

THE MISTS OF SIMLA

Balraj Khanna

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PROLOGUE

The summer of 1962 in India was like any other - scorching, parched, punishing. Monsoon floods followed, adding injury to misery. This was normal.

Normal and expected. The country was prepared for it all in its usual God's-will-be-done sort of way.

What was neither normal nor expected was the sudden appearance on its borders in North East Frontier Agency - NEFA - of a large Chinese army for which India was not prepared in any sort of way. China was supposed to be a friend. Delhi and Peking had been waxing lyrical about each other for years. Much-loved Nehru, apostle of peace, had gone well out of his way to raise the profile of the little-known Chou En Lai on the world stage. Against the wishes of the mighty US, he had championed pariah China at the UN. Nobody believed China would invade India. Least of all, the apostle of peace.

So Indians went about their business as usual, making do with what they had and trying desperately to get what they did not have. They sweated through the day but slept in peace at night.

Nowhere was it more apparent than in the sleepy little hill station of Solan, a place of pine-covered peaks and verdant valleys, where young Rahul Kapoor faced the important FA exam to get to graduate college. This college was twenty-five miles up the tortuous mountain road in glamorous Simla, the summer capital of the old

British Raj. Indians loved Simla. In the Raj time, the common folk were not allowed to walk on its glittering Mall Road. But Indians still loved Simla. Simla was dazzling. Simla was bewitching. And although the British had been gone for fifteen long years, Simla remained dazzling and bewitching. Indians loved it all the more now that they could wear their shoes out walking on the once-forbidden Mall and gape at its Aladdin shops.

Almost eighteen, Rahul loved home. The very thought of going away pushed a needle through his heart. But Solan was Solan, a half-hearted scatter of corrugated-iron rooftops clinging to slippery hillsides where nothing ever happened. All Solan had was the scenery and a shoebox cinema which had never heard of Hollywood. Rahul was sick of Solan's boring scenery and its leaky shoebox.

Rahul knew that one behaved the way people treated one. And people treated him as if he was different from them. It was not his fault, therefore, if he came to believe that he was - different. He got noticed even without trying. The problem was, there simply weren't enough people around of the right kind to notice Rahul. The local girls couldn't even leave home, unless they were escorted by aunts with tandoors strapped to their bellies and brothers armed to the teeth and gums.

Rahul longed to be in Simla where girls wore bottom-hugging jeans and see-through nylon tops on its famous Mall Road, smoked and danced in dishy English

restaurants, skated in swirling skirts and went to Hollywood movies - unchaperoned.

But there was this condition - Rahul had to pass the looming FA exam. It was an order nearly as tall as the mammoth Mount Solan for anybody. But Rahul was not just anybody. He was a Kapoor. He continued to hit, spin and chase the red five-and-a-half-ounce cricket ball even as the exams approached. He also prayed. Prayer moved mountains. Prayer filled the future with goodies.

Rahul prayed to the beautiful blue-bodied Krishna, with whom he had a special relationship. The God and the man had much in common - especially love for sport and girls. The whole world knew how the Divine Lover was ever surrounded by countless beauties, his many nubile *gopis* to whom he made love. Rahul was sure his day would come. He had full faith in Krishna, the God of Understanding. Rahul could talk to Him as a friend. He did so every day.

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ONE

A dark cloud suddenly shot up from behind the sullen hump of Mount Solan, making the early-morning gold more radiant by contrast. Then the cloud just hung there, waiting for a push to spill it over and fill the panoramic valley.

The push did not come immediately and yet the July morning, dew-laden and clear, acquired a grim shade of grey. Rahul, watching with his sixteen year-old sister Shobana from their long veranda, knew what was coming. He did not want it to come. He did not want the black cloud to topple the mountain. For sure as hell, that would be it, *khattam-shudh* - total destruction of whatever was left of the rotting Kapoor cash crops. The monsoon that year had come a month too early. This would be the fourth jharri non-stop rainfall on the trot.

Rahul was thinking. No, a hammer was at work inside his head.

Money.

The Kapoors were broke. They often were. But this time . . .

Rahul yawned loudly to chase money away.

There was anger in the cloud. Within minutes the immense valley became ink-black. Serpents of lightning stung it. Soon, the distant cannonade became an overhead affair. It frightened the life out of Shobana and their dog Terry at her feet.

‘Mummy!’ she yelled and ran as rain pelted down deafeningly on the corrugated-iron roof of their rambling Sun House. In its master bedroom, she jumped into Mummy’s queen-size palang.

‘Mummy, save me,’ she said in English, hugging her. The family spoke English in the Sun House, the language of anybody who was somebody. They switched to Punjabi only when angry.

In their room, her little brothers Shoki and Bimbi, aged fourteen and twelve, were jubilant. They leaped off their beds and came running, chattering their teeth even though it was not cold at all.

‘Mummy!’ They jumped in after her.

Bed-tea arrived for Mummy and for Daddy. Bald old Santram with only a bodi topknot brought it on a silver tray - a heavily pregnant teapot, its tea-cosy shimmering with sequins, Royal Worcester cups and saucers. Daddy was served first in his king-size bed. There were bags under his eyes. He had spent last evening gazing at maps of NEFA. Then he had had a bad night - breathlessness and coughing. This time of the year brought it on, the monsoon rain releasing some strange vapour trapped in the mountain earth. He had tried everything, from whatever Dr Gupta prescribed to homeopathy bullshit and the Ayurvedic bakwas. But . . . It was just this time of the calendar. Come September the first or second, and Prakash Kapoor, a handsome man of fifty, was fit as a fiddle.

Rahul turned up, followed by Terry. He too slipped under Mummy's quilt.

'What about the dog?' Prakash said.

'Acres of room here, sir,' Rahul replied.

'Kamla madam, you bore me idiots, not sons. Is that what I was married to you for?' Prakash said to his wife. But he loved the sight of her with their children. For a moment he did not have a worry in the world. The idiots laughed, the happiest idiots in the world.

'As much your sons as mine, ji,' Kamla said, taking a sip.

'What Ji-ji? Was told when marrying I was marrying not only a beauty queen but also one with a BA. So I was guaranteed classy offsprings. Intelligent. But just look at them!' In fact, looking at his boys and Shobana did to Prakash what a gust of cool breeze does to a man when the mercury goes mad. 'You must admit you present a picture with your litter clinging to you,' he added.

'I probably do. Present a picture of a sort.'

'Changing the subject - this bitch rain.'

'Daddy, where do the birds go in a bad monsoon rain like this?' Bimbi asked.

'Silly boy, where do you think they go? And monsoon is a wind, not rain. Get that in your wet brain,' Shoki said. 'I read somewhere that in rain, if you run from the car to the house, you get the same amount of water as when you walk.'