bleeding had stopped. I wrapped a small sterile dry gauze around it. I answered all the queries Abdul bhai's wife and his daughter in law had to ask and after a warm handshake, Abdul bhai and the family returned home. And, before we parted, I made sure I had Kasam's cell number.

I had decided to talk to Kasam later during the day.