

Somebody shouted from the house, "Would you send the child's uncle inside?"

Outside, sitting on the *duree* in the winter sun, I was feeling somewhat sad. I was surprised to hear my name. Some people sitting near me repeated the message which had been received from the house. I got up. Inside there was a musty atmosphere mingled with the sobbing and wailing of women. I did not know why I had been summoned into the room. *Maami Ji* (maternal aunt) pulled me near her and whispered, "Balbir, you are the one who will have to carry Kisha's child in your arms." I did not answer but looked in cold amazement at little Pinti wrapped in a white cloth.

Kisha is my first cousin, one of my uncle's daughters. She is two years older than I. We have been very close to each other since childhood. I know she has a special affection for me. Kisha was born in a family which was continually faced with suffering. The little wealth the family had was lost during the Partition. Soon after arrival in India, my uncle had developed a stomach ulcer. He died during surgery. His wife whom I called *Chaachi*, had no sons, but four daughters. The eldest one got married while uncle was alive. Kisha was at school at the time of her father's death, as was Sushila, and the youngest one, Baby, was then only five years old. After uncle's passing away, it was my aunt who had to carry the burden of raising the family alone.

In those days we were naive and innocent, totally unaware of the importance of wealth and implications of calamities such as the loss of the bread winner in an uprooted family. Life for us children went on as if no tragedy had struck the family. Our childhood ended

SHORT STORY

FRAMES

○ Balwant Bhaneja

when we suddenly felt silly to play hide and seek and I-spy.

Kisha had just completed high school that year. She had decided (at least that's what she said) that, because of the financial constraints at home, she would not go for higher studies. Instead she would look for a job so that she could put all her efforts into getting her two younger sisters educated. One day she said to me, "Now watch me and see what I am going to do for the family. I am going to tell mother to stop working and sit at home. I am going to find a good job and support Sushila so that she can become a doctor some day—then Sushila could look after the younger one."

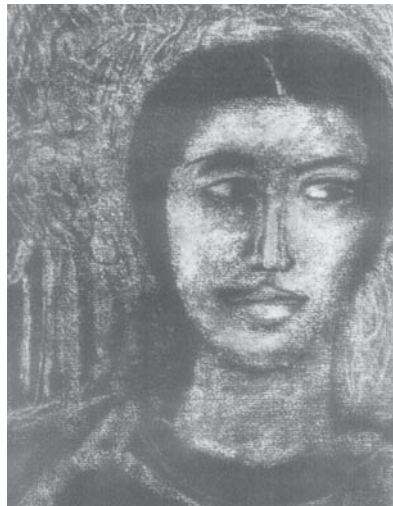
I was so impressed with her logic that I believed every word of it. Her job did serve some purpose: her mother was able to find a husband for her. Kisha's high school education

and a job proved very useful in getting Kisha a husband within a year of her starting work, without her mother having to pay any dowry.

Marriage does change people. Being married seemed to have bestowed upon Kisha a special authority. Though affectionate, there was a change in Kisha's tone while speaking to me. She would address me as a novice who had a lot to learn about the mysteries of married life. I was amazed at her non-stop gossip and criticism, whether it was of her mother, sisters, or her husband, or even Swaraj *ji's* family.

"Balbir," she would mutter, "Now tell me, did I commit a crime asking mother to get a new suit for Swaraj *ji* for Diwali?" A tailored woollen suit was an expensive proposition for my aunt, especially when she had one given only last year at Kisha's wedding. Or for her husband's family she would say, "I wish we were well-off, particularly when we are no longer with Swaraj *ji's* parents. Balbir, you won't believe when we were leaving their house, my in-laws even asked me to take off all my gold bangles and *mangalsutra*, and leave those behind."

I did not know how to respond to such stories. She was right. I was too immature in the matter of family affairs. After yet another rift with her in-laws, Kisha's husband had been able to get a modest quarter rented in a government colony.



“First it was frightening to be on our own. But now as we have two salaries coming into the house, it’s getting better.”

She invited me to visit their home where I would be most welcome.

Because of my studies, I had to be away from Delhi for some years. One summer, while home on vacation, I decided to visit Kisha. She was living in a tenement house somewhere in Ramesh Nagar. It was one of those yellow row houses built only few years ago at the outskirts of Delhi. Considering her family consisted of two, her husband and herself, the size of their accommodation was more than adequate—two rooms and a kitchen. I was taken by surprise by an attractive calendar on the wall in the front room. It was a popular calendar that was being distributed by a pharmaceutical company which produced powdered milk for infants. It was one of those calendars with separate months, days and dates which could be recycled every year. However its most interesting aspect was the colourful picture of a bouncy baby, invitingly looking at everyone in the little room. Kisha had been married for three years. I remember asking her why she was still without a child. All the other cousins and family friends who were married around the same time as Kisha had two children, at least, by now.

Kisha said, “It’s either a job or a family.”

I insisted, “But you must be planning to have a family sometime.”

“Heaven forbid, don’t you think there are enough children in this country already,” she replied. “Now look at *Didi*, with the number of kids she has, what would you call her place—a home or a hell house? Has anybody ever had time to look after those children? I dread putting my feet in that house.”



I knew what she meant. The reason her elder sister’s home was always a mess was because, even though like Kisha, *Didi*’s family lived in two rooms, *Didi*’s family comprised of ten members—six children, husband and wife, and the old ones, the mother and father-in-law. On top of it, *Didi*’s husband had no great source of income. He was a commercial artist who painted signboards for shops in the refugee colony.

I teasingly continued, “Kisha, we are not giving up on you yet.”

Irritated, she looked at me, “Why don’t people leave us alone? Have you nothing better to worry about?”

I was taken aback at her sharp retort. I looked around the room and told myself that this dislike of children on Kisha’s part was a pretence, the reality was the calendar on the wall with the picture of the cuddly baby. I did not say anything further, but could not help smiling.

Two years later, Kisha was blessed with a daughter. We were all very pleased that, after all these years, she had become a mother. Her unusual state had been the cause of several rumours, one of them being that being unable to produce a child had led to several heated arguments between herself and her mother-in-law. When I visited Kisha a few weeks later at her home, she seemed to be delighted with her new role.

“Balbir, don’t ask me about my happiness, ask Swaraj *ji* how happy he is.” She added, “Wherever we would go, the first question put to us

would always be the same, how come you do not have any children yet. Even though on the outside we pretended indifference and kept a brave face, within us we felt ashamed. Swaraj *ji* would say to me at night, ‘Kisha, could we not have one child at least?’ I understood him but I did not know what to do. We consulted many doctors, nurses, and midwives. I was prepared for any necessary procedure or operation. No one was able to find any physical defect.” She stopped for a moment to pick up the baby from the cot, then added, “Now I want to forget about the past. I have my little girl and nothing could be better than this.” Smiling she said, “She is only five weeks old and Swaraj *ji* thinks she has already started to talk to him.” I later found that it had been a difficult caesarean delivery, and the couple would not be able to have another child.

I asked Kisha to pass the baby to me. Looking at her half-closed eyes, I felt for a fleeting moment, that the baby smiled at me, and then she seemed to fall asleep and wake up and smile again, and on the game went. I found myself entangled in this play, which both the baby and I seemed to enjoy. I asked, “So what are you calling your little doll?” With a sparkle in her eyes, she said, “I am calling her Munni and he, Pinti. Let’s see who eventually wins.”

I placed Pinti back into her arms. While doing so I watched Kisha’s face which held an aura of total contentment—as if the happiness of the whole world had been put together for her in that child in her arms. I looked around the room. The old calendar was still there with the smiling picture of cuddly child.



Soon after completing my training, I obtained a job with a private company that required me to

stay away from Delhi for almost six months of the year, travelling. When I returned home from these trips there was very little time to visit relatives. During such a period of life one is more interested in cultivating outside contacts and making friends with those associated through one's work. One starts taking relatives for granted, tending to see less and less of them.

One evening when I returned home, my mother had a message from Kisha inviting me to dinner. I was surprised. "But why me?" I asked. Mother, annoyed at me, responded, "If she has invited you and not us, what's wrong with that? She sees us everyday. You're always away or busy with your friends." Mother was getting her dig at the men in the family... When would we begin to realise the importance of keeping in touch with relatives and so on. To avoid getting drawn into an argument I said, "Did I say I am turning down the invitation? When does she want me to come?" Mother looked pleased, "Tomorrow evening."

Eagerly anticipated meeting Kisha once again, especially to find out how she was enjoying her mother's role. Pinti must be around four by now, I thought. Next evening I took my scooter and drove to Ramesh Nagar. It was the same neighbourhood, but looked more worn out because of the increase in tenement population and general neglect in upkeep. I had just parked the scooter outside the house when I noticed kids circling the bike. The children started fooling with the horn, light switch, handle bars, some even tried to kick the starter. I had to strike a deal with the oldest boy in the group to mind the vehicle. On hearing the commotion, Kisha came running out. Seeing me mired in this situation, she laughed. With a voice full of authority she got the kids out



of my hair in an instant. Then she turned to me laughingly, "Now we can see how you will manage when your own children bother you." Having been a chronic bachelor, I felt slightly uncomfortable at that thought. I could see she had not yet lost her old zest. She added, "*Chaachi ji* tells me she has found a nice girl for you."

I kept a straight face, "Is that so? Glad you invited me, otherwise who would have told me this great news!"

Bringing me inside the house, she said, "I can see you are no longer the quiet little Balbir." Suddenly, I was greeted by a crowd of children shouting, playing and jumping all over. I jested, "Hey Kisha, how come so many kids, I thought you had only one." She knew I was teasing. "Yes, I have only one. These are *Didi's* children. She has been sick lately, and as the kids had holidays she sent these devils here for a while."

"Where is *Swaraj ji*? I enquired about her husband.

"He has gone to the evening college." She said.

I was surprised. "Evening college?"

"He's studying for his M.A. You know it's very important for his career. For getting promoted as an Assistant in the Ministry, he has to pass some UPSC exam." Then

jokingly she added, "You know as the father of a daughter he has to start saving or a decent dowry for Pinti."

I looked around for Pinti. She was hiding behind the door of the bedroom. Kisha called her, "Come out here Pinti, and say *namaste* to uncle." I could not remember when I saw Pinti last. The only vivid memory I had of her was of the time when I had her in my arms as an infant. The little girl in front of me was a shy, thin-looking girl, not yet sure of the stranger in the house. She giggled and ran out of the house to play with *Didi's* kids.

"Oh, why are we standing here. Come with me into the kitchen and we shall talk there."

I remembered I was carrying a package of sweets in my hand. "I forgot I picked up sweets on the way— for you and the family." She seemed pleased. In the kitchen she gave me a wooden stool to sit on. She sat on another one near the two kerosene stoves. While she was poking into pots and pans on the stoves, she started filling me in on the details about her life, *Swaraj ji's* family, and the other kin— who died, who got married, who had children, who had a fight with in-laws, relatives and so on. She told me how her mother was having great difficulty in finding a decent match for her younger sisters. If I could recommend anyone... She went on about *Swaraj's* family, how his parents were still upset with him, and the problems he was having at work in getting promoted to the next step of his career ladder. If I knew anybody in his Ministry, to put in a word for his promotion...

I looked at my watch. "Kisha, when will *Swaraj ji* be back?"

"You never know with him. Sometimes he comes by ten, sometimes by eleven."

I rose, explaining I must leave. She pushed me down by my shoulders and said bossily, “Arrey, we all know that you have become a big man, now will you sit down, or I will have to make you sit by force!”

I had no choice. She said, “Let the kids eat first, and then we shall follow.”

I was watching her intently. With each facial and body movement, I tried to recollect a picture of her from our childhood days. She had been married for eight years. Still youthful and vibrant, she was now more calm and steady. The reflection of yellow and blue flames from the nearby stoves was wavering on the dark skin of her face. Entranced, I kept looking at her.



To break the silence, I asked, “You used to work in an office, did you like it?”

“Oh, it was fun in a way. Getting ready in the morning and going out in the wide world, experiencing new challenges, meeting new people, doing things which men usually do.”

“Then why did you leave the job?”

She started dishing up food for the children. “That was because of

Pinti. Her father is crazy about her. He said to look after Pinti, my place was at home.”

I said, “What about money?”

“Money. Swarajji said that’s his job. It’s amazing how things which once looked so necessary are no longer of importance.” I know she was referring to her lack of interest in an office job.

Kisha shouted to *Didi’s* eldest son, “O Channi, bring all the children over here.”

Channi was about 14 and it was he whom I had earlier asked to guard my scooter. He seemed to have good leadership qualities—got the whole gang together and brought them to the door of the kitchen. One by one as the plates were handed to them, they disappeared into the inside room. Kisha then softly called to Pinti who was shyly hiding behind the door. “Come on Pinti dear, look, uncle has brought sweets for you.”

I lifted Pinti from behind the door and put her on my lap. Kisha set the child’s plate next to mine. “Now you eat here,” she instructed Pinti. “If you go inside, you will get into trouble and you will cry. I won’t come in to help you out, understand!”

Somehow Pinti figured out that her mother wanted to pay her special attention. She sat down beside me. Channi came to call her, but Kisha cut him short, “You children eat in the room. Pinti says she will eat with uncle here.” Then she said to Channi, “Come, take these two pieces of *paneer* (home made cheese) but do not broadcast to others that you got the extra portion.” When the other children came for seconds, she announced, “No *paneer*, only the gravy if anybody wants it.”

I noticed that she did not offer sweets to her sister’s children. Once

the children were gone, she looked at me in exasperation, “Balbir, *Didi* has spoiled her children. The other day, I took Channi to my friend’s place. He had eaten his lunch here. But as soon as my friend offered something to eat, he sat down and polished the whole plate as if he had never eaten before. Isn’t that poor upbringing?”

A thought crossed my mind that if instead of Channi, Pinti had sat at that table gorging the food, would she have made such disparaging remarks about her own child? Pinti was about to finish her meal. She took a *gulab jamun*, and put the tiny ball of sweet in her little mouth. I asked if she liked it. She nodded shyly, her mischievous eyes with a twinkle acknowledging that the sweet was indeed very tasty.



Afterward, Pinti went near the tap. Like a well-trained child, she washed her hands, and dried them with the towel hanging nearby. Then she came near me and said, “*Mamu* uncle, you give me a kiss, I will give you one and then I will go and play with Channi *bhai*.” Her innocent comment once again reminded me of the baby I had held in my arms when she was only a few weeks old. I hugged and kissed her. One could feel the tenderness with which Kisha watched all this. When

Pinti left the room, we stared at each other for a moment. I could see her face— her eyes and lips, wanting to say with pride and delight, “Balbir, do you see that is my child!”

That night, when I passed by the front room in Kisha’s home I was surprised to see the picture of the bouncing cuddly baby of the calendar was now set in a golden picture frame.



It was at work that I heard the sad news. A colleague had received the message. “Mr. Kohli, there was a call for you this morning. Do you have a sister living in Ramesh Nagar?” “Yes,” I replied. “Her daughter passed away at three o’ clock this morning.” I was stunned. I was told that Pinti had been suffering from a fever for a while. Then her temperature suddenly rose. Pinti was racked with shivering and breathed with great difficulty. Despite all the care and the presence of a doctor, nothing could be done to save her.

I was now staring blankly at the small figure of Pinti draped in the white cloth. I remembered the time when Pinti had come rushing up to me and, jumping into my lap had tenderly kissed me and run out... I heard the priest instructing me, “As a maternal uncle of the child, you have to carry the child’s body to the cremation ground.”

I looked at Kisha among the wailing women. I was thinking of the pleasant evening we had spent at her place a couple of months before— her home full of kids, laughter, her doting affection for Pinti, which made her seem so secure and settled. Now distraught and lost, sitting beside the body of her daughter, I wished I could console her. I wanted to say, “You



are young Kisha and when the pain eases, you will have another child.” But I knew that was not possible.

The only thing I could do was to hug her and say, “Everything will be alright.” She cried out, “No, it won’t!” and burst into tears. I felt her grip tightening on my wrist. It was as if my bones would crumble. Then the grip loosened, and she had no strength left to continue the hold. Kisha’s body sagged and slipped through my arms to the floor, into the circle of wailing women in white clothes surrounding us.

Much later I remembered the significance of the calendar picture. Now that Pinti and all the dreams had died, I was sure it would be removed, never to return. □

Balwant Bhaneja’s short fiction has been published in India and Canada, including MANUSHI. Recently, his radio adaptation of Ajit Dalvi’s play “Mahatma versus Gandhi” and the English translation of Vijay Tendulkar’s “Cyclewallah” were broadcast by the BBC World Service.

An Appeal To Our Subscribers

A lot of copies of MANUSHI get lost or stolen in the mail. We appeal to you to let us know if your copy of MANUSHI is not reaching you. A sure sign that you didn’t receive an issue due to you is when your subscription skips one or more numbers - for example, if you get MANUSHI 122 and 124 but not MANUSHI 123.

It is very important to us that you stay closely connected with MANUSHI and do not miss any issue. Therefore, we make it a point to send duplicate copies when a subscriber writes to let us know about copies not received. However, we can send duplicate copies only if you let us know within one month of the succeeding issue number.

Please help us to reach you with every issue.