

GHULAM ABBAS

A Summer Day

ONLY two houses stood on the hill. Actually, there was just one building, but at some point in the past its owner had put up a thin dividing wall in the middle, and now two families were living separately in each section. Mountain houses are quite small anyway, so the reduced living space in this partitioned house would have disappointed its residents, if they hadn't enjoyed spending their summers in the mountains.

The tapered wooden house had been painted red. It was situated on the side of the hill and could only be reached by climbing a long wooden stairway. A flower bed occupied a small, level strip of ground in front of the house, but it had fallen victim to neglect, and now only a stubborn dahlia remained. Seated on a bench at one end of the flower bed, one could view the beautiful, forlorn valley. As long as the sun remained hidden behind the clouds, pale-blue wisps of mist shrouded the landscape like gossamer webs, creating the impression of looking at a reflection in water. When the sun came out the mist instantly turned golden, enhancing the beauty of the scene, but after a few short moments the glare would become blinding, forcing the viewer to avert his gaze.

One August morning, just as the sun was rising between two hills in the eastern chain of mountains, a small boy came out from one of the houses. He couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old. He was wearing knickers, a red wool pullover, and almond-colored boots with edges darkened by the rain. As the boy descended from the wooden verandah, he glanced at the house next to his, but its door was closed. His eyes turned away in dejection, as if he were standing in front of some candy shop or toy store which hadn't opened on time because of the shopkeeper's laziness. His glance then fell on the dahlia plant, with its single, large flower swaying majestically in the golden morning sun. The flower attracted him, and he moved in its direction. Fascinated, he stared at it for several moments. The flower's deep red color sparkled wonder-

fully in the shimmering beads of dew on its petals. The boy cast another glance at the house and then very carefully plucked the flower.

Happily holding it in his hand, he strode to the neighbor's verandah and pushed slightly on the door. It was locked from the inside. He could see dark purple curtains through glass panels set above the door. The boy stood there for a while, as if pondering whether or not he should knock, when he heard the sound of heavy footsteps on the wooden floor followed by the sound of the bolt being drawn back. Frightened, he retreated a little, the hand with the dahlia slipping behind his back of its own accord.

A solemn looking man clad in pajamas and wrapped in a blanket came out the door. He was brushing his teeth with a twig, and in his other hand he held a bag. At first he didn't pay any attention to the boy, but as he stepped down from the verandah he turned towards him.

"What is it, Akbar Miyan?" the man asked.

"Nothing, sir," fell out of the boy's mouth, as the sparkle in his eyes quickly dimmed.

"Have you come to play with Berri?"

"Yes ..." He tried to smile.

"Berri is asleep right now."

The boy lowered his eyes but didn't say anything.

"What do you have in your hand, Akbar Miyan?" the man asked.

"A flower, sir." Scared, he brought the flower out and showed it. His small hand was wet with dew.

"For Berri?"

"Yes ..."

"Berri is asleep. The sun has just come up, Akbar."

The boy didn't respond.

"Today is Sunday, isn't it? You and Berri can play all day."

The man said this while moving away. Still brushing his teeth he descended the wooden steps and set off on the path that snaked down to the foot of the hill. Akbar stood on the verandah and watched his figure continually disappear and reemerge from among the twists and turns of the winding path. At last, when the man vanished from sight completely, Akbar cast another mournful glance at the house next to his, then left the verandah and went over to the dahlia plant. It no longer looked attractive. The maimed stalk seemed to say, "I cannot grow another flower now."

Akbar walked away from the plant and sat down on the bench. The sun had climbed above the long, thin, crimson clouds and the expanse of mountains. The mist that blanketed the lower valley was slowly dissolving into sunlight, and the landscape was clearing by the moment. Faces had

started to appear in the windows of nearby homes. From their uncoordinated movements it was clear these newly risen people had not yet gained full control over their bodies. Far below, the church-like building of Akbar's school with its weather vane was visible. In the courtyard of a house built in a hollow a housewife was wringing out small, bright clothes and hanging them on a clothesline. On a tree branch near a wall, a colorful bird stroked its long beak across its tail, warbling sadly now and then.

Akbar was so absorbed in this scene that he unwittingly pulled a petal off the dahlia. When he became aware of what he had done, he removed each petal one by one and then tossed the stem out into the air. He thought he would watch it tumble into the ravine far below, but after only a short distance it got caught in a bush and hung there. A cold wind began to blow suddenly, and a thick mass of clouds hid the brilliant sun. Instantly rain drops started to fall. The housewife looked up at the sky and then quickly pulled the clothes off the line.

A little boy around five years old, whose outfit was nearly identical to Akbar's, came running out onto the verandah.

"Brother," he said, "Ammi is calling you."

Akbar didn't answer.

"Brother, Ammi says come eat breakfast."

Again Akbar didn't answer. He continued to sit on the bench with his back to the house.

The small boy went inside, but immediately returned.

"Brother, Ammi is getting angry," he said.

"I heard you, I heard you," Akbar finally turned his head and replied. "I'm coming."

The small boy went back in again. Barely a second passed before a woman whose youth had faded appeared on the verandah. She was adjusting a violet, large-flowered sari around her hips.

"Akbar," she said with a voice full of love, "why don't you come inside and have your breakfast. You're getting wet sitting in the rain. What if you get sick? You've just recently gotten over an illness. Come inside quickly, my love."

"I was on my way, Ammi Jan," said Akbar getting up from the bench, but making no attempt to keep from getting soaked as he slowly walked over to the verandah. Before going inside he took one more look at the neighbor's door.

The rain shower lasted for nearly a quarter of an hour, after which the sky cleared, and the sun continued its journey even higher than before. Both boys came outside. Akbar went and stood by the dahlia plant, while

the smaller boy went over to the neighbor's verandah and began pounding fearlessly on the door with his tiny hands.

"Berri!" he yelled.

"Berri!" Without waiting for a reply he yelled even louder, "Brother is calling you. He has a real airplane. Come and see."

"What is it Munir Miyan?" said a small voice from the other side of the door.

"Open the door," Munir answered.

"The bolt is closed and I can't reach it. Ammi is in the bathroom."

"Last night Uncle brought us a nice airplane," Munir said.

"Where is it?"

"Brother has it."

"OK, I'm coming."

After five minutes the door opened, and a small girl, who was around seven years old came out. She had on a light green, floral silk shirt and pants decorated with a flower-bud design. Over this she wore a turquoise wool cardigan. Two braids tied with white ribbon hung down to her shoulders. The small, sky blue, fine silk *dupatta* draped across her chest fluttered in the wind. On her feet were little, green suede sandals.

Seeing both brothers sitting on the bench she ran over to them like a breeze. As soon as Munir saw her face he began to laugh and make fun of her.

"O Ho Ho Ho, Berri!" he said, "You've put on so much powder your eyelashes have turned white."

"What are you talking about?" The girl's playfulness vanished.

"Shut up, Munir," Akbar scolded his little brother.

"Go look in the mirror," Munir said.

Berri touched her cheek with her finger. A trace of powder stuck to her fingertip.

"See ..."

"Enough, *ji*, enough," said Berri suddenly losing her temper and cutting Munir off. "I won't speak to you."

"If you don't shut up, Munir, I'll beat you." Akbar glared at Munir angrily.

"Akbar Miyan," Berri turned her attention to Akbar, completely ignoring Munir, "where is the airplane your uncle brought last night?"

"I'll show you."

"Where is it?"

"It's in the house."

"Bring it."

“I will.”

“No, go get it right now.”

“Why don’t you come inside and see it.”

“No, *bhai*, I’m not going in your house,” Berri said rolling her eyes, “your *ammi* got mad at me last time.”

“She was only a little angry at you. She was really upset with me.”

“Bring the airplane out here.”

“OK, stay here, don’t go anywhere. I’m getting it.” And he ran off towards the house.

Munir’s stare was fixed on Berri’s face, but she didn’t deign to look in his direction. Instead, she was gazing at the valley below. At that moment, the man who had gone off in the morning wrapped in his blanket and carrying a bag came into view climbing the wooden steps. Screaming delightedly, “Abba Jan! Abba Jan!” Berri ran over to him.

When Akbar came out with the airplane, Berri was clutching one side of the bag brimming over with fruits and vegetables and going into the house alongside her father. Five minutes passed. Akbar and Munir stood by the bench and waited for her to return, but she didn’t come out.

Akbar gave the airplane to Munir and said, “Go show it to Berri.”

“Aren’t you going to?”

“No, I’ll stay here. Tell her that I’m asking for her.”

It was a very large wooden airplane painted light blue. Munir carried it with difficulty to Berri’s door. The door was open, but he didn’t have the courage to step inside.

“Berri,” he yelled, “come see the airplane.”

Berri came to the door sucking a mango.

“Why are you yelling ... oh, so this is the airplane your uncle brought last night? My, it’s so big!”

“Brother is standing over there. He’s asking for you.”

Berri’s and Akbar’s eyes met. Akbar stood up from the bench and started to smile.

“Munir Miyan,” Berri said, “tell your brother I’ll come out in a minute. I’m eating a mango right now.”

Munir carried the airplane over to Akbar. They both sat down on the bench and began to look at the valley. Ten minutes went by, but Berri didn’t come out. The sky was clouding over again. The light clouds moved in quite low this time, veiling everything in a fine mist. Suddenly, a heavy shower began. Akbar and Munir picked up the airplane and dashed inside. The rain lasted for a little over an hour, and afterwards the sun returned.

“Berri.” Akbar stood at Berri’s door, holding a large ball covered with colorful pictures of English children in one hand and a big book in the other.

“Berri,” he repeated slowly.

“What is it, Akbar Miyan?” Berri asked as she came towards him.

“You didn’t come outside!”

“When?”

“When you said you would.”

“It was raining hard. Where’s the airplane?”

“I put it away. Here, look at this picture book.”

“Is it the same story of the girl who didn’t have her hair braided?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve already seen it,” she said with annoyance.

“OK, come play with the ball.”

“I won’t play with the ball, *bhai*. *Ammi* says I shouldn’t go outside because it’s slippery. If I slipped, I would fall into the ravine and break my bones.”

“In that case, let’s play on your verandah.”

“*Bhai*, we’ll play in the evening. Now I’m going shopping for clothes with *Abba* and *Ammi*.”

And in fact after just a little while, Berri descended the wooden steps holding on to her father’s finger. He was wearing a loose-fitting English suit and hat. Chewing *pan*, her mother trailed behind them in an Egyptian-style black silk *burqa*. Akbar watched them with great interest from the bench. He glanced repeatedly at Berri who had replaced her flower-bud pants and *dupatta* with a frock. Even from a distance her white calves looked nice. The wind kept blowing a lock of hair into her face, which she would brush back with her small hand. Akbar watched the small, slow moving caravan disappear and reappear down the meandering path. At last, having seen them turn at the lowest bend of the hill, he shifted his gaze elsewhere.

Although the rain had ended, drops of water still fell from the *deodar* trees whenever a strong gust of wind blew. Somewhere in the distance a swollen brook gushed noisily. A blue jay perching on a tree chirped shrilly, balanced its wings, swooped into the air, and alighted on another tree for no apparent reason. The mountains on the distant horizon, which usually remained wrapped in a cloudy mist, unexpectedly became visible when the sky cleared. They appeared piled up one behind another in the way shy young girls hide behind older ones and peek out. Some of the mountains were verdant, and some drearily bare, but they were jumbled

up like a thick blanket left lying rumpled on a bed with its green cover showing in some places, and its grey lining in others.

Akbar was so absorbed in the scene that he didn't realize three classmates were standing around him laughing.

"Oh, ho! It's you all," he started. "When did you get here?"

"Akbar," one of them said, "what are you doing sitting here? Come play football with us."

"You all go ahead. I have to do some work," Akbar replied.

"What's this?" another boy said. "You have to come. Look, we just bought a new football today."

"No, I can't go today."

"Why not?"

"I have to do some work."

"What kind of work?"

"What kind of work ... school work that Master Sahib gave me."

"You really won't come along?"

"Not today, tomorrow." Akbar got up from the bench and walked towards his house.

"Let him go," one of the boys said, "If he doesn't want to come with us then he doesn't have to," and they walked away grumbling.

It was after six o'clock when Berri returned with her parents. She was carrying a small bundle. Her father took the house key out of his pocket and opened the door, while her mother removed her *burqa* and sat down on a chair on the verandah. She seemed worn out. After taking a few moments to drop her bundle inside, Berri came over to the bench where Akbar was sitting.

"Berri, you're back!" He stood up quickly. "Did you buy some clothes?"

"Yes. I bought some silk with big roses on it to make a suit. *Abba* also gave me a Benarsi scarf and new sandals, too. Then I bought some perfume, and lipstick, and nail polish." Her eyes were dancing with joy.

"Berri, you ..."

"Don't call me Berri," she said turning instantly quarrelsome.

"Then what should I call you?"

"My name is Amirun Nisa Begum," she replied with the seriousness of an adult.

"But your mother just calls you Berri."

"Hmph."

"And your father, too."

"Well, I let them."

“I’m also going to call you Berri ... Berri!”

“Look, I’m telling you, don’t call me Berri.”

“And if I do ... ?”

“I’m through talking to you. I’m going home.”

She turned around, paused for a second, and then ran through the flower bed with the gracefulness of a butterfly, disappearing from sight in an instant. Akbar didn’t try to call her back. He stood dumbfounded for a few moments and then slowly sat down on the bench.

Meanwhile the sun had set, and crimson clouds blanketed the surrounding mountains. Down in the valley patches of white fog were rising over the tops of the trees, the roofs of the houses, and the slopes of the mountains, obscuring the scene. Akbar’s eyes fell on his school building, whose weather vane was now hidden by the fog. Undoubtedly, his classmates were still playing football on the school grounds. He wasn’t sorry that he hadn’t gone with them, nor was he concerned that they might be mad at him. The schoolwork still remained, but he didn’t worry about it much, either. Perhaps he could find some excuse that would spare him from the schoolmaster’s rebuke and slaps tomorrow.

The wind turned sharply cold. He clenched his fists, tucked them under his arms, and hunched his shoulders. Perhaps he shouldn’t have called Berri, Berri, he was thinking. He had argued for no reason. She wasn’t a little girl anymore. How mature she seemed in her floral, green silk shirt and flower-bud pants. Akbar’s eyes were filling with tears, but he didn’t want to cry.

Evening had fallen, and darkness was descending over the valley below. It rapidly engulfed the trees, surrounded the houses, and began to cast long shadows across the mountains. In just a few moments Akbar’s school, the bell-tower, and all the other buildings disappeared from sight. Right before his eyes a black curtain unfurled from the sky to the ground, covering every living thing and every object, as well as his entire being. □

—*Translated by Robert Phillips*