

BY ANURADHA SHARMA GUPTA ('86 MMS)

# DADDY COMES A VISITING

'The Return of the Father...'

**D**addy came to meet me a record 13 times in four years! He would get extremely Anu-sick and Pilani seemed just round the corner from Delhi those days. Now that I have a little one, I can empathize because we are temperamentally very similar. I was Daddy's little girl and he would brood about my health and well being. Any concern would propel him towards the Interstate Bus Terminal (ISBT) and he would embark upon the six-hour journey to Pilani.

Given that he was retired and was handling his own book business, it was easy to manage his schedule for a few days. There was a swanky guesthouse as one entered Pilani, on the left, and another soon thereafter—this one, an apology to guesthouses, down-market and dilapidated. Being the rustic that he is, he thought the latter was functional, the *masala chai* was great, he befriended the housekeeper and felt there was no reason to pay a premium for ambience.

All of us, especially in our youth, experiment with issues. Somehow, the thought of meeting up with my father in the ordinary guesthouse did not gel. Call it a status symbol issue, a youthful folly, call it anything. I'm so much more discerning now—especially after a major in marketing. I can now see through the premiums charged purely on brand name and halo effects. I can see through how the lack of discernment about the difference between needs

and wants is exploited. Temperamentally, I'm equally down to earth. But it's the "Circle of Life" syndrome and back in those days, I insisted he stay at the plush guesthouse. He did succumb a couple times but his soul rebelled... And yes, he discovered another alternative... an innovative, original discovery.

He stayed with my pals! In the guys' hostel. He stayed mostly with Dev and Chotu and a couple of times with Bhattu. Their rooms were messy, full of sexy divas (well, posters at least) and stacks and piles of dust-laden books (many of which seemed to bemoan their fate – no one paid attention to them except maybe during an occasional test series). Everything tottering, skeletons falling out of closets. Shocking graffiti—descriptions of enraptured guys wooing indifferent girls. Heavy metal that would jar a lesser mortal. Piles of dirty laundry. Guys moving in and out, general *laccha*, Daddy perched on a bed chatting about everything under the sun. Totally comfy and at ease.



**"I can still remember the joy of dragging Daddy into the girls' mess..."**

Daddy has this capacity to enjoy every bit of life, to live it to the fullest. I can still remember his rich laugh resonating in my ears as he described—in the presence of my pals—outside their Mess, how delightful the experience was. How young he felt and totally at home, with such sloth, gluttony, and sheer depravity. How good the food that everybody complained about tasted. How nice it was to 'hang out' with the boys. Bless their hearts; my friends welcomed him for we were as close as a family could be.

It was after all Dev who stood outside my hospital room when Tannu was born, grabbed the camera from hubby and clicked a dizzy number of under-exposed photographs, the ones that were visible were with the cradle all covered. In 'The Little Prince' fashion I knew Tannu lay within. It was Chotu who defended me when somebody alleged that I had C.T.'ed (course topped) O.B. because the Prof liked me (his calm demeanor was shaken for once in Pilani as he suddenly threw everything in sight at the unsuspecting guy – from books, to powder tins). True loyalty, true pals. Renchy and Muds hung out with Daddy as if he were their pal – definitely more entertaining than staid old me. Indeed, he enjoyed every minute!

I can still remember the joy of dragging Daddy into the girls' mess and making him sample delicacies that had hitherto been offered only in the guys' messes – ice creams, for instance. It

didn't matter that eventually he paid for it – it was from my scrounging and saving that I could treat him. It was my turn to foist stuff upon him – to spoil him. He sat with my friends and seemed to know everybody's names, histories, heritage, likes, tastes, and tales. Even today he will suddenly spring a surprise and ask about a forgotten batch-mate, a memory that will send me scurrying around, looking for her or him, overcome with sheer nostalgia.

Now some friends had fathers who were, thankfully, a wee bit busier. At the best of times, at the peak of his career, Daddy had always had time for us. He never seemed rushed or busy, never preoccupied. There was always time for bird-watching (genuine birds of course), walks, poring over books, discussions, little secrets, discussions about geography, war, boys, politics, not necessarily in that order. But now, he took the cake, baker and bakery. He seemed vela!

After a while, it irked me when in one semester—since I had acid reflux (thanks to eight cups of tea a day, sleepless nights spent *ghoting*)—Daddy landed up for the third time. I remember standing next to Mr. Postman, hoping I would receive a letter (from somebody other than Daddy who pretty much wrote poetry every day – 'I miss you, the sky is blue, *tum aae nahi, kyun?*'). Well, surprise, surprise, he was, in person grinning from ear to ear. Hadn't informed me, ostensibly to get me to jump out of my skin – with delight?

My disposition as acidic as my stomach, I took him aside and muttered, "You keep landing up - people will think my Daddy is a vela! What will everybody



say..." He is such a sport, he thought I was genuinely upset. And he left telling me he'd be right back. I waited and waited, thinking he would return, but he left a message for me (he managed to go to Dev's hostel, call him out and leave a message with him) that the Vela Daddy has departed – till the next time! He had a hearty laugh as he confided in Dev and would not get dissuaded. Dev even offered that he stay with them and ignore me but Daddy left. Guess who kicked me that evening? None quite as hard as I kicked myself..

Time wounds all heels, time heals all wounds. I don't think I ever apologized enough, but God bless Daddy's good-natured heart because he has converted the incident into one of his favorite stories.

He left with his ego damaged and clambered onto a Delhi-bound bus – scheduled to reach late at night. How he nearly fell out of the bus at Jal T, not deliberately, of course, it was the mammoth crowd, stupid! How he nearly gave into the temptation of heading back, at that point. About how he and one Jat heaved and pushed and elbowed each other to try and

grab limited space on a seat with seat-covers torn and springs broken - so that they could have a comfy slumber – if at all that was possible. About how the Jat was leaner and meaner and it was a losing battle. About how the Jat fell asleep on Daddy's shoulder with half of Daddy hanging out of the seat and the other half pushed off by the burly fellow with his ticklish mustache. And about how he resolved to return soon after the dust would settle...

As soon as he got my teary letter saying that not only was he a vela, he was also dense, and he better return, he headed back. I stood waiting for him this time, since he had forsaken surprising me and had actually revealed an arrival date with trepidation. I waited outside the campus, amid the chatter of people sitting outside sweetsshops, the comforting noise of the *rickshawallahs*, and ran to hug his big, burly form. Yes, return he did, lovable, incorrigible Daddy. Along the dust laden road on a bus that journeyed from Delhi, through Haryana, into Rajasthan—Loharu through to Pilani—grinning from ear to ear. Return, he did.

