

## *My Father's Fountain Pens*



**Radha Nair**

Radha schooled in the Convent of Jesus and Mary (Delhi) and St. Joseph's Convent (Bombay), and graduated from Lady Shri Ram College (Delhi). She taught English at Women's Polytechnic (Madras and Coimbatore) for six years. Since 2007, she has been a freelance writer for the Hindustan Times (Mumbai), the Deccan Herald (Bangalore), and for the online editions of Outlook Traveller, India Traveller Travelogue, and Mathrabhumi (Calicut). She won the first prize in a short story competition conducted by the Deccan Herald in 2007. She has written many short stories based on her memories of family holidays in Calicut; one of these was published in Penguin First Proof, 2010.

His writing table was a study in perfection. Not a speck of dust on the polished rosewood table, with its enchanting whorls and wavy grains, which sacredly held, a fat Webster's dictionary, a Pitman's shorthand primer, a brass coffee percolator holding carefully sharpened pencils, two brass paper weights of ingenious design made in the I.N.S. Sivaji foundry soon after WWII, an eraser, a gum bottle, a bottle of Quink ink and blotting paper. There was also a handsome ledger, into which he meticulously entered the household expenses, payments made to the carpenter, farm hands, coconut pluckers and masons.

Inside one drawer would be a writing pad, with pale blue sheets of paper, embossed stylishly with the Bond watermark. There would also be his most precious possession, his Montblanc, the last in his collection of expensive pens.

My father's handwriting was calligraphy at its best. Perfectly spaced, his writing would appear like print, neat precise and upright. The graceful loops of his I's, H's, P's and G's were a joy to behold. The T's were distinctly crossed, and the J's and I's emphatically dotted.

His language matched his handwriting, crisp sentences, laced with humour, peppered with lively anecdote and local lore in one continuous zestful flow. There were no mistakes, no ugly scratches, or inserted words

Letter writing was a passion with him. Once he settled down to it, nobody dared disturb him, except a two-month-old kitten that drew his attention when fishermen sped past our house.

He wrote slowly, pausing only to draw a contented puff from a Navy Cut (*Editor's note: a cigarette brand*) or to tip the ash into an ashtray. He poured his soul into each letter he sent to his daughters, his naval friends, the bank, sundry job applications for needy neighbours, and requisitions for temple donations. He gave each one of them his undivided attention. For him, writing was the purest form of meditation, and when he was at it, his face was suffused with an inner glow.

Several drafts would be made before he finally reached for his crested pad. Then he would take out his Montblanc, carefully uncap it, check it for ink, open the letter pad and begin writing solemnly, as if it was the Magna Carta itself.

Beginning with the date and the salutation, his letter would emerge from his soul; perfect margins were maintained on either side till the end. He then signed off magnificently, with his initials, P.P. K., looped together in one grand flourish.

He bought his first Parker pen in Delhi in 1953. When not in its case, he polished it first with a clean white kerchief, and then clipped it safely in the breast pocket of his naval coat, before leaving for his South Block office. On his return, the first thing he would do was to nestle it gently in its case. The gold nib remained unchanged for years, for he took care never to drop it, or exert undue pressure on it.

One day, however, by some mischance, he left this pen in a taxi. He was distraught. He went over the events of the day, tried to remember the taxi driver's face, prayed to God that it would be returned to him, and lost many nights of sleep.

He bought a second Parker pen. This time he would not let it out of his sight. The Parker pen brought out all the grace and elegance of his writing. Those who received his letters treasured them for their lively style, and more for his stylish writing. The moment his Parker was in his hand, he lost touch with the world around him.

A few years later he was gifted a set of Sheaffer's pen and pencil. The pen had a sleek silver body, and a good nib, but for my father, nothing could match his Parker pen. In fact, when I went to college, the Sheaffer pen was mine for the asking.

Some time later, he misplaced the second Parker pen. By then he had got a tubby Montblanc, its black body contrasting vividly with its gold-rimmed cap and clip, crowned with a six-pointed star with rounded edges. Writing with a Montblanc gave him a sense of power and deep pride. He knew he was handling the Rolls-Royce among pens.

His letters continued to bring joy into the lives of many.

When he could write no more, the Montblanc went to my mother, who treasured it, more for the memories it carried of my father. She used it sparingly, only to write to my sister and me, or to fill out a cheque leaf.

With time, when she too could not remember many things, the Montblanc was stealthily lifted out of its case. It is now probably in the hands of a greedy uncle, who will never know its true worth!

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