

## THE SOUTH BANK SHOW

*'Simplicity is all'*, she told herself imitating King Lear's *ripeness is all*. That Shakespearean play formed part of her initiation rites on arrival in England in 1979. It was the King's homelessness, the complete reversal of his fortune that had shocked Ava when she first read the play as an under-graduate in India. Today, she tried to imagine the Queen in such circumstances. The idea itself was preposterous. Briskly, she licked yet another envelope containing another job application. She added Prudence and Patience to Simplicity as her Three Graces.

The basement office where Ava was temping had emptied by now. Most people with jobs had proper homes to return to. All through the day she overheard snatches of office conversations with family and friends she visualised in homes straight out of the pages of glossy magazines. During the lunch hour, she went to read her horoscope, hoping that reality would one day catch up with her daily forecasts, which were unfailingly optimistic. It was good to know that all was well as far as the sun, moon and stars were concerned in shaping her destiny. If she felt hungry after the trip to the newsagent, who being a fellow countryman, indulged her the use of his shop as a sort of library, Ava treated herself to a sandwich; eating it slowly on the way back to the office making it last longer, as she made her way through the immaculately laid out public gardens and parks in the neighbourhood.

The rest of the afternoon she spent thinking about her family; the thought of phoning them calmed her. The idea was enough. The fact that there was no possibility of dialling direct was only a secondary concern. The major obstacle was that it was not the proper thing to do, especially from the office though every body else called their family and friends and received calls from them. Even when there was no such opportunity, Ava felt the burden of having to represent not just herself, but her family and country in her host country. She could not bear anyone referring to 'Indians' in an unfavourable manner.

As a child, Ava had been taught to be on her best behaviour from the point she left home until her return, at which point it was permitted occasionally to throw an almighty tantrum about the injustices of not being offered the cake first by the host or family member responsible for distributing the sweets among the children and other such major issues. Even then there was a catch (as there were in these matters) as 'home' was always busy with relatives, acquaintances and strangers; even overnight guests. In the end, it was difficult to behave badly at all during waking hours.

Sometimes, one heard of a younger cousin having violated that elementary code in which case it was important to sympathise with the person who had suffered such embarrassment. The arrangement was unfair; it was definitely tilted in favour of the adults who created the rules anyway. But the desire to win immense personal favours from elders kept them, the army of children, within the bounds of good behaviour. Not like kids today who are spoilt, lack discipline and have no sense of what's what.

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Ava often borrowed writing paper, envelopes, even the odd stamp to send off her own job applications. She made a note of how much she borrowed, like some usurious lender, because she knew she would have to repay doubly when she found a proper job. This was another of her balancing acts. She believed in settling accounts in this life, as far as practically possible. The risk of being born again in some ignominious form for the foolishness of not having paid one's debts in this life was simply not worth taking. It was bad enough this time round but to make it worse for the future seemed unforgivable.

What was frustrating for Ava in the company of such intelligent and educated people that populated the office was their naivety, their belief that given the opportunity the world would somehow become a more equal place. She conceded that perhaps it does work initially but then things change as they always do, and so the rules need to be changed too. While change is the only permanent thing in our world, it happens at variable speeds. Sometimes, in a split second the world changes; sometimes, even in a lifetime, some things don't. So, she had evolved a simple survival credo; *always return the favour bestowed upon you, even if it is not directed at the same person*. Do something for someone every day, and the world will soon be a happier place. But what about the injustices, the bad things, that are doled out to you? Do we distribute that as well? She had not made up her mind on this issue; unsure whether life was a simple question of an eye for an eye (and the world goes blind), turning the other cheek (and both cheeks are hurt) or something entirely new? Though she had no idea what that 'new' approach to life might be.

Ava knew she did not have all the answers. She had found a way of coping with the negative or the bad things that happened. But did not have the inner reserves of strength, goodness and whatever else it takes to bless her enemies. As a child, she had found this Gandhian concept of dealing with one's enemy work effectively only within the family circle; even that was not always the case. When she had turned her other cheek to a friend, she has been surprised with the second blow, followed by humiliating laughter from her classmates. She had learnt not to apply that principle indiscriminately. She knew she was no Mother Teresa... Anyway, the resolution of such weighty matters was not for her.

It would not be accurate to refer to what Ava did in that office as a proper job. She often took refuge in the grand title of *Administrative Assistant*. In any event, she learnt a few things in this office as she spent her days sealing envelopes, making tea or acting as an answering machine. It was her version of *Modern Times* as she moulded herself to an irrational world. It learnt for example that hunger in Africa was unlikely to be resolved through financial aid. It was exactly what it was meant to be, temporary relief. What upset Ava when she viewed unreal people on TV, skin stretched tightly over bones, more skeletal than human, was how unfair it was, not just for the victims of such a life but for her too – to watch people dying in Africa without food just when she herself was having her only meal of the day. How could one possibly eat anything watching such misery day after day? Dinner was her only hot meal, earned at reasonable personal cost. She was in no mood to feel guilty about her fortune. She too

had seen malnutrition in India. Most of the children who grew up in the streets shared that look; slightly bloated stomachs, thin rickety legs, eyes shining with hope, sometimes even a smile for you. These were the lucky ones. The unlucky ones, of course, suffered mutilation of all sorts.

She felt helpless that these children were denied a chance to alter their lives. However, she rarely expressed that personal anguish in public, particularly in an environment where her bosses thrived on the belief their help mattered; thus, they mattered. Ava may not have shared their vision of themselves, if such a perception even faintly amounted to a kind of corporate culture. No, never did she experience anything as alienating as that in an office which was friendly, pleasant, and informal.

On the contrary, Ava felt her enterprise and hunger to better her lot in life as being at odds with the mission of this august institution. Her argument that the poor of the world need jobs, if not the support to start their own enterprises, but not mere hand-outs, to make a sustainable living was perhaps not fully understood. At the same time, it gave her the basic minimum financial support to do exactly that! As the *Admin Ass*, it really did not matter what she thought. As per the intangible office code, Ava virtually belonged to the Establishment! The only other Asian in the office contributed to that myth. He expected a female from the subcontinent to turn to him for friendship and support. After all, he saw himself as enlightened, free of the male, sub-continental mind-set.

When Ava showed no signs of leaning on him, he was good enough to make amends by circulating the rumour that she must hail from an exalted family. Ava saw no reason to alter that image as long as she was left alone. It was quite a common classification she encountered; you were a refugee or, if you didn't look or behave like one, you were some form of royalty even though you didn't look or behave like one! With America attracting the middle-class professionals from India, Great Britain was left with the have-everythings or the have-nothings. History invariably dredged up the debris of its own past.

Ava's job consisted of assembling standard replies to standard enquiries regarding voluntary projects in far-flung corners of the earth. Absolutely no intellectual effort was required in the execution of her duty; that suited her as it would have been positively hazardous to be encumbered with an interesting, but badly paid, job. It left her free to pursue her real plans. Every now and then, the chain of her thoughts would be snapped by the phone ringing or teatime descending upon them, and for her to stir into a frenzy of activity.

When she settled down to signing off letters on behalf of her bosses, it became clear how finely balanced life was. While she among thousands of others sought a new way of life in the UK, it was perfectly natural that people here aspired for an alternative way of life in Burkina Faso, Chad or Bangladesh, albeit temporarily! The more people saw how the other half live, there would be a better chance of understanding each other. Understanding oneself better was an added bonus. Had she herself not benefited in appreciating her own country after she left India? Even Gandhi underwent a similar experience, she reminded herself. We all need to leave home to return home. And to understand yourself better, you must leave the comfort of your

own family, country, value-systems. Struggling to survive in a world where you are nobody is the ultimate test of self-realisation; some define themselves anew, other reaffirmed their long held certainties.

Ava was daily amazed at the number of young people in the UK who wrote in saying they wanted to work for a year or two in Africa or Asia. Most were unemployed or straight out of university with little prospect of finding a job in Britain. A lot of the applicants were either already on the dole or would soon end up signing on for unemployment benefit. It would cost the government less to support them in various locations in the developing world on local salaries instead of keeping them at home where the prospect of finding a job was bleak; not to mention the loss of self-worth, the colossal waste of time and talent in not being able to find any employment. While it was easy for money to flow to these areas of opportunity, it was more difficult for people to do so. Each time she sent a reply in the negative, Ava sympathised with all the rejections she received. All through the day she signed off letters of regret about not having a vacancy or something to that effect, then in the evening she would slit open envelopes containing similar letters addressed to her.

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As Ava stepped out of Whitehall Court where the office was located, she could not help but feel a swirl of energy released within her. It was six-thirty in the evening; the sky had that crimson glow, the air fresh with hope. It was the sort of evening that made you feel grateful to be alive and awake to the world around you, when the smile on your face is infectious because you notice strangers smiling back at you, when you notice the colour of the leaves on trees, the patterns they make against the brilliance of the sky, when you appreciate the wrinkles on the faces of strangers in the soft light of the setting sun. Perhaps, it was the prospect of a musical evening that buoyed her spirits, or that of meeting a good friend and being able to talk; yes talk freely at last. The major difference between life at University and whatever you choose to call this in the Office was that there had been an endless supply of friends, time, ideas and hope at University. Everything seemed possible...

Arriving in Oxford had been the best thing that happened to Ava; it was a second birth. As a girl, that too the only daughter, she was constantly told what to do but usually what not to do. Marriage was an obvious escape route but seemed more like exchanging the eccentric authority of parents for that of the husband and his family. To the credit of Ava's parents, she negotiated the former option. When the latter option seemed unpalatable, it made sense for Ava to escape to study abroad. Her scholarship to Oxford was a passport to freedom. But life in London bore no resemblance to an academic lifestyle that was part contemplation, part exchange of ideas and part assimilation of the two to produce an *original contribution to knowledge!* Including self-knowledge?

It was a mild autumn evening, perfect for a short walk. Ava headed for Westminster Bridge, a detour necessary if she was going to allow herself some exercise. Walking she had long discovered as an effective antidote to all kinds of problems. The more stressed out she was, the more she walked and the better she slept. Faced with an unreasonable landlord during her mandatory Earls Court days, she once spent a whole

evening criss-crossing Trafalgar Square, Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus; impervious to attempts by suspicious-looking men who offered to take her out for a drink, coffee, dinner. She was once asked by a man: "Do you have enough money dear?" To which she replied: "Do I look like a charity case to you?" and walked off. She spent therapeutic afternoons walking in cemeteries; the Brompton Cemetery was one such place during the Earls Court phase. Soon she discovered the seductions of Hampstead Heath, Highgate Cemetery and Waterlow Park and found herself the tiniest of bed-sits nearby.

Ava walked along the Embankment towards Big Ben with the steady noise of traffic spurring her on. She looked forward to meeting Richard, and listening to stories of his experiences in India. He had been savouring the delights of India while Ava had exiled herself in London searching for a job. She turned left on Westminster Bridge and walked towards the Royal Festival Hall. Memories of her first crossing that bridge had survived intact the onslaughts of years of coming to terms with the reality of her adopted homeland, never being entirely sure if the adoption was real or not. Who adopts whom? Ava had been brought up on a diet of English Literature, of the best in that firmament.

Even then, it had been difficult to understand why T.S. Eliot thought London Bridge was falling down. When she first went to London Bridge to check it out, she learnt that you must not quite believe everything you read! That it was only an image of what Eliot thought; it represented an idea. But, Eliot's lines made perfect sense in India, where most things were literally falling down. On the contrary, today she felt euphoric standing in the middle of Westminster Bridge, surveying not prospective ruins but emblems of power and wealth.

Of course, the British Empire had collapsed a long time ago. Even before she was born the matter had been settled. As a student of English Literature, one was doomed to seeing the world through other people's eyes; Atlas-like, upholding the great tradition. What lay in front of her was not history but the present and, hopefully, the future. It had been an unmistakable recognition on her part that what was ahead of her would bear little resemblance to the past. She had made a home for herself somewhere in her heart and head between England and India. In this process of self-definition, Ava had drifted away from both shores towards an imaginary island. She needed to fashion a new language, new currency for her personal fantasyland, though she was still learning how best to live in it. But learning goes on forever; the more you know, the more you know that you don't know. No wonder the Hindus believed in re-incarnation. This life may not be a rehearsal, but Ava understood why one might need several lifetimes to get one's present life perfect.

For a moment she paused on the steps descending towards the South Bank. The green lights beneath Westminster Bridge made the muddy water of the Thames seem darker. The last of the boat-cruises had left the Pier. The chain of lights along both sides of the embankment seemed to stretch on forever. There was the usual flow of traffic over the bridge, but as she got off the bridge and started walking towards the Royal Festival Hall, there were fewer pedestrians. Never a great lover of crowds, Ava preferred to observe human behaviour from a distance, though she appreciated the role of crowds in providing the stage for the rich drama of life to unfold. For that

reason India scored higher points for livelier street atmosphere. London just could not afford to be so extroverted. It was either raining or too cold or just plain dreary.

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What an irony that in this land of Shakespeare, one rarely encountered any form of dramatic behaviour in the daily progression of an extraordinarily ordered life of the nation! Her hands warming in her coat pockets, Ava strolled along the deserted embankment thinking that what she relished most about living in London was a sense of anonymity, of being nobody, the luxury of being left alone. But, before she could savour it any further, she noticed a shadow fast approaching her. It was as if it had self-materialised. This moving trick of light and shade finally came together in the shape of a black man with his right hand aimed at Ava as if pointing a gun. It was too dark to be sure if he held a gun or was just posturing. Apart from museums and films, Ava had never seen a gun. In the dark one imagines things.

“Gimme your money,” she heard the ghost of a figure say. A combination of absent-mindedness and general unpreparedness to face the crisis at hand meant she carried on walking, unfaltering her pace. Like a sleepwalker, Ava kept on going as if she had not heard him speak. It was this magical moment that protected her because she then heard him say, unexpectedly: “I’m sorry.”

Her failure to respond immediately to the situation had unwittingly given her the upper hand. When she recovered her senses, she was better able to rise to the occasion, which basically meant that she continued to walk on as before but was now more alert. She could see the ghost’s face by then, and was rather surprised to see a young man’s face, not that of a criminal. She had no idea what criminals looked like. Jack, The Ripper did not look like a criminal either. Could this person be someone who could pull the trigger? Criminals usually did not apologise...

“You should be sorry! It is not even seven o’clock...” Ava stopped to check the time. It did not occur to her that she was talking nonsense, as if there was a law saying it was alright to mug people after 10.00 pm! By this stage they were both able to see each other’s faces quite clearly. He did not panic in any way either but kept pace with her. While Ava kept on walking, she wondered where all the people had disappeared that evening! For once, she wanted to be in the middle of a bustling bazaar in India, thronging with people; where you felt the heat and the dust and the noise, where you felt irritated with people milling about you in a haphazard sort of way but it also made you feel relatively safe.

After a brief pause, she said: “People like you give *us black people* a bad name.” Her tone of voice implying she expected something better from him. After all, what criminal would walk with you after pretending to hold a gun up to you?

“Do you have money or not? I want money; I have no money, no job.” He said as if he was being reasonable.

“Yes, yes; I know exactly how difficult it is with no money, no job. But what exactly are you doing about it? What sort of education do you have?” Ava asked as if screening him for a job.

“What are you ta’king, w’man!” At least, that’s what it sounded like.

“Do you really expect anyone to hire you without any education or work experience? If you are black and uneducated in this world, you do not count. Petty crime makes matters worse...” While Ava analysed his future prospects, they kept on walking towards her rendezvous point. Anybody watching them from a distance would have assumed they two knew each other. He was a bit jumpy, rather he moved awkwardly alongside her as if escorting her with some reluctance. There was no hint of violence in his demeanour. By this time, they had both ruled out violence as a workable solution to this situation.

“I have no home...” was his next line of attack or defence, depending on your point of view. At least, he had persistence though not a lot of originality, she thought. Sometimes, life tends to reward that. “No family.” He added.

“Nor have I!” Ava rebutted calmly: “Look, I really can’t help you. I have no money to give you. And even if I had a few pounds, how would that solve your problem, eh? You would immediately spend it unwisely, on drinks or drugs or whatever...”

“You have no money? You look rich!” He looked surprised.

“Yes, I have no money. And, I am not rich.” Ava confirmed.

He continued to walk with her and she didn’t mind any longer. Perhaps, he had nothing better to do. In any event, talking to him seemed like an effective way of disarming him and getting through: “I hope you won’t do this to anyone else.”

“No.” He said dully as if he was drained of all energy, having now exhausted every plea to get some money out of her. It was his doggedness that finally got to Ava; he conveyed a silent message of appeal for help, not money.

“If it is of any help to you,” she said: “I have a lot of problems of my own. Life has not been easy for me, either. I was married to a man who beat me so badly I had to leave him. I was then lucky enough to get a scholarship to go to University. Even then finding a job has not been easy. But going around mugging people will not help me, will it? We are very lucky anyway; do you know that every day people in Africa are dying of hunger?”

He had not bargained for that lecture. Nor could she blame him for not being able to say anything at all in response to that. They were, after all, in the same boat except that Ava had been luckier and was blessed with a strong will to change her life. That was, perhaps, all the possession she had inherited and was ready to donate some of that spirit to him. She would have gifted that freely but sensed he was not quite ready for it. The conversation seemed over and he retreated slowly.

Ava walked on thinking of the millions of young people in the world who had no idea how to change their lives, how to alter their destiny, how to escape from the trap of poverty, poor education and thus no hope of altering the direction of their lives. Even to make the necessary leap forward one needed at least one firm foot to stand upon. And not having that much in life, not having one firm foot planted on firm ground was our universal poverty.

Her thoughts were scattering again as she remembered the look in the eyes of an old man begging in the streets of Cuzco in Peru. He was more like a skeleton than a human being, but his eyes burnt bright as any she had seen; he lived in hope. *She was the rich tourist with the dollar bills and he made her feel like a god for a dollar, usually less.* The expression on that man's face haunted her. *His eyes could not thank her and the other foreigners enough for their charity; his toothless grin showering them with grace.* Ava never learnt how to accept such forgiveness. But the world was changing, and the rich had to learn how to pay. Growing up in India had sensitised her to poverty but having lived away in England, she had lost her immunity.

Her newly acquired friend was not far behind. He showed his face again looking distinctly worried: "You'll not tell the police?"

"What will I tell the police?" She asked. He backed off uncertainly but not quite out of view. Before she could collect her thoughts, he said: "Are you sure you have no money? You must have some?"

"Look, what difference does it make? As it happens, I don't have any. A friend has invited me for a concert. You better leave now or I might change my mind about the police..." Ava was feeling quite safe by now as she walked past the doors of the Royal Festival Hall towards the bookshop where she was due to meet her friend. There was no sign of Richard anywhere. There were several familiar looking Indian faces milling around the foyer but none belonged to Richard.

The crowd was slowly disappearing into the hall. Indian concerts normally began late except at exalted venues like the Festival Hall. Just a few moments to go before the musicians start tuning their sitars, tablas; but yet no sign of Richard. He was a *professional listener*, if one can be described thus, of Indian classical music. Ava listened to all music mostly with her heart and that was enough for her. She would probably not remember the raga that was last played by Vilayat Khan in his last London concert or by Ravi Shankar in his last recital at the Barbican Hall; but Richard would. Ava would look at a painting and conclude: *this is good* or *I don't like that*; but Richard could spend hours telling you the history of the period, the story behind the picture, the technique, the colour combinations and what they signified. He was the best guide Ava ever had at The Louvre.

She could not believe it when her young friend turned up again, grinning enquired: "What happened to your friend?"

"I thought I told you to disappear." Ava could not think of anything else to say.

“What is happening here? So many Indians like you here...” He carried on ignoring Ava’s previous statement. His persistence finally paid off. Ava looked at him for the first time as a fellow human being; as an attractive, young, black man. It had just gone 7.30pm. She was tired and thirsty. A trip to The Ladies was becoming urgent. Under the circumstances, she had to disappear and let Richard wait for her on his arrival instead. She must have taken that split second longer to make up her mind as she heard him say: “Let me buy you a drink while you wait for your friend?”

Though stunned, Ava managed to say: “What? I thought you wanted my money because you had no money!”

“Okay, I said I was sorry...” He said apologetically but firmly.

“So, saying sorry makes it alright, eh? Now you want to buy me a drink?”

“I thought *you* had no money. I have money for a drink!” He offered gallantly.

“What shall we talk about? I don’t have the time. I’m here for the concert. My friend will be here any minute. Good-bye.” Ava said and marched off towards the sign that said Toilets, her eyes fixed on the main entrance doors, in case Richard walked in.

“We can talk about Gandhi... when you’re back.” She heard him say in reply to her previous question as she walked away.

When she returned, Ava saw the black youth sitting in one of the tables with two glasses of wine, one white, one red, waving at her, summoning her to join him. Ava felt she had to go back and clarify the situation. He was beaming a magnificent smile that said thank you for treating me like a human being: “Which one will you have?”

“You don’t give up; do you? I hope you are as determined in your studies?” she remarked.

“You are brave...; are you as brave always?” he asked in return.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, shall I?” she answered.

“Yes. And kind...” He waited as if gauging her response before adding: “and beautiful.”

“Steady on...” Ava said. “What are you up to? First you try to mug me, then you buy me a drink. Don’t you have friends you hang out with? Girls your own age?”

“I’ve never done this before. I’m no mugger. Just bored. Don’t like school or home or my friends who are into drugs or girls ... Life’s no good.” He was silent for a while, then continued: “You are brave to talk to me; I could’ve been a mugger.” Then he added: “First, my father left us; then my older brother. It’s just me and my mother now and she drinks a lot... and has bad friends, boy friends...”

“What’s your name? You told me you had no family...” Ava reminded him. He just shrugged and shook his head as if to say that he could not be held responsible for her naivety: “You can call me Martin...”

“Like Martin Luther King? That’s great... Thanks Martin for the drink; where did you get the money?”

“I found it...” He volunteered.

“You mean you stole it.” Ava said unkindly.

“Yes, I stole it. What does it matter? The rich people are thieves too.”

“Yes, it does matter and you know that. Since you wanted to talk about Gandhi earlier, let me remind you that Gandhi would not have approved.” She added confidently as if she was Gandhi’s conscience-keeper.

Ava was hoping that Richard would come to her rescue. But it was past 8.00pm, the concert had started, and she was sitting in the foyer having a drink with a complete stranger. *I owe him some money*, she reminded herself; the least she could do was to pay for the drinks.

Earlier on in the evening, when Ava had no great desire to give this young man any money, he would have taken it; but now, when she offered him some, he would not take it. *If a few pounds can help him feel good about himself, why should I deny him that?* In any case, Ava did not have enough money on her. Her travel-card was enough to take her home and she had enough food at home, if she felt hungry later at night. She rarely carried a lot of cash on her. Besides, she had no plans for making a charitable donation that evening considering the state of her personal financial affairs! *Still, when Richard arrives, she told herself, I’ll borrow some money from him and give it to Martin. Ten pounds would be more than enough.*

As the enigma of Richard’s non-arrival remained unsolved, she thought of an alternative solution. Requesting Martin to wait at the table, she disappeared not saying where she was going. Before he could ask, Ava was gone; her glass half-full, suggesting she would be back. Making a detour, she went to the bookshop looking for a copy of Gandhi’s *Autobiography*. Ava was truly excited when she located a copy and paid for it with her credit card. She had found the perfect gift for Martin.

When she rushed back to the table in anticipation of seeing the look on his face when presented with the book, she faced instead a profusely apologetic Richard mumbling something about traffic delays and British Rail. At that point, Ava was not interested in his excuse: “Where is Martin?” she exclaimed. “I want to give him this book ...” The table was empty; her half-empty glass still there, smudged with her lipstick.

“Is he here, too for the concert?” Richard exclaimed, referring to a common friend of theirs.

“No, not that Martin,” Ava sighed. “You know perfectly well he stopped talking to me when he learnt I was looking for a job in the City!”

Her eyes were still searching for Martin when Richard lightly kissed her cheeks and added: “It’s so good to see you; I have so much to tell you about my trip to India. I’m so sorry for being late. I hope we don’t have to wait for the interval to get in. It would be such a pity to miss the entire *alap*. But, how are you? You look well. How’s the job search going? So much to talk about...”

There was no doubt that Richard was truly pleased to see Ava. So was she. But his timing was terrible. Then Richard said: “You know, a very strange thing happened ... just before you came. As I walked in, this fellow asked me if I was looking for an Indian lady? I was so surprised. I asked him how he knew; he said you were waiting for me at this table and asked me to wait here for you. He then walked off and I still can’t figure out how he knew!” Richard sounded rather bewildered.

Ava decided to do the explaining later. “Which way did he go?” she asked urgently.

“He vanished through those doors!” Richard was even more astonished at her question. “You don’t know him, do you? I wouldn’t have thought so...” his voice trailed off in utter confusion.

“Just a minute...” Ava shouted back as she ran in the direction of the darkness that had enveloped Martin, clutching Gandhi’s *Autobiography* in my hand. Martin had simply melted into the night. Ava stood outside for a while hoping she might catch sight of him. But, the place was deserted. He had truly vanished this time. She returned, disappointed.

“He is not anybody you know.” Ava said finally. Then on seeing her clutched book, Richard asked: “Are you reading this too? I started reading it in India...” If he felt she was being obtuse in wasting even more time than they already had, considering they were extraordinarily late for the concert, he did not express it. After all, she had waited for him, and he was doing the same.

“Yes. No. Shall we go in?” With some such words, like characters in a Beckett play, they both stood in the emptiness of the foyer.

“Let’s go,” he echoed and took her arm as they walked towards the entrance doors.