

CHEF

A Novel

Jaspreet Singh

B L O O M S B U R Y

NEW YORK • BERLIN • LONDON

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Bloomsbury USA, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Published by Bloomsbury USA, New York

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA HAS BEEN APPLIED FOR.

ISBN: 978-1-60819-085-0

First published in Montréal by Véhicule Press in 2008
First U.S. edition 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in the United States of America by Worldcolor Fairfield

They make a desolation and call it peace.
Galgacus, 84 AD

The cold is eating into the center of my brain.
Thomas Bernhard

1

For a long time now I have stayed away from certain people.

I was late getting to the station and almost missed the *Express* because of the American President. His motorcade was passing the Red Fort, not far from the railway terminal. The President is visiting India to sign the nuclear deal. He is staying at the Hotel Taj and the chefs at the hotel have invented a new kebab in his honor. All this in today's paper. Rarely does one see the photo of a kebab on the front page. It made my mouth water.

Not far from me, a little girl is sitting on the aisle seat. A peach glows in her hand. Moments ago she asked her mother, What do we miss the most when we die? And I almost responded. But her mother put a thick finger on her lips: Shh, children should not talk about death, and she looked at me for a brief second, apologetically. Food, I almost said to the girl. We miss peaches, strawberries, delicacies like Sandhurst curry, kebab pasanda and rogan josh. The dead do not eat marzipan. The smell of bakeries torments them day and night.

Something about this exchange between mother and daughter has upset me. I look out the window. The train is cutting through villages. I don't even know their names. But the swaying yellow mustard fields and the growing darkness

fills me with disquiet about the time I resigned from the army. I find myself asking the same question over and over again. Why did I allow my life to take a wrong turn?

Fourteen years ago I used to work as chef at the General's residence in Kashmir. I remember the fruit orchard by the kitchen window. For five straight years I cooked for him in that kitchen, then suddenly handed in my resignation and moved to Delhi. I never married. I cook for my mother. Now after a span of fourteen years I am returning to Kashmir.

It is not that in all these years I was not tempted to return. The temptation was at times intense, especially when I heard about the quake and the rubble it left behind. But the earth shook mostly on the *enemy* side. During my five years of service I was confined to the Indian side – the more beautiful side.

The beauty is still embedded in my brain. It is the kind that cannot be shared with others. Most important things in our lives, like recipes, cannot be shared. They remain within us with a dash of this and a whiff of that and trouble our bones.

The tumor is in your brain, said the specialist. (Last week exactly at three o'clock my CAT scan results came back to the clinic. The dark scan looked quite something inside that box of bright light.) His finger pointed towards an area which resembled a patch of snow, and next to it was a horrifying shape like the dark rings of a tree. Three months to a year maximum, he said. Suddenly I felt very weak and dizzy. My voice disintegrated. The world around me started withering.

I walked the crowded street back home. Cutting through my own cloud, stepping through the fog. My mother greeted me at the door. She knew. My mother already knew. She (who cooked every meal for me when I was young) knew what I did not know myself. She handed me a letter, and slowly walked to her bed.

The letter was postmarked Kashmir. After fourteen years General Sahib finally mailed the letter, and that thin piece of paper delighted me and brought tears to my eyes. His daughter is getting married. In hurriedly scribbled lines he requested me to be the chef for the wedding banquet.

I read the letter a second time, sitting at the kitchen table. My answer was obviously going to be a no. I was not even planning to respond. I felt dizzy. But in the evening while preparing soup I changed my mind. I make all big decisions while cooking. Mother is bedridden most of the time and I served as usual in her room at eight in the evening. I did not reveal the trouble brewing in my brain. During dinner I simply read her the General's letter.

'Are you sure?' she asked. 'You want to go?'

'Of course,' I said. 'It is impossible to say no.'

Dear Kip, Several times in the past I thought of writing to you, but I did not. You know me well, my whole life in the army has been geared to eliminate what is from a practical stand point non-essential.

My daughter (whom you last saw as a child) is getting married, and she is the one who forced me to write this letter. I have heard that your mother is sick, but this is a very important event in our life, and we would like you to be the chef at the wedding. I do not want some new duffer to spoil it.

You are the man for this emergency. I want to see you and I am tired and have much to talk over and plan with you. This wedding feast is perhaps my last battle and I would like for us to win it. I am sure you will not disappoint me.

Yours affectionately,

Lt. General Ashwini Kumar (Retired), VrC, AVSM, PVSM.

Former GOC-in-C, Northern Command.

The General's daughter used to call me 'Kip-Ing' (instead of Kirpal Singh). Since then 'Kip' has stuck. In the army everyone has a second name. General Sahib's nickname was 'Red', but it was rarely mentioned in his presence.

'How many days will you spend there?' Mother asked.

'Seven,' I said. 'Seven or eight days. I must go, Mother. The neighbor will take care of you. Eating someone else's food will do you good.'

Mother did not finish the dal soup. Her frail head rested on two white pillows and she held my arm as if we were not going to see each other again.

I urged her to take the yellow tablets and capsules. She agreed only after I raised my voice. I rarely raise my voice in the presence of Mother. Something inside me was definitely changing.

It was then I showed her the wedding card:

Rubiya Kumar

weds

Shahid Lone

'So the General's daughter has decided to marry a Muslim?' she asked.

'Not just a Muslim,' I added, 'but one from the other side of the border.'

Let me put this straight. Sahib is not prejudiced against the Muslims. There were Muslim soldiers in our regiment, and he never once discriminated against any of them to my knowledge. But, of course, General Sahib is not pleased with the wedding. I have read the letter twice, and I sense his hands must have been shaking when he held the pen. Sahib gave his youth to our nation to keep the Pakistanis away, he fought two wars, and now his own daughter is

marrying one of them. Did so many soldiers lose their lives for one big nothing?

This train is moving slower than a mountain mule. The engine is old, I know. It resembles me in many ways. But the railway-wallahs insist on calling it an *Express*. I readjust my glasses, and my gaze drifts from one fuzzy face to another. They will last longer than me – the ears and eyes and noses of other people. Faint scent of pickles fills the compartment. Loud and hazy conversations. Flies have started hovering over the little girl's peach.

Once I prepare the perfect wedding banquet, General Sahib will refer me to top specialists in the military hospital, and they will start treatment right away. I have a high regard for military doctors. For my mother's sake, I must live a little longer. I don't know why I raised my voice in her presence. She needs me more than ever. I must live a little bit longer.

Perhaps it was simply the selfish wish *to live just a little bit longer* that made me change my mind.

But things must sort out first. Before I begin work for the wedding I want the General to sort out things between us. For the last fourteen years every day I expected a letter from him. And now the wait is over, the letter is in my pocket. I had expected the letter to be heavy, to carry the entire weight of our past, but he offered me nothing. No explanation. I want him to sort out things between us. Not pretend as if there had been a simple misunderstanding.

I still remember the day I had arrived in Kashmir the first time. The mountains and lakes were covered with thick fog. I was nineteen. And I had bought a second-class ticket on this very train. For some reason I remember the train moved faster then.

I must have fallen asleep. I am woken up by a tap on my shoulder. 'Is this bag yours, is this one yours?' Two police-wallahs in our compartment. 'Yes, that one is mine,' says the civilian man occupying the aisle seat, the girl no longer there. One police-wallah sticks labels on already identified luggage. 'And the brown suitcase on the rack belongs to my missus,' the man says.

'Whose is this big trunk?'

'Mine,' I say.

'You don't look like a commissioned officer.'

'It used to belong to a general.'

'Show me your ID card.'

'I forgot my card.'

'What is the name of the general?'

'He is retired now.'

'Name?'

'He is the new Governor of Kashmir.'

'Name?'

'General Kumar.'

The police-wallahs look at me with contempt. They have rifles slung around their necks. The younger one turns on his flashlight.

'What *things* are there inside?'

I do not respond. I take pity on their contemptible tasks.

‘Open it.’

One of them transfers the heavy trunk to the aisle, and I hand him the key. He is rough-handling the bottles, and he does not read the labels. His face resembles the face of people who don’t take responsibility for their actions.

‘What is all this?’

‘Don’t you see?’ The middle-aged woman sitting close by comes to my rescue. ‘This is heeng and that one is cinnamon . . . cardamom, coriander, cloves, fenugreek, crushed pomegranate, poppy seeds, rose petals, curry leaves, nutmeg and mace.’

‘Why so many spices?’ asks the first police-wallah.

‘Are you a woman?’ asks the second.

Chuckles from the two of them. ‘Carrying an entire kitchen on the train?’

‘The only reason we will let you go is because your trunk is not a real coffin,’ one of them says from the other end of the bogie, making eye contact with me, staring.

They chuckle louder after making that odd remark, and leave.

Then silence. Only the sound of the train.

Outside I see India passing by. I readjust my glasses. It is raining mildly, and I am glad it is raining because India looks beautiful in the rain. Rain hides the melancholy of this land, ugliness as well. Rain helps me forget my own self. I see a face reflected in the window. Who is that man with spots of gray in his hair? What have I become? But certain things never change. I have the face of someone who is always planning serious work, someone who does not know how to take time off. Now even that will be snatched away from me.

None of my fellow passengers understood the police-wallahs when they said, ‘The only reason we have let you

go is because your trunk is not a real coffin.' Our country is a country with a short memory. They don't remember the coffin scam which took place in the army during the war with Pakistan and cost the General his promotion. Because of the scam he could not become the chief of army staff. He was innocent really. Officers below him, jealous of Sahib's abilities, screwed him. Sahib did not get the respect he deserved. There is no way I am going to explain to the civilians the coffin scam. Even if I tried they would not understand.

The middle-aged woman is surveying me, looking at me from the corners of her eyes. She is eager to ask me thousands of questions. Her face resembles a plate of samosas left overnight in rain. The man sitting across the aisle just said he is proud of the Indian army. After the police-wallahs left, he asked me, 'What did you do in the army, sir?'

'I kept the top brass healthy and cheerful.'

'What is it exactly you did, sir?'

'I was the General's chef for five years.'

'Oh, you were a cook,' he said and controlled his smile. His wife could not control herself. She looked up from the glossy magazine, laughed. The middle-aged woman could not control her laughter either. Civilians.

Then suddenly as if to break silence, he asked: 'Have you ever won a woman's heart with your cooking, sir?'

I did not reply.

'But you must have?'

'There are no women in the army,' I said.

'But sir. Women fall for men in the army. You, sir, had the biggest weapon in your hand. Cooking. Did you ever make someone fall in love, sir?'

'Sorry,' I said. 'I am looking for a chai-wallah. Did you hear a vendor selling tea?'

'Oh, we have tea in our thermos. Please pour some for sir.'

'No, no, thank you very much.'

I turned to the window and the conversation stopped. The view outside the window was far more interesting.

India is passing through the night. Night, just like rain, hides the ugliness of a place so well. We are running behind the backs of houses. Thousands of tiny lights have been turned on inside them. Towns pass by, and villages. I remember my first journey to Kashmir on this train. It was a very hot day, and despite that, passengers were drinking tea, and the whole compartment smelled of a wedding. Girls in beautiful saris and salwar-kameezes sat not far from me; some of them spoke hardly any English. Their skins had the shine of ripe fruits. How shy I was then. How much I yearned to talk to them, but I pretended that I was not interested. I had picked up the paper the man in the corner seat had discarded, and hid my face behind the news. I would stealthily peek at the girls and when one or two returned my gaze I would hide once again behind words. One time my eyes locked with the eyes of an oval-faced girl, and this created an awkward moment. She started whispering, and then suddenly an exclamation was followed by loud laughter, and I felt they were all laughing at me, and I hid again behind the paper. How I yearned to talk to them, and how I desired for them to leave me alone in the carriage because I could not endure so many of them, and I wanted them to carry on with their usual business without bothering me, and when

they disembarked at a strange platform how alone I had felt in that near-empty carriage. I had missed my chance. A beautiful opportunity had presented itself, but I had spoiled it. Partly to deal with loneliness and partly to deal with the absence of girls I began reading the paper. Several times I read the article which had shielded me from the beauties. It was accompanied by a large photograph of the body of a soldier.

BODY OF A SOLDIER FOUND AFTER 53 YEARS

Trekkers on a remote stretch of Himalayan glacier have found the fully preserved body of a soldier 53 years after he died in a plane crash. They discovered the corpse, still in an overcoat uniform, with personal documents in the pockets. The discovery was reported yesterday at the base camp. The team also found aircraft parts close to the soldier, suggesting there could be other bodies buried in ice.

It is believed the crash occurred in early 1934. The soldier may have been flying to or from Ladakh, the high altitude area in Kashmir.

In 1934 India had yet to be partitioned by the British to become 'India' and 'Pakistan'. So it is not clear whether the body belongs to India or Pakistan. The two countries have fought four wars, three of them over Kashmir.

Kashmir. It was my first time, and I found the place different from the way Delhi-wallahs describe it, as paradise, or shadow of paradise. I was a young man, but old enough to separate romance from reality. There was thick fog and it was very cold. I did not have a proper jacket. I had arrived with only one suitcase and the recruitment letter in my pocket. By the time I stood on the lawns of the General's residence the sound of the train had simply disappeared

from my mind. A uniformed man accompanied me from the gate-posts to Sahib's residence, the Command House, located on a hill overlooking the golf course. I must have waited for half an hour on the lawns. I thought I was going to die of cold when a middle-aged man stepped out of the house. He was wearing an apron. The hair on his head was closely cropped. His face, clean-shaven with thin eyebrows, ears unusually long. The man's body had a muscular appeal to it. A black dog trotted ahead of him. The dog came to sniff me. I touched its muzzle.

'How old is he?' I asked.

'We are all growing old,' the man said. 'Fourteen, maybe, the dog is fourteen.'

'How long do dogs live, sir?'

He did not answer, but took off slowly in the wind towards a patch of vegetable garden, fencing around it. He opened a little wooden gate and shut it. The dog circumambulated the fence while on the other side the man stooped and plucked leaves of what to me looked like fenugreek or coriander. How the vegetables grew in the extreme cold was beyond my imagination.

'Come.' He asked me to follow him.

I handed him the recruitment paper.

'Not now,' he said.

On the way to the kitchen the man patted me on my back. He was an inch or two taller than me. Something about that pat made me feel uncomfortable.

'Follow me,' he said. 'The General's ADC has told me about you. He has given me the instructions.'

'What do I call you, sir?'

'I am Chef.'

'Sir.'

'Call me Chef Kishen.'

'Sir.'

'Just call me Chef.'

'Yessir.'

'Follow me with your luggage,' he said.

We entered his room, which was between the kitchen and the servants' quarters. The place reeked of shaving cream; cuttings from Hindi newspapers covered the walls: photos of Bombay actresses in revealing saris, including my favorite, Waheeda. On the side table a tape recorder was playing music unfamiliar to my ears. German music, he said. I wouldn't have imagined, I said. *Does this bother you?* No sir. Top mewjik, he said. There were two beds side by side, and they formed a huge shadow on the floor. The square shadow on the wall came from the tape recorder. Chef pointed towards the smaller bed. Suddenly my body felt the exhaustion of a long journey. I dumped my suitcase and sat down on the bed.

'Not now,' he said. 'Keep following.'

The kitchen. Scent of cumin, ajwain and cardamom. On the table, a little pile of nutmeg. Thick, oily vapor rose from the pot on the stove. The room was warm and spacious, the window high and wide. Tiny drops of condensation covered the top of the glass. Smoke soared towards the ceiling in shafts of light. I noticed many shiny pots and pans hanging on the whitewashed walls. And strings of lal mirchi, and idli makers, and thalis, and conical molds for kulfi. In the corner the tandoor was ready. Its orange glow stirred in the utensils on the walls. I walked to the oven and stooped over. A wave of heat hit my cheeks. It was then he put his arm around my shoulder and took me towards the dining room. He said, 'Kitchen without a memsahib is a nice place to work in.'

'Sir.'

‘See that woman looking down at us?’

‘Sir.’

‘She was the memsahib.’

The painting was seven or eight feet tall, and so was the beautiful woman. Her eyes were big and wide open. Her brows, fearless. Skin, the color of cinnamon. She was wrapped in a graceful red sari.

‘Sahib used to love her as if she were a Mughal queen and she in turn loved him the way she loved her dog.’

‘Sir.’

‘She loved me too.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What do you mean *yes, sir*? She was a bitch. Memsahibs is people that controls the kitchen. She counted spoons. She counted to test the reliability of staff. That woman banned cooking without a shirt on, and I had to wear at least a banian in her presence. Aprons appeared suddenly. She cooked the dessert herself on Tuesdays and made me taste it and one wrong (but honest) word would make that woman swear in English. It was hard for me. The hardest thing to do is to hold my tongue, Kirpal.’

‘Sir.’

‘That woman refused to change recipes. To disturb a recipe is to disturb the soul of the dead, she would say.’

Right then I heard loud voices coming towards the kitchen from other rooms. The bell rang for service. Chef replaced the server out on a cigarette break and dashed into Sahib’s room with the tray of tea and samosas. The samosas smelled of pork. Sahib is fond of pork, he said before leaving the kitchen. There was rhythm in his legs. In Sahib’s room I will also take *ardor* for dinner. He pronounced ‘order’ as *ardor*. It was one of the few English words in his vocabulary.

I soon learned about him. Chef had joined the army as an ordinary soldier, and after an injury in the war he was sent to the Officers' Mess. During a meeting of the middle brass of the regiment he had committed his first error. He had refused to serve tea to a Muslim officer.

'I refused tea to that man,' said Chef. 'The problem with *those people* is that they smell. *Badboo*. That is why. The colonel showed me his teeth and reprimanded me severely. I was transferred to the kitchen as a dishwasher, but within a few months I bounced back. I made the kitchen my territory and impressed the officers with my *above average* culinary abilities. The brigadier of the regiment chose me for a four-month training course in international cuisine conducted by the foreign embassies in Delhi. German, French, Chinese, Italian, Szechuan noodles, linguine with clam sauce, lamb provençal, Pavlova – that kind of food. You see, if I had not refused to serve tea to the Muslim officer I would never have become a chef. Understand?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.