

# BIRTHDAY

PARUL KAPUR

When the New Delhi heat became oppressive like this, climbed past a hundred degrees and burned relentlessly into the evening, Mrs. Shah would give up any plans of going out to shop or join a friend at the club for afternoon tea. She would let loose her hair from its bun, unwrap the silky folds of her sari, and nap in the cool of her bedroom until Mr. Shah returned home from the office. But this afternoon, after she had drawn the blinds and turned on the air conditioner, she did not go to sleep. Instead, she sat down to write a stack of clown-faced invitations for her son's birthday party in two weeks. People will always remember Arun's first birthday, she decided, mentally listing all the arrangements to be made. I must put in a special order at the sweet shop, select the cake. Chocolate? Or should it be plain with chocolate ice cream? Of course, there will be the chocolate truffles from Harrod's. Mr. Shah had just returned from a business trip to London where he had picked up a five-pound box of chocolate truffles she had asked him to buy for Arun's party. A sudden sharp rapping at the door broke her train of thought.

"What is it?" she asked with a trace of annoyance.

"Memsahib," the servant called, "please come quickly to the baby's room. The sweeper has found a snake."

Mrs. Shah rushed to the blue-and-yellow nursery and found Arun standing in his crib, crying. "Raja," she called out, reaching to pick him up. They had called him Prince ever since he was born; there was something regal about him even at such a young age. He would be a great, rich man, Mrs. Shah thought, admiring his broad forehead and well-shaped nose.

"What happened to my little raja?" she cooed, petting his forehead.

"Look, Memsahib," the sweeper said, opening a paper bag containing a thin black strip of reptile. "Cobra," he announced. Mrs. Shah thought it might have been rubber except for a trickle of blood seeping out from where its thumb-sized head had been smashed.

She shrank back. "Where did you find it?" Then turning to the servant, "Go fetch the ayah," she ordered.

"It was curled around the foot of the crib," the sweeper replied, indicating the exact spot. "I hit it with the broom handle. One good thing about my being late in doing the sweeping," he laughed faintly, "God let me kill the snake before it could harm the baby."

"Yes, yes. Well done." Mrs. Shah agreed, "You'll get a reward for this." Hugging the child against her, she decided he had earned a five rupee tip. "Come to my room before you leave today. Now go quickly, throw that thing out."

When she walked into the nursery, the ayah's hands were still wet from doing her washing outside.

"Where were you?" Mrs. Shah demanded, "There was a snake under Arun's bed just now. A cobra. He could have been bitten and died."

The ayah reached out for the whimpering child but Mrs. Shah pulled back. "Leave him to me," she said, "How can you be so careless?" In her anger, Mrs. Shah did not remember giving the boy's maid the afternoon off.

"I'm sorry, Memsahib, but I stayed with him until he went to sleep. Then I went to my quarters to do some washing. Thank God he's all right."

"Yes. He could have been killed this afternoon thanks to your negligence," Mrs. Shah scolded, her large brown eyes narrowing.

"I'll get him some milk," the ayah offered.

"No, you've done enough already." Mrs. Shah turned away. "Go finish your laundry; I'll take care of him myself. Just be back by four o'clock."

The ayah returned to her quarters at the far end of the bungalow. She sat down on a rope-string bed across from which a picture of Krishna, garlanded with wilted marigolds, hung on the wall. She bowed her head in thanks for Arun's being saved. Then, too disturbed to hang her wash, she sank into a deep, forgetful sleep as the sun blazed through the small window all afternoon long, scorching her through her thin cotton sari.

Finishing up the invitations in her chilled green bedroom, Mrs. Shah decided not to tell her husband about the snake charmer. It was the only way for the cobra to have gotten into the house, and Mr. Shah would shout up a storm. There were enough stories about that kind of people taking revenge, he would reproach her, if they felt they hadn't been paid

enough. How could she haggle over a few rupees like that? No, decided Mrs. Shah, she would not tell him about being allured by the charmer's music as he wandered down the road, and stopping him to put on a little show for Arun on the front lawn. She had held the boy high above the undulating reptiles, and when the spectacle was over, she insisted that two rupees was enough. The man was an argumentative, surly type, who hankered for more. Finally, she just tossed two bills at his feet and stalked inside, slamming the door behind her. But somehow he had managed to slip in his revenge. They only left behind newborn snakes, the ones with teeth, rather than the more frightening-looking older snakes whose teeth had been removed so they could be easily handled.

Mr. Shah would never let his wife forget her mistake if he found out. He would use it like a needle with which to sting her in angry moments or in front of friends, when after a few drinks, he found satisfaction in belittling her. He lived by the philosophy that if you keep the poor happy they wouldn't harm you. That's why he gave his old shirts to the servant, Bahadur, and even presented him once with an old Timex. At cocktail parties, he boasted that he had kept Bahadur for ten years, even since his bachelor days in Calcutta. The servant had followed him everywhere he was transferred—from Calcutta to Poona to Guhati and finally to Delhi. But his wife didn't have the same knack of keeping servants happy, and every few months she was looking for a new sweeper or mundu or driver. Somehow the ayah had been the only one she had been able to hold on to for nearly a year, but the woman was straight out of a village and didn't expect the same privileges as the other Delhi servants.

Mrs. Shah always defended herself by saying that in her mother's house it was enough to pay the servants their wages and give them quarters to keep them loyal. There was no need to spoil them with tips and gifts and permission to watch the Hindi movie on TV on Sunday nights. And then her husband laughed and said that was the way things were done in small towns, but not in New Delhi. So when Mr. Shah came home that evening, his wife said nothing about the snake.

"Darling," she said, as he poured himself a Scotch, "we must make an appointment to have Raja's portrait done for his birthday. What do you think?"

"By all means," he said, "Go ahead. But go to the best. What about that fellow in the Regency Hotel?"

"Yes, everyone says he's quite good. He's the fellow who did Ashu's wedding."

Two days later, Mrs. Shah dressed Arun in his new raw silk birthday outfit and red patent leather shoes, and took him to the photographer to have his portrait taken. Then she fed him ice cream at the hotel coffee shop before going to order a cake at a bakery near their house. She asked for a little prince to be drawn in icing on the cake, crowned with bits of chocolate and jelly drops. At Hari Lal's traditional sweet shop across the market square, she put in an order for some traditional snacks. They should be made only with pure milk and butter, she warned the shopkeeper. She had been coming to the shop regularly and would not tolerate any adulterated food.

"No, Memsahib," Hari Lal assured her, "we make only quality sweets. And don't worry, for your son's birthday we'll use only the finest ingredients. Our milk comes fresh from Moti Bagh every day, ask anyone."

The sun was beginning to burn, so Mrs. Shah covered the baby's head with a white hanky and began making her way back to the car. Suddenly she found herself being trailed by a dark-skinned leper pushing his wife along in a wooden cart. The woman held a tiny blackish infant up to her breast with one arm and reached out with the other, her hand cupped and trembling for a coin. Mrs. Shah quickened her pace but the lepers kept up with her, the woman likening her suckling infant to Arun, then pathetically gesturing to his belly. Mrs. Shah clutched her son tighter and stared straight ahead, waving the beggars away until she got to the blue Fiat where the driver dozed behind the wheel.

"Come on, Alam Singh, let's go," she ordered, climbing hurriedly into the car. They were outside her window now, their faces grimaced in that pathetic mask all beggars wore, their cupped hands gesturing to their mouths in dull mime. Mrs. Shah snapped her head forward and did not roll the window down for a breeze until they were on the main road.

She herself put Arun down for a nap that afternoon. It wasn't good for him to become as attached to the ayah as he was becoming, calling out for her when he woke up instead of his mother.

"Who is Mummy's big boy?" she cooed. "Who's going to buy Mummy lots of perfumes and saris and take care of her when he grows up, ha? You'll look after Mummy, won't you, my little Raja?" The baby smiled up

at the pleasant voice, and Mrs. Shah knew she had never loved anyone so much.

At the beginning of the week of the party, she ordered for the birthday dinner five kilos of chicken over her husband's protests that chicken was too expensive and now she really was going too far with the celebration. But Mrs. Shah was determined for people to remember her son's first birthday. She went to the storeroom at the far end of the kitchen to check on the other supplies, thinking she might need more basmati rice or saffron for the curry. As she pulled open the door, she was startled by a figure in a dim corner of the tiny room.

"Who's there?" she demanded, snapping on an overhead bulb.

It was the servant's helper, a young mundu she had hired a few weeks ago, his hands deep in a binful of sugar. A bowl packed with pure ghee and packages of lentils and almonds lay at his side.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Mrs. Shah demanded, walking over to where he stood.

"Nothing, Memsahib. I was just getting some things ready for your dinner this evening."

"Look, this is the second time I've caught you in here like this. Don't lie to me." She examined the pilfered food. "What fancy tastes you're developing. Almonds? Pure ghee? Do you have any idea how much these cost me a kilo?"

"Of course, Memsahib. It's all for you, after all."

"Quiet. I've had enough of you. Go pack up your things and find someone else to steal from. Leave me alone."

"But Memsahib," the servant said, resisting an impulse to lash out at her, "please listen to a poor man. I just needed a little food to last me until the next salary. I've been sending money back to my village . . ."

"Yes, yes I've heard your story before, and all your promises not to steal. But they don't mean a thing, I've seen. Go now, gather up your things."

The mundu's dark eyes tightened and fixed upon Mrs. Shah indignantly. He deliberately brushed against her on his way out to his room in back of the courtyard, where he collected his few clothes, dishes and letters from his village into a worn satchel. He worked automatically, so furious that he could not think about where he would go next or how he would continue sending money home for his brothers and sister.

familiar route from the backdoor to the baby's room. The mundu turned the door-knob noiselessly and held his breath as he walked to the crib. The handkerchief in his hand was damp with sweat as he moved his arm above the sleeping child. In one swift stroke he clamped his palm down on the boy's mouth. A sort of cry escaped before being muffled by the cloth. Quickly he lifted the boy up, and quietly but swiftly made his way back to the kitchen door and across the brick courtyard, crouching in the shadows of the servants' quarters away from the floodlight of the moon. The door to the alley behind the house was still half-open as he had left it, and as he closed it he eased the pressure on the boy's mouth to let him breathe easier.

The mundu walked for hours to a bus stop at the outskirts of the city where busses left all night long for the northern hills where his village lay. He would take the child, not to his village, but to a more remote hill station where a man he knew had use for such children. In a paltry roadside town at the Punjab border, a man would pay up to 200 rupees for the child. What would be done to the boy after that, the mundu thought as he rocked back and forth on an old bus climbing the steep, dark roads, would be what the family deserved. As the sun came up, he changed busses, one of the many changes he would make crisscrossing his way up the north hills, and knew they would soon find the baby gone.

It was the ayah who first saw the empty crib. She tried to reassure herself that Mrs. Shah had taken Arun into her bedroom early on the morning of his birthday. But Mrs. Shah was still drowsy, and Mr. Shah was getting dressed for the office, when the ayah knocked on the door asking for Arun.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Shah asked. "He must be in his room."

"No," cried the ayah.

Mrs. Shah sat up started, and ran to the nursery. She saw the birthday clothes and red shoes laid out in anticipation of the day. Her eyes moved hesitantly towards the crib, afraid to confront what she suddenly knew in her heart was the truth. The loud shriek when she glimpsed the empty bed came involuntarily, almost automatically, sounding mournfully through the bungalow.

The police were summoned and the servants gathered up as Mrs. Shah lay faint in the drawing room sofa, her husband beside her. "Have you let any servants go recently, anyone who might hold a grudge against you?"

was one of the inspector's first questions. Mrs. Shah lay still, rigid as rock, and whispered, "yes, yes." The hatred in the mundu's eyes came back to her and she knew who had taken Arun. But she could not say where he came from or who his family was; the servant who had recommended him had left her a few weeks earlier. She knew nothing about the mundu except that he had a family in a village somewhere. "Ask the other servants," she demanded the police, "they'll tell you all about him." But no one had come to know much about the mundu, who was too reserved and distrusting to disclose his background. "Talk," Mrs. Shah screamed at the servants, "talk." Then she saw the snake eyes in her mind again and knew it was futile.

Getting off the bus at Pahtankhot, the mundu drew the blanket around the whimpering child's arms. They would be ruined soon. Sliced off at the wrist or elbow, or perhaps a foot would be maimed. He would be disfigured somehow before being sent off to beg in a large city. It would add to his appeal, would elicit the pity that brought in a regular income. And the boy's fine features, incongruous with his pathetic circumstances, would prompt an even more generous hand, especially from European and American tourists. They were not immune to such visible suffering, and their guilt could be exploited where the Indian sensitivity was inured. The mundu was sure the boy would fetch a top price. He would start the bargaining high, at double what he expected to get, he thought, climbing aboard the last bus for the hills under a blazing white sun.