

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

*Jayant Neogy*

### **The Last Flash of Gunmetal**

"MOVE, DAMN IT!" MY FATHER YELLED at me as he aimed his 12 bore shotgun at Ginger.

"Oh no," I thought, "he's going to shoot my friend", without thinking, I jumped between him, and my father.

Ginger was lying on the ground, panting, as foam flecked his muzzle. Standing at the doorway, my mother screamed at me to come away at once.

To save my only friend, I did the unthinkable, I kicked him as hard as I could and shouted "Run, Ginger, run! Run for your life."

He looked up at me with startled, pain filled eyes. Thankfully, he understood the urgency in my voice. He got up with an effort and tottered for a moment. Then he gathered himself in a crouch and yelping in pain, ran out of the compound of our bungalow and to the road outside.

By the time my father came round me, Ginger was a fading streak in the distance.

The loss of Ginger hit me very hard, for I was a lonely child. We were new to the neighborhood and our bungalow was one of a few in a sparsely-built wealthy part of Bhavnagar, the capital of the native state of the same name in British India.

I was an only child, home schooled in preparation for admission in a boarding school in Bombay and there were no children of my age nearby. My mother understood my loneliness. One day, she brought home a black Labrador pup as my playmate. I was as delighted by Ginger, as my father was disgusted by a puppy with no toilet training.

When my father was appointed the Port Officer at the sea port at Bhavnagar, we experienced a very different India, one that was not ruled by the Viceroy. Bhavnagar had her own King, flag and army. It was a 'Native State'.

My mother said, "It is so peaceful here, no 'free India' movement, no slogans, no processions."

My father said, "The British keep a low profile. As long as the State pays its taxes to the Crown, no one meddles with us."

The city of Bhavnagar was peaceful, but I knew no peace. I missed Ginger terribly. After that dramatic day when my father tried to shoot him, Ginger disappeared completely. Ignoring all parental directives, I went looking for him day after day. I trudged miles, but had no luck whatsoever.

My father said, "Good riddance, he had turned rabid and would have bitten you. Hydrophobia is no laughing matter", he added darkly.

My mother comforted me, "You would have outgrown him soon," she said. "In any case, after primary school, you would have gone to Bombay, leaving Ginger behind. Once in a proper school there, you'd make friends and would forget Ginger."

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"How can I forget Ginger? How can I forgive myself for what has happened to him?" I asked my mother. "I told you, Ginger got into the fight to save me! Remember? If it hadn't been for him, that rabid cur would have surely savaged me."

My mother said, "I know, and we are so grateful to Ginger, but he is rabid now and a rabid dog..." her voice trailed away.

Full of self-reproach, I recalled vividly what had happened that evening. Ginger and I were out for our customary evening stroll. The road in front is tree lined, shady and cool even during the intense summers of Bhavnagar. For us, the empty road was our very own play ground, for people were rare and cars almost non-existent. Still, as I was told, I used to leash him every day and I felt sorry that it stopped him from running free, to inspect bushes and smell tree trunks.

That fateful day, I did not leash Ginger. He reveled in his freedom, and he lingered to smell the bushes and tree trunks as I strolled ahead. Light was fading as a cool salty breeze blew off the Gulf of Cambay.

It was time to return, so I stopped and turned back. Suddenly, out of the darkening shadows under a largish bush, I heard growls and angry barks. Before I could react, a mongrel rushed out of the gloom and charged at me.

I was petrified. I could see his wide open jaws streaming foam. His eyes were frenzied, hazed over and dull red. Before the rabid dog could get to me however, a streak of black lightning shot past me and pounced on my would-be attacker.

I could see little in the whirling fury of biting jaws and slashing paws. However, in a minute, the mongrel ran away howling, his tail between his legs. Ginger came gamboling back to me and tried to lick my face.

I felt very grateful for Ginger's timely help. I was even more thankful that he appeared none the worse from the fight. I hugged him and we made our way slowly back to the bungalow. I decided not to tell anyone about our encounter, for I feared my mother's reproaches and a dressing-down from my father for not having leashed Ginger.

I should have told them. The next morning, I found out the cost of my mistake. For Ginger did not come to wake me. Every morning, following a well-established routine, Ginger would come to my bedroom and wake me with a lick on my face. But late that morning, I woke on my own. Ginger had not come. Overcome with foreboding I hurried outdoors to find his kennel empty. His blanket lay undisturbed and his water dish was full.

Then I saw him. Near our front gate, Ginger lay curled up, panting, with his eyes closed. Relieved, I called out to him as I tried to come close but he growled menacingly. I stopped surprised and worried. Something was very wrong.

My shouts brought my parents running. One look and my father muttered "Rabies!" and rushed back into the house to reappear with his shot gun. My mother called to me frantically to come away. But it was too late to stop the tragedy. To save his life, I kicked my best friend when he was already in pain. It broke something between us, and Ginger ran away.

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I searched high and low, in the neighborhood and all the way to the railway station and the main road, but found no trace of him. It was as if Ginger had never existed.

A couple of agonizing months passed. Instead of lessening with time, my pain and guilt only grew stronger. The school in Bombay that I had regarded as a frightening unknown now began to look inviting, for Bhavnagar was turning unbearable for me.

Then, one evening, as I walked along the road in front of our bungalow, I kept thinking of Ginger gamboling along with me. Suddenly, from a dark patch under a bush much like the one from which the rabid dog had charged me, I heard a soft but familiar bark and my world stopped.

I would have recognized the bark anywhere, it was Ginger! My lost friend had forgiven me and had found me. "Ginger", I called out joyfully, "Here boy, come to me, where have you been all these months, I was so worried..." My words trailed away for Ginger did not come to me. He sat under the bush, wagging his tail and barking softly. I tried to take a step towards him and he got off, backed away and sat down again, looking at me with his big liquid eyes that showed no sign of illness.

His ribs showed plainly, his coat was a mess and burrs stuck to his front paws. But it was not so much his appearance as his behavior that really pained me. As I could not get him to come any closer, I walked slowly home and Ginger followed, but if I tried to take a step towards him, he stopped and backed away. He recognized me, but I was his best friend no longer. The bond of trust we had shared so long, was broken.

When we reached home, he stopped under a tree some ten feet away from our main gate and would come no closer, no matter what the enticement was. I tried his blanket, his favorite rubber toy and his dinner dish. Nothing had any effect on him. He wagged his tail, barked softly, but stayed away, as if I had a contagious disease.

With the gardener's help, we got his kennel out of the compound and set it up under the tree on the opposite side of the road. He backed away at first, but I saw him eat from his dish and settle down on his familiar blanket inside the kennel.

My parents were doubtful. But our family doctor explained that Ginger probably had a touch of Distemper and not Rabies. In their initial stage, both diseases show similar symptoms.

"Clearly he is not rabid, or he would have died long ago" said the doctor with an air of finality and we were willing to accept that.

So began a new phase of our relationship. Ginger stayed resolutely outdoors. He backed away when I brought his meal, but after I had retreated, he ate quietly. At night, he slept in his kennel, for the nights had turned chilly. But during the day, he was nowhere to be seen.

When I walked past him for my evening stroll as we had done so often, he looked up from his post under the tree and wagged his tail. In spite of all my enticements, he did not get up to follow me, I honored his boundaries. He was content to remain close, but he would brook no familiarity. I accepted his attitude as a just rebuke for having let him down when he needed me.

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Time passed and winter lost its bite. Spring was in the air, and I thought I saw a change in Ginger. Although he wouldn't let me touch him, I could get really close to him. Perhaps the wall was coming down between us, I began to dream again.

But my castle in the air came crashing down on one Sunday evening. My father had announced at breakfast, "I've been invited to join the Maharaja's hunting party this evening."

My mother exclaimed, "Oh my goodness! That's a great honor. Only the top circle ever gets invited! Congratulations, Darling!"

My father said, "Well! I have served his majesty faithfully. I'm glad he has recognized it." That evening, the car was brought around to the front gate as my father, wearing his khaki bush jacket and Jodhpurs stepped out of the house. He was carrying his shotgun in the crook of his arm.

Mother and I were waiting to see him off. I noticed Ginger lying in front of his kennel under the tree on the opposite side of the road. A warning bell went off in my head. What if Ginger sees the gun?

I yelled out, "Careful Dad, don't let Ginger see the gun in your hand." It was too late. As my father climbed in, the street light fell on the polished and oiled barrel of his gun. It flashed in the gloom for all to see.

With a startled yelp, Ginger leapt to his feet, looked back at me, and bounded away into the night. I never saw him again.

He had seen the gun, and he had remembered.