

Chapter 6

Wonder Years

The next few years were ones of discovery and wonderment for the Scrimshankers. Adolescence is usually a magical and exciting time. These are years when the true joys of living are revealed and previews of what life has to offer are experienced for the first time. The human condition in all its glory, majesty, anxiety and absurdity, becomes abundantly clear as an unavoidable part of existence. It is a time when lifelong interests in literature, history, philosophy, science, mathematics, music and theology are forged, when young mortals begin their quest to reach for the stars and beyond. And, it all usually begins with the wonderful world of books and music.

George always had copious amounts of books at home. When he was a child in Long Island, New York, his mother had enjoyed going to all the yard sales in the neighborhood. She always made it a point of buying every age-appropriate book she could find. As a result, he had acquired all the children's classics as well as the complete series of both the *Tom Swift* and *Hardy Boys* books. When his family relocated to Bangalore, George had brought along most of his books with him. Later, when he met Swami and Venu, they introduced him to Enid Blyton novels. He had completed reading the entire *Famous Five* and the *Adventure* series in less than a year.

George's father was an avid reader of pulp fiction, particularly of the hard-boiled crime and adventure variety. There were bookshelves full of Mickey Spillane, Alistair MacLean, Desmond Bagley, Leslie Charteris, Perry Mason, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross MacDonald and James Hadley Chase in

the house. George had also discovered a suitcase of more adult paperbacks by Harold Robbins, Nick Carter and Ted Mark in the bottom of his father's bedroom cupboard.



Although Swaminathan did not have many books at home, his father, R. Venkatasubramanian, or Venkat as he was known, had always taken him to the British Council Library every Saturday morning since he was quite young.

The goal of the British Council in its charter was outlined as “promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilization by encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere.” The library was a godsend for the people of Bangalore. There were no other libraries that had the same selection of books and periodicals anywhere else in the city.

Venkat loved books, even though he was not a very prolific reader himself. His main reading material was the *Reader's Digest* he received in the mail each month. It usually took him two weeks to complete an issue from cover to cover. His hobby, and a source of immense pride and joy for him, was the shelf of *Reader's Digest* Volumes he had put together in the drawing room. These were arranged in chronological order and boasted every issue ever published since January 1961. To preserve and protect them, he had hardbound every six issues into volumes at the local printer. It was one indulgence he permitted himself. Each year's volume was bound in a different colored rexine and had the dates printed in gold on the spine.

Swami had been explicitly prohibited from removing any of the volumes from the shelf without his father's permission. He did so quite frequently, however, when his father was away. Once, while eating a ripe Alphonso mango and laughing uncontrollably at the “*Humor In Uniform*” page of the April 1969 issue, he had inadvertently stained the entire spread with sticky mango juice. Fortunately, his father wasn't aware of it yet.

The British Council Library was located next to St. Mark's Cathedral, above the popular Koshy's Restaurant. After their morning tiffin every Saturday, Venkat would take Swami to the library on his Vespa scooter. Father and son both enjoyed this

outing very much. Swami loved sitting behind his father on the scooter and hugging him around his waist as he breathed in the comforting and familiar smell of dhobi-starch and talcum powder on his father's shirt as they zigzagged their way through the crowded streets.

Ever since he was a young man, Venkat always dressed in exactly the same way: in white. Whether he was at the bank, at home, or elsewhere, he always wore his self-imposed uniform of starched white trousers, white half-sleeved shirt, thin black belt and black leather shoes with laces. He also usually carried a black, gold-capped, Parker fountain pen clipped to his left breast pocket.

"I used to always wear a white shirt and white pants when I was a boy in school. When I came out, I missed it so much that I decided that I would continue wearing it as my uniform for the rest of my life," he told Swami.

"A uniform gives a person pride, discipline and humility. Our beloved Mahatma Gandhi wore only a white dhoti for most of his life for this very reason," he added with fervor. Venkat loved to talk about his years as a young boy during the freedom movement.

"It was a time when Gandhiji inspired all Indians to have pride and patriotism," he reminisced. "I was quite young, but I still remember the excitement and hope during the years after independence. These days, I'm not sure what has happened to all that. Now, we have an Emergency put in place by another Gandhi that is curtailing our freedom. I am sure the Mahatma would be very disappointed with the developments in our country."

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared a state of emergency a few months earlier. Many civil liberties, including the freedom of the press, had been suspended. Several opposition leaders, including the popular labor organizer, George Fernandez, had been arrested and reportedly even been beaten by the police. Swami was very much influenced his father's strong political views and passionate outrage.

"You mean even the newspapers cannot write the truth about what is happening?" he had asked indignantly.

"Yes," said Venkat. "Until this Emergency is lifted, the Press is not allowed to write what they want about the government. This goes against the basic rights in a democracy like ours," he added, fuming with anger.



Entering the British Council Library was like stepping into another world. It was hard to imagine, once inside, that right outside there existed the chaos and incongruity that are part and parcel of every Indian city: On most days, one could see a couple of cows sprawled on the footpath outside amidst a heap of dung and hay; Vendors with little baskets attached to the back of their bicycles selling guavas, sliced cucumbers, roasted peanuts, mangoes and confectionery; Executives in suits and ties walking past nimbly, avoiding the garbage, mud and excrement on the streets; Shaggy-haired intellectuals smoking and reading newspapers on street corners as they made their way leisurely to Koshy's Restaurant for their daily rendezvous with friends; Pedestrians, cyclists, autorickshaws, motorbikes, scooters, Ambassador and Fiat cars, all vying with each other amidst a cacophony of horns, beeps and shouts; Young barefoot children dressed in rags chasing each other on the street while their parents worked at the construction site nearby, carrying loads of stone, sand and cement like Sisyphus up and down rickety ladders with little metal troughs balanced on their heads; A group of cheerful lepers sitting outside the big wooden gates of the majestic St. Mark's Cathedral, displaying their missing fingers and bandaged hands while begging for alms from people passing by; A young mother carrying a baby on her hip in a thin sari and no blouse, with emaciated breasts, selling newspapers and magazines to motorists at the traffic light.

These sights and sounds are so common and pervasive in Bangalore, that most of its denizens are quite immune to them. They might instead stare at a Western tourist taking photographs with his camera, and wonder in surprise what amongst these scenes would merit capturing on film for posterity.

Inside the library, however, the discipline and order of the British Raj was still impeccably maintained. There was a large sign posted just inside the doors that said, "SILENCE," and underneath it to emphasize the point, "Please Do Not Talk." Swaminathan knew from experience that even a slight whisper could attract the ire of the vigilant librarians at once. It was rumored that repeat offenders were barred from ever coming back.

Swaminathan loved the smell of the new books in their tight,