

A favour for a spoilt kid



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Born in 1941, Vinod was brought up and educated in Amritsar. He attended Government Medical College, and subsequently trained as a surgeon at PGI, Chandigarh. He left for USA in 1969, and retired in 2003 as Director of Critical Care Services at a teaching hospital in Michigan. Married with two grown sons, he continues to visit India at least once a year.

In 1955, as a fourteen-year old, I was thrilled at the prospect of going to Bombay (now Mumbai) on a school-sponsored trip. I was excited by the prospect of travelling almost a thousand miles from Amritsar, a small town in north India, to the glamour of Bombay, the movie capital of India. There were legions of stories of how actors and actresses had been discovered after arriving penniless in Bombay.

So it was natural for me to brag about it to my friends and other people in the neighbourhood.

Chaman Lal's mother heard about my planned trip. She talked to my mother because she had an interest in Delhi, which was on the route to Bombay.

Chaman Lal was two or three years older than I was, and had recently run away from home. He was an only child, and a thoroughly spoiled one. His father worked for the government-owned city electric utility. He was a soft-spoken, mild mannered man, who, in winter, liked to sit on a *charpoy* in the sun, read the Urdu Sunday newspaper, and smoke his *hookah*. It was his second marriage.

Chaman Lal's mother was about twenty years younger than her husband. She was an attractive looking, petite woman, who was always well dressed. She had a fair complexion, large eyes in a round face, and jet-black hair. Her hair was always well combed, and piled into a bun. Unlike most women of her age, she had remained slim, with a good figure.

But she was quite garrulous, and most women were afraid of picking up an argument with her. As children, we tried to avoid her scrutiny, which was difficult, because she spent a considerable amount of time in the afternoon, sitting on her second story balcony, ostensibly knitting or chopping vegetables, and observing the goings on in the street below.

Even as kids, we knew of the rumours about Chaman Lal's mother. A cloth-seller who hawked his wares in the streets was reputed to be Chaman Lal's real father. Not that he ever publicly showed any affection for the boy, or that the boy showed any respect towards him.

Nothing ever slowed Chaman Lal or his mouth. He was the cleverest amongst us, and seemed to know more about the affairs of the adults than any other kid did. He knew

particularly the juicy details of who was chasing whom and succeeding. Once, he admitted that he had drilled a hole in the wooden wall of a neighbour's house to spy on a newly-wed couple.

He shared his knowledge of sex acts with only a select few kids. Such is the nature of childhood alliances! Those were the days of single sex schools, and all of us believed that the couple of co-educational schools in town were for sissies.

Chaman Lal went to a different school than I did. His school was reputed more for its sports teams than scholastics. He was not particularly interested in studies. He went to school mostly to hob-nob with other boys and teachers. Apparently, his father did favours for the teachers on their electricity bills, and, in turn, they let him make the grade.

He was not even very good at sports – cricket, volleyball, badminton, or soccer. His forte was cheerleading. He could lead a group of boys at cricket matches and heckle the opposing team to distraction. He excelled at cheating in street games of marbles and [*gulli-danda*](#) (an Indian game played outdoors with a small piece of wood sharpened at both ends or *gulli* which is hit with a sturdy, two-foot long stick or *danda*). Or the great Indian game of breath-control called *kabaddi*, played on grass or in dirt and requiring nothing except a group of eight to twelve boys. You went into the enemy territory and attempted to come back to home field while dragging opponents & chanting non-stop, “*kabbadi-kabbadi*.” When he lost, he simply walked away, as if he was bored by the game.

Movies were another matter! He saw every new movie on the first day, and could act out the entire script by himself. That included both Hindi and English movies of Tarzan and Westerns. How he got the money to go for the very first show, and manage to get a ticket was a mystery. Most likely, his father managed to get free pass to the movies. The cinema halls used to be pretty rowdy places on the opening day. The genteel amongst us showed disdain for those who insisted seeing the movie on the first day, irrespective of the bloody nose or torn shirt. But all of us liked the juicy bits of dialogue delivered by the ‘hero’! He enacted the gunplay with the snarls and warnings of hardened cowboys. And the chaste heroines saved from evil villains! He acted as if he understood English dialogue, and we believed him! Mostly, it was words and phrases like ‘bloody-fool’ and ‘shut up’. Now that I think about it, he habitually failed his English classes! We thought Chaman Lal to be lucky indeed!

He could also spin the tales of ghosts and witches to frighten small kids. The summer evenings, when our parents allowed us to stay up late, we would prevail on him to relate these terrifying tales from Hindu mythology. He was not beyond claiming his Brahmin caste, which we knew gave him a special status. The fluttering of the *pepul* leaves or passing under the *banyan* tree on our way home held a special terror, as the demons, *rakshas* described by Chaman Lal in great detail, appeared to lurk around the corner. These were the demons with long tusks, pot-bellies and long curved nails that could pull asunder a man's chest to drink the blood from his heart. The demons and ugly crones appeared to make it their business to be involved with the daily lives of ordinary people! On those nights, when parents called us to come home, we would walk back with delicious feelings of awe and excitement, and anticipation.

Only he could get away with the cruel remarks he made about a rich man who lived in the neighbourhood. This man's son, who was in his twenties, lay dying in the hospital from a bleeding ulcer in the stomach. Apparently, several operations had been performed but to no avail. Dozens of relatives and friends had donated blood to save young man's life. He was handsome and a popular sportsman. Children in the area hero-worshipped him. Employees of his father were now being brought to the hospital in truckloads to donate blood. They were probably being paid as well, a common custom.

But Chaman Lal was having none of it. Instead, he said, "Why do the poor people have to give blood for his son? He is so fat, they can get a drum-full of blood out of him." We laughed, and we actually thought he was funny!

A few days later, the young man died, and I felt quite guilty. So when the funeral procession passed by on the street, I accompanied the man's younger cousin to the cemetery. Those days, kids my age usually did not go to cremation grounds. I doubt if Chaman Lal ever felt any remorse.

When he ran away from home after failing his final examinations, we were not surprised. I heard that he had gone to Delhi. I also heard that he had found a job. But what could he do? He barely had an eight-grade education. We actually heard very little. His mother was very depressed, and cried easily. There was not very much that his father could do. So he remained fairly stoic. When the time came for me to leave for Bombay, my mother pressed a small parcel in my hands, "For Chaman Lal." His mother had knitted him a sweater.

"But where will I find him?" I was nonplussed.

"His mother says he will find you. When you reach the Delhi railway station just look out for him," my mother said. His mother had found out that Chaman Lal worked at the railway station. The train stopped there for about two hours.

After the excitement of leaving home without my parents for the first time, we travelled all night. I had this foolish idea that I was going to keep a record of all the small towns that the train passed. So I kept a diary, while keeping awake, and started to jot down the names of strange sounding towns. Next morning, we pulled into Delhi railway station.

I got down from the train, and went to a bookstand to look at some magazines. Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to find Chaman Lal.

"Hey Chaman, how are you?"

"I am all right."

I dragged him to our train's compartment, and handed him the small bundle. He acted unconcerned. I told him about his mother and father. He said he writes to his mother. Despite asking several times, I could not find out what he did in Delhi. I reminded him of his fascination with movies and Bombay that I would be visiting. He said he was very soon planning to go to Bombay himself.

As the time for our meeting drew to a close, he pressed a five-rupee note in my hands, "For my mother."

I promised him that I would give it to his mother. Five rupees was a considerable amount of money those days.

Four weeks later, when I returned home from Bombay on the trip that had started on a note of optimism and excitement, I found myself in trouble. I had lost a blanket that an aunt had loaned me. I found out that I had not done well in my final eighth grade exams, and would be demoted next year to the worst section of the class. That meant my father would not allow me to play cricket for the high school team, so that I would have more time for studies.

And, I had spent in Bombay the five rupees that Chaman Lal had given me for his mother. I had no choice but to ask my mother for the money. Grudgingly, my mother parted with five rupees so I could make good on my promise to Chaman Lal. ❖

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