



Syeds In America

THE Greyhound pulled into this simple shed and the bus driver, in a nasal and drawn out accent, called out 'Urbana-Champaign, Urbana-Champaign, last stop! Watch your step. Watch your step!' Bewildered, homesick, apprehensive and anxious about the unseen ahead, he waited till all had left the bus. Making sure that all his belongings were securely hanging on his body, that his Pakistani cap was properly positioned and his name tag clearly visible, he silently recited the prayer his mother had told him and took those irrefragable steps towards his future. Exactly as the orientation letters and the instruction sheet had promised, the assistant director of YMCA (Young Mens Christian Association) was there to welcome him. This heavy-set man with a deep voice and constant smile was wearing a baseball cap and visibly worn-out sweater that carried an oversized name patch announcing 'Bill'. The welcome was casual, pleasant and a bit confusing.

As he uncomfortably settled in the plush soft seat of this big American car and was struggling with the fears of a conversation strictly in English, the host turned to him and said, 'Now, tell me about your name. What does it mean? And though it sounds exotic, why is it so long and complicated?' The question came across like an assignment for an essay in history, geneology and language. Afraid to disappoint his benefactor, he attempted an answer, 'You see, we come from the family of the Prophet Muhammad' and then he felt duty bound to say, 'Sallallaho-alehay-wassallam' and carried on, 'that, you see, means Peace and Blessings on him and that is a requirement for all believers to say whenever they utter his name. Now being his descendant makes me a Syed, which in Arabic means the leaders, the heads of gathering, those worthy of respect. Though I do not deserve this title what can I say? You see, my elders get very upset if I do not use this part of my name... My second name, actually comes from a pre-Islamic Persian epic...' This carried on for quite some time with a few well concealed yawns and many affirmations of 'How interesting!' by the host who was having difficulty remaining awake at the wheel. The newly arrived Syed triumphantly finished his presentation by a reassuring

gesture, 'Reverend William Oliver, Sir, I hope I have been able to answer your question'. 'O Yes! you have done an impressive job. In fact my wife would be very interested to hear the whole story after dinner as I have to go and pick up another student who is coming on the 9.30 bus. And in future please call me 'Bill'. In this country we insist on being informal. Now you have a very interesting name but too long. We must find a simple American name for you. In fact Jane and I were discussing it just this morning at breakfast and we picked some dandy ones. Well, let us see. Would you prefer 'Sid', or should we call you 'Russ', or 'Al' or 'Gil'? Syed Rustum Ali Shah Gilani almost choked at this sudden reduction of his whole being and identity into a single syllable. 'Whatever you think is good, Sir, I mean Bill'. 'I think Sid would suit you just right, you do look like a Sid after all and I am sure the girls will like that too'. The Reverend had a hearty laugh as he slapped him on the shoulder and welcomed him through the main door of his house. The Syed from Pakistan had arrived in America.

The following week, a day before the classes were to begin, his professor took him on a round of the building and the laboratories where he was to be studying. He introduced him to some other professors whose office doors were open, to many graduate students and a few laboratory technicians. He finally brought him to where he was to sit for many years to come. The room was crowded with seven desks. One desk in the corner, away from the window was empty. Everyone stood up, perhaps in respect for the professor or may be in sympathy for the new academic slave from across the oceans. 'Gentlemen, this is your new office-mate, Sid Gilani from Pakistan. Sid, please make yourself at home and I will see you tomorrow in the class'; saying this the professor left.

One by one the inmates introduced themselves. 'I am Attilio Petruccioli from Rome, welcome!' 'Kenneth Foster from London'. 'Hi, Jim Cummings from Kankakee, Illinois. Let me know if I can be of any help'. 'Hello, my name is Dhirubhai Karamchand Mali. They usually call me DeeBee but I prefer to be called Mali'. 'Asslam-o-Alekum, brother, we knew you were coming and you are invited to join us in the weekly Hadith discussion meeting which happens to be today after Isha prayers'. 'Hi, my name is Syed Jaffer Abbasi but you can call me Jeff. If you are a religious type, brother Abe here will keep you busy until your knee-caps are bare and your forehead shrivelled up. But if you love fun and do not want to

hang around like a corpse, you turn to Jolly Jeff', he patted his chest as he said that and looked mischievously at the bearded Abdul Fattah who invoked the name of God and cursed the devil.

Rustum Gilani landed himself in the empty chair in front of the unoccupied desk. Taped in front of him was a paper with a 'Happy Face' drawing under which was written in bold letters: 'Cheer Up Sid!'. Saddened by the abomination of his name, he quietly removed the paper, wrote under it his full name in Arabic script, put a date and sent it to his mother.

Academically, he was brilliant and successful. Spiritually and emotionally, however, he felt stripped, unanchored, and alone. Temptations of the rebelliously free campus life of the sixties kept his mind agitated and at the edge of carnal catastrophe. American classmates, especially girls, invited him to abandon his orthodox hang-ups and be part of the scene. Cummings invited him to his farm for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners where his grandfather tried hard to save the Syed's soul by delivering it to the Messiah. Dhirubhai questioned the very basis of his national identity and never failed to stress the wisdom of an unpartitioned sub-continent of the Gandhian utopia. Petruccioli and Foster were decent but ultimately unwilling to get involved with someone's personal anguish. He sought solace in the comradeship of brother Abdul Fattah but the group soon claimed religious authority over his entire being and tried to imprison him in a claustrophobic world of empty ritual. The 'brothers' questioned the very meaning of his claim to being a Syed, ridiculed the shrine built over his scholar-saint grandfather, and in the heat of the argument suggested that Rustum being part of the pre-Islamic legacy, was not even a desirable Muslim name. Jeff, on the other hand, claimed to be his 'spiritual kin' but was a source of embarrassment at the best of times. His uncle and potential father-in-law wrote to him regularly never failing to remind him of his pious ancestry, his religious days of commemoration and the dreams his late father had for him.

Twenty three years have passed. His wife Mary is from the Cummings farm of Kankakee, Illinois. He is the proud head of a large consulting firm known as SRG International and signs his name as Sid Geelanay. He has two sons Mo and Al and a daughter Fay. His ninety year old mother in Pakistan keeps their pictures next to her bed and introduces every visitor to Maryam, her daughter-in-law and Muhammad, Ali and Fatima, her grandchildren who live in America. ■