

THIRD EYE EDITION

End of an epoch

Dear Sonny,

I know I shouldn't be doing this. You expressly forbade me to write this piece and extracted promise from me not to do so. But what the heck. Sonny, promises, like nuts, are meant to be broken. Yhou have just reached a milestone and I just couldn't let go an opportunity like that. This may sound syrupy and full of maudlin sentimentality, mawkish to the point of embarrassing you. Guess I can't help it. What to do. I am like that only.

Sonny, yesterday was your last day in school. It happened quite suddenly. They just announced it and invited you to the class X farewell on the 12th. It gave me quite a turn, Omigosh. It seems just like yesterday when I had faced my last day in school, when I took autographs from the teachers, wept tears as we went around the classrooms and cheered up at the thought of being able to wear saries and make up to college, bunk classes and maybe even have a boyfriend! And now, it's your turn. Is God fast forwarding time or what? But there's a difference though. Boys don't cry. You are very macho about leaving school, keeping your feelings under wraps. But you let it slip that all of you left your classroom very reluctantly on that last day.

I remember the day you started school. You innocently assumed school was a place where papas and mamas sat on each side of every kid. So you gamely slipped into your chocolate half-pants, white shirt and picked up your bag. Your bright pink tiffin box (with the Donald Duck on it) was packed with goodies you liked. You sat in the classroom sucking your thumb. Trouble started when I began edging nervously out of the door. Your screams sounded like an air-raid siren. I just fled, covering my ears, close to tears. You were just two and a half. I had enrolled you in school because the stork was flying rapidly towards me with your baby brother and I wanted you out of the way for a few hours every day. And yet, I missed you dreadfully during those few hours. The sight of your tricycle, your clothes, your house slippers (so tiny!) were enough to make my eyes brim. I would fill a big beer mug with chicken and tomato soup, cover it up and put it on the dining table and rush off to get you. On the way I would buy a bar of Mango gum for you. At school, among a sea of identical children, I would scan for your face, my heart beating, my mouth dry, what if I lost you? And then you would call out to me and run to me as fast as your chubby legs could carry you and we would have a joyous reunion and unwary spectator could be forgiven for thinking it was a scene from a celluloid tear jerker, mother reunited with son lost in Kumbhmela etc. etc. On the way back, you would fall asleep in my arms and I would put you to bed with your milk bottle.

All this sounds like I was an angel of a mother. Far from it. I was a veritable witch at times. I got it into my head that you would have to get a seat at Don Bosco. I was hell-bent in getting you through the admission test. So, on those evenings when you wanted to cycle, or watch cartoons I made you slog over numbers and alphabets, names of fruits and flowers and vegetables., days of the week. I just would not let you enjoy your childhood. Mistakes on your part brought out angry, hurtful words from my mouth. My hand flew out to strike you. I was the slave driver, the tyrant. No wonder you adored your father who consoled you with kisses and chocolates., who took you on scooter-rides and let you play in your bath-tub as long as you wanted to. I was the gorgon.

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On the day you went to the Don Bosco interview. I dressed you in white, right down to your shoes. I didn't want you to get your colours goofed up. And when you were inside, I was seized by panic. What if you said the colour of your hair was white too? Apparently you didn't, for me got the acceptance card soon afterwards. I remember you, looking up at me, puckish, beaming "I will go to Don Bosco. Will they give me a rabbit now?" You see, I had shamelessly lied to you that everyone who gets in will get a rabbit from the school zoo. That had been enough for you to slog through your lessons.

The years were passing by. Soon your baby brother joined your school too. Endless rounds of weekly tests, parent teacher meetings, science exhibitions, sports days. You had boundless talent for staining your shirts, tearing the seat of your pants, losing your pencil box. Once you lost the whole school bag and I went around the field, roasting under the August sun, muttering under my breath, till I found it. And then, with a twinge of dismay. I noticed you had inherited my total incomprehension about anything to do with numbers. Then we began the tuitions. Oh yes, we had our share of tutors.

But it was the extra-curricular activities that wore my nerves to a frazzle. We once got you a wig, a beard, lengths of red cloth, and even a *trishul* to boot. We dressed you up as a sadhu. I was dead-sure you would bag the first prize. Only you refused to venture out of the front door.

And then, without even my noticing them, the changes crept in. Your voice cracked. You bolted the door when you dressed. You packed your school-bag yourself. You ate in the canteen instead of taking lunch. You studied without my help. And you were embarrassed when I went to fetch you from school. Then came a day when you cycled all by yourself to your tutorials. And people mistook your voice on the telephone as your papa's. And I had to crane my neck to look up at you.

You have been a steady, dependable chap throughout your growing years. No teen tantrums. No running wild. You have been gentle and protective about your kid brother. I regret the many times when I've left you alone at home as I worked at the office. The many times I was not there to welcome you home when you came back from school, many times when you wanted me to listen to your chatter; or nurse a bruised knee. And I just want to say I am so proud of you. I am so proud of the day a bully tried to get you to fight and you didn't hit back, because the boy had family problems, a recent bereavement. I am so proud when you delivered your speech before the governor and distinguished guests at a school function. I nearly burst with maternal pride when you explained a tough science experiment to visitors at your annual science exhibition. Your school may not have given you values that you will cherish throughout your life. It has given you wonderful teachers who you are. You don't realize it yet, but an epoch in your life is drawing to an end. And in every ending there is a new beginning. That's the beauty of life.