

Of Figs and Guinea-Pigs

By Vengrai Parthasarthy

We were talking. Of cabbages and kings. Of cantaloupes and things. And about ourselves-Rukki my wife, Venky her brother and myself. It was Rukki who started off the debate.

"You know, I am weary of life. If death comes today I'll be ready to embrace it", she said.

"What's the matter with you?", inquired Venky. "You are only 63 and this is the time for you to smell the roses. You are talking as if you are a hundred years old and have reached the end of the road"

I butted in. "You see I am reminded of a story. There was this woodcutter who, day in and day out, went to the forest, spent middlemen to take the lion's share of the profits. He was tired of that life and would say 'Oh, Lord! when are you going to take me away from the daily torment. What's there to keep me going? My wife is dead and I have no children. Take me away, Oh Lord'. This was a daily prayer and one day God suddenly appeared before him and said 'Yes, my son, what do you want?' Taken aback and surprised that the moment had come too soon the woodcutter sheepishly said 'Oh, it is nothing, my Lord. I just wanted someone to give me a hand in lifting this bundle of wood. Can you...'

Venky smiled a knowing smile at my digression but Rukki was madder than a hornet. She hurled at me a glance which spelt murder.

"As if I am afraid of death", she said cuttingly. "I don't care a fig for life".

Rukki got into an expansive mood. "You see I have lived a fairly full life; done my duty to my two children who are well settled in life. I have enjoyed the delightful company of my grandchildren. I have done my bit for retarded children in India I rose to be the Principal of a school before I retired. And, my husband after an initial medical set back is now (touch wood!) in good time.

What more is there to live for? I have retired from the rat race and am merely watching the day go by and waiting to meet my Maker".

Venky mounted a verbal attack. "What are you talking about? Only one phase of your life is over. Now is the time for you to savour the bounties given by God; You should get out from the mental backwaters and join the mainstream. And, there are a hundred and one things you can do. The variety alone would keep you from getting bored and stagnant. Take a leaf from the lives of older Americans here. They have a zest for living. They are veterans, vulnerable and bent but with the will to enjoy life. Why, only yesterday I saw a matrimonial ad by a 69 year old woman for a husband. What do you say to that?"

"That is what I would call bizarre optimism", said Rukki. "She has to get to know the man who might well be a crotchety old crab. She must get to know his idiosyncrasies and adjust her life to his. A fat chance she has of making the marriage work. And, if it doesn't click what is to become of her. At her age she won't have time even to regret".

I felt like interrupting but kept my peace. If I joined it would become not a discussion but an argument and perhaps deteriorate into a yelling match.

"It is all a question of attitude. The problem with you is you. We live but only once, forgetting all the crap about reincarnation and all that. Let's lead a full life" That was Venky.

"Right. I don't have your mental make up. You go jogging five miles every day. And, every second year you go on a jaunt to some far off place and bring back sheaves of photos. I just can't afford it. Moreover I don't care for foreign trips. I can't stand the strain and the planning needed for it".

But there are a lot of other things you can do if you don't like traveling. You can get involved in

social activities. There are innumerable projects and programs tailored for senior citizens like you. In your own field of education you can volunteer to work in some school near your home. You can learn fabric painting or stained glass tinting. You can lend your services to some hospital. The choices are endless

"That's the trouble with you. You have got into a rut. You should get out of it and instead of just existing you should live it up. I don't know whether you have some secret sorrow. It is better you come out of it and become a part of the exciting things that are happening around you. You need a free-wheeling attitude".

Venky had provided a substantial snack for thought. Rukki got into a pensive mood. She said "You think that I can, at my age, take up some new activity?" she asked.

"Sure, why not?", asked Venky. "I'll take you to a Community college which offers many leisure time activities. You can learn German or Spanish. You can pick up computer programming. You can even learn some fancy cooking. Why not? You may not earn money but then.....Venky trailed off.

"I don't care about money. What I want is something which will grip me. Hey, I liked the course on Italian cooking you mentioned. I hate cooking if I have to do it, but not, if it is out of my own free choice in which case I love the opportunity for creativity and improvisation. Yes cooking is the thing. I can roll out Pizzas and Ravioli and other exotic dishes and experiment..."

"On me", I joined in before she could complete the sentence. Perhaps I sounded like a guinea-pig already or is it a lamb being readied for the slaughterhouse!