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## HILL GIRLS AND PRINCELINGS

**I**N 1961, SIX YEARS BEFORE THE ILL-FATED PARTY, I had left my graduate studies at Harvard and moved to New York at the age of twenty-six to try to make my living as a writer. I had barely settled in when my father arrived in the city, to attend to Mrs. Clyde. My apartment at the time was one L-shaped room on East Fifty-eighth Street, and so it suited both of us that he should stay, as he usually did, in Mrs. Clyde's apartment at 1 Fifth Avenue. But we met often for meals and talks; sometimes during the day he would camp out in my apartment, waiting for me to come home from my office at *The New Yorker*, where I had just become a staff writer.

One Saturday morning, while I was waiting to have lunch with my father, I took my shoes to the cobbler around the corner for new heels. I had barely entered his shop when he jumped up from his stitching machine and came around the counter.

"Mr. Mehta!" he said, exuberantly taking both my hands. I stiffened. I scarcely knew the fellow. How dare he be so

familiar with me? But then I worried that I was being unnecessarily standoffish. After all, he was like a neighbor.

"I have a copy of your book. I am in the middle of reading it. It's wonderful."

"Really?" I said, somewhat flustered. Publicly owning up to the fact that I was a writer always made me shy. "Which book?" I asked him. I had published two.

"'Face to Face.'"

I squirmed. That book was the autobiography, which had mostly been written when I was twenty and had been speaking English for just five years (it was completed when I was twenty-two). Now that I was embarking on a career as a serious writer, I disowned it. But then I realized that the cobbler wouldn't have cared what kind of English the book was written in—he himself spoke in a thick Polish accent—and that I should be flattered that he liked it.

But then he said, to my horror, "Your daddy, he inscribed the book for me and my missus."

It was one of my father's engaging qualities that he was comfortable talking to anyone and everyone, whether a cobbler or a prime minister. He had but to meet a stranger and he was apt to pull out pictures of our mother and us seven children and boast extravagantly about our achievements, as if he were a father in the small village of his boyhood rather than a well-travelled, cosmopolitan doctor. He was constantly ordering copies of my books from the publisher. No doubt it was one of these that he had presented to the cobbler, signing it, with a proud flourish, with his customary inscription: "Daddy, author's father and character in the book."

I mumbled some inane thanks and hurried out. I was exasperated with my father and grew even more so when I met with a similar reception from the laundress at the laundromat and the pharmacist at the pharmacy, both of whom also had new copies of "Face to Face." Although doubtless my father had only been taking pride in me, still I felt that he wasn't acknowledging that I was now twenty-six years old, out of the

sheltering environment of schools and universities and earning my own livelihood. He was acting as if I were still a dependent child, whom he could show off like a monkey on a chain. This was especially galling because I liked the thought of being anonymous in a big city and I felt that he had made it embarrassing for me to walk around in my own neighborhood.

Over lunch, I confronted him.

"I thought these nice people would like to read about you and our family and know the kind of background we come from," he said. "It's important to have good relations with your neighbors."

"But you really must stop inscribing the books."

"What harm is there in it? I knew you'd never do it."

I could never be indignant with my father for long, and soon we were laughing about what the cobbler and the laundress and the pharmacist would make of my sister Pom's wedding or my mother's Hindu superstitions.

"Only in New York would you find a cobbler who enjoys reading a book," my father said, then added, as if he were now making an effort to be casual, "You know, son, long before you became a writer, I was dreaming of becoming a novelist."

"You don't mean it."

"Yes, I do. What's more, I may surprise you, son, by writing a best-seller one of these days."

As far as I knew, he had never written anything except letters and medical reports, so privately I dismissed his aspirations as just talk. Aloud, I said, "Best-sellers look easy-to-write and formulaic, but even accomplished writers have trouble bringing them off." He was in one of his optimistic moods, though, and nothing I said seemed to quiet his spirits.

After that, whenever we met, he would bring up again the subject of his writing a novel. Still, I did not pay it much mind, because he had always been something of a dreamer, a little like Mr. Micawber in "David Copperfield." Whenever I went to parties, I was sure to meet a woman who would tell me that her daughter wrote such beautiful letters from her school

that she felt someone should collect and publish them. I sometimes thought that, if I stood at the front of a Fifth Avenue bus and asked those passengers who were writers to raise their hands, every hand would go up.

Six years had passed since my embarrassing encounter with the cobbler. I was now thirty-three, and my father was seventy-two. He was again in New York, this time with my mother for Usha's confinement.

"As you know, son, procrastination is my worst habit," he said during one of his visits to my apartment, after my mother had left to be with Usha in Charleston. "But I have now engaged a good steno in New Delhi and am finally getting down to the job of writing. Once I get back home, I'll send you something."

Again I didn't take his project seriously. By now I had published three more books, and I thought that I might have unwittingly stirred up a spirit of competition in him.

Anyway, after he returned home I heard nothing more about the novel. Then, several months later, I received a draft of its first chapter, with a note asking me to rewrite it for him, saying, "After all, son, I'm a medical man, and I don't have the vinegar and spice that authors like you use to make your stories interesting."

From the draft, it was clear that he had a gift for telling a story. I should have been able to foresee that—any time he was describing an incident to listeners he would command their full attention. Indeed, I had sometimes thought my own penchant for writing stories might have come from him. Still, as he himself realized, his writing style was more suited to a government report than to narrative fiction; instead of dialogue, for example, the chapter had summaries of dialogue. But I found the material fascinating, and I set about rewriting it. In time, we hit upon a method for what turned into a father-son collaboration. He would send me some rough notes from New Delhi, and I would write them up in New York and send him the draft. He would then go over the draft, expand it and offer

new ideas, and send it back to me for yet another rewrite. In this way, we exchanged as many as a dozen drafts over a year or two. As much as possible, I tried to keep to the spirit of his ideas, though the details were filtered through and embellished by my imagination. At first I took up the task as a way of keeping in touch with him, even, perhaps, humoring him. I found it diverting from the serious writing I did every day. Certainly, the story he wanted to tell was not one I would have ever thought up, myself. It seemed like a fairy tale—superficially magical, but with dark undertones—yet its deeper structure revealed itself to me only gradually. Anyway, once I got involved in it I couldn't drop it, especially after it began to acquire a certain foreboding significance in our relationship—but more about that, in due course. What follows is the result of our joint effort, to which we gave the title "Hill Girls and Princlings."



AS A BOY, Chander had a talent for drawing and mathematics, and he wanted to grow up to be an engineer. But his father wanted him to be a doctor.

"It's better to spend your time saving our poor people from plague and cholera than building monuments to the British," his father would say. Chander, being a good son, joined the King Edward Medical College in Lahore. During his first summer vacation, to escape the heat, he went on a trek up in Kangra district, in the Punjab Himalayas. He was nineteen and restless, full of energy and curiosity.

Chander had hardly climbed his first hill when he spotted an isolated shack set on an incongruously beautiful site. He walked up and peeped in through the little open window. An old man was mixing some powders by its light, and he looked up.

"You seem to be new to these parts, young man. Can I help you?" The old man's voice wafted out, clear, if distant.

"I was thinking that there was something I could do to help you," said Chander, on impulse, walking into the shack.

The old man introduced himself as the hillside's only medical man, the compounder who mixed medicines for the local dispensary, for that is what the shack was. He resumed his mixing.

Thinking that helping the compounder at the rural dispensary for the summer would be a good way to get some experience while exploring the hills, Chander told him that he was a medical student and offered his services.

"I couldn't afford to pay you," warned the compounder. "I myself just get by."

"Plain food and a roof over my head are all I need," Chander said, eager to be accommodating.

The old man sealed the bargain by stepping up to the young man and embracing him.

One of Chander's first patients was a pale, thin girl. She had bright, greenish-blue eyes and a loosely coiled long braid of golden hair, which she nervously twisted while Chander was taking down her medical history. He noticed that she had the developed figure of someone older than her twelve years.

"Tell me what your symptoms are," he said, but he couldn't get her to say anything.

The plump woman who had brought the girl there gave her a push and said, "Reshmi is always complaining of being run-down. That's just her way of avoiding work. Just give her some medicine to make her strong."

Chander noticed that the girl had malar flush, jotted it down in her history, counted out some quinine and iron tablets, and told the woman to see that the girl took the medicine and got more to eat. He was sure that the woman, and the well-fed six-year-old boy whom she had also brought along, were eating their fill at the expense of the girl.

Throughout the day, every time one patient left two more arrived, but Chander could not get the pale girl with the golden hair out of his head.

In the evening, he made some inquiries about that small family and was directed to their hut on a nearby hillock. Through the open door, he could see heaps of fleece tied in loose bundles stacked to the ceiling. The musty smell coming out of the hut was so overwhelming that he had to step back. There was no sign of the pale girl with the golden hair, but the plump woman was there and, spotting him, she came out.

"I was passing by and I saw you, so I thought I'd stop and see how the girl is doing," Chander said. "Where is she?"

"She's tending to the sheep on the lea. She'll be back before long."

Chander sat down on a rock next to a small stream with a trickle of water in it, while the woman stood scowling beside him with her arms akimbo.

"In monsoon season that stream becomes flooded," she said. "It gets so full that you can't even cross to the lea. Sometimes it floods the house. Then we have to move out and sleep wherever we can find shelter."

She gave him a pitiful glance, as if she were hoping for a handout. But, looking at her standing there, plump as a setting hen, Chander recalled the well-fed boy and the pale, thin girl and could feel little sympathy for the woman.

He gestured at the bundles in the hut, and said pointedly, "Those must bring you a good bit of money."

"Not nearly enough, sahib. My husband and I do our best, but we've got four mouths to feed, and the hill winters are severe."

Just then, Chander caught sight of the girl and a man bringing home the flock of sheep. The woman beckoned the girl over, handed her a piece of dry bread, and ordered her to go put the sheep in the pen. Chander thought that the girl wanted to linger, but she promptly obeyed.

"She needs more nourishment than that," Chander said hotly. "You should feed—"

"I am very fond of my daughter," the man broke in. He spoke Hindi with a pronounced Nepalese accent (he was of the

Gurkha tribe). "I am determined to get her away from her stepmother"—he pointed at the woman—"before she starves my poor Reshmi to death. She is always giving Reshmi's food to our son. She can't spoil him enough."

The woman protested peevishly: "He and his daughter go out from morning to night. They leave me here to bundle up the fleece, and cook and sew and clean and mend."

"The woman won't rest until I get the girl out of the house," the man said. He and his wife both carried on as if the other were not there, and seemed to be appealing to Chander for arbitration. "Even today, I was talking about Reshmi with the agents who recruit girls for the harem of the Nawab," he continued. "No doubt she would be better off in the harem of the Jat Raja in the upper hills, but the agents are much more liberal with the Nawab's money. I am a poor widower who must get the best price for my daughter." He spread his hands in a show of despair.

Chander was incensed. He had vaguely heard that the princelings' agents roamed the hills looking for desirable candidates for the harems, but could not believe that young girls could be bought and sold like sheep right under the nose of the British, who prided themselves on stamping out "barbaric native customs." He seethed with anger at the stepmother and the father, at the princelings and the British authorities. His anger was tempered by a certain sympathy for the poor illiterate shepherd, but Chander said to him sternly, "If you discuss the girl with an agent again, I will report you to the deputy commissioner, and the Englishman will put you in jail."

The shepherd quickly did an about-face. "Whoever said that I will sell my precious girl?" he said ingratiatingly. "I just said that to placate her stepmother, so that she will give my Reshmi enough food to fill her stomach."

"I always feed Reshmi as much as she deserves," the woman said. "Didn't I bring her to the dispensary today for medicine?"

Chander felt confused and frustrated. He thought he had never seen a more wretched family. He despaired of doing

anything for them, and the overpowering smell of fleece was making him sick, so he mumbled his *namastes* and left.



IN THE EVENINGS, after Chander had finished his work at the rural dispensary, he would hike into the hills and watch the hill girls tending sheep, fetching water, and slapping together straw and dung into patties to fuel their fires. Like Reshmi, many of them were pale and beautiful, and some of them were even quite saucy, tossing their long braids or throwing little smiles in his direction. Wherever he went, he heard more stories from villagers about such girls being sold off to one of the princelings—the Muslim Nawab or the Hindu Jat Raja.

Though Chander never so much as caught a glimpse of the Nawab himself, he did often see his motorcar cruising up and down the slopes. The car was furnished with tulle curtains, which allowed the passengers to see out but prevented anyone from seeing in. The Nawab's minions put it about that the car's passengers were the begums, but it was generally known that the royal lecher himself was inside, trawling for prospective recruits for his harem. Sometimes, the Nawab's agent, usually a mullah, would jump out of the car, accost the young village girl who apparently had caught the Nawab's fancy, tempt her with shining gold bangles or necklaces on the spot, hustle her into the car, and spirit her away. In order to keep the matter hushed up, away from the notice of the police and the British authorities, the agent would call on the parents under the cover of darkness later on and make an appropriate payment. Chander was at once disturbed and fascinated. Then he heard that the Nawab's mullah would regularly go around from hamlet to hamlet, preaching the message of Allah, using the Nawab's largesse to win converts and, at the same time, sizing up the village girls, most of whom had not yet reached puberty, as prospective recruits for the Nawab's harem. Whenever the mullah came to know about a real beauty, he filled the ears of

her parents with lofty talk about the power of Islam, the strict observance of devout purdah in the Nawab's household, and the Nawab's generosity in running a "boarding school" for girls on the grounds of the luxurious palace. The parents were taken in by the religious talk, something that served as a salve to their conscience for accepting the Nawab's proffered money. The girl soon found herself in the harem instead of the supposed boarding school, never to be seen or heard of by her parents again.

Chander sought out the mullah, who tended the mosque near the Nawab's palace on the top of a hill, and gained the mullah's confidence by reciting the short *Qalma* that he had learned as a boy.

"Aren't you using religion for the profane purposes of the Nawab?" Chander asked the mullah eventually.

"I'm converting infidels to Islam," the mullah retorted.

Chander pointed out that the girls were minors and that taking them away from their homes was against the British law.

The mullah promptly replied that the authority of the Koran was higher than the British law and that the Koran made no distinction between minors and grown women. Moreover, he said that the Nawab not only got young girls for his boarding school but also got young boys to serve in his household. "The boys are trained to make carpets with the name of Allah woven into the pattern," the mullah said smoothly and slyly. "Thus, even as they are doing worldly work for the Nawab they are also doing heavenly work for Allah."

One day the compounder invited Chander to go with him to the Nawab's palace to meet His Highness himself, making no secret of the fact that even he received a handsome stipend from the palace for keeping an eye out for desirable young girls.

Chander chastised the old man for being no better than the mullah.

"I'm just a small fry," he answered. "I have no choice but to stay on the good side of the high and the mighty. What can

someone like me do when even the big sahibs, like the British Civil Surgeon, wine and dine with His Highness?"

So His Highness uses religion to seduce girls, money to keep their parents silent, and lavish hospitality to traduce British authorities, Chander thought. He felt disgusted and angry.

"I will have nothing to do with such a scoundrel, however rich and powerful he might be," Chander said.

"Then you'd better quit this place quickly, before the Nawab gets a wind of your nosing around," the compounder said, sounding fatherly.

Chander took the compounder's warning to heart and in due course quit the Nawab's jurisdiction, together with the dispensary job. He could not, however, bring himself to leave the hills and go immediately back to Lahore. So he hired a mule and rode to the palace of the Jat Raja to snoop around there and to discover if he had any more scruples than the Nawab had. He never got past the gates of the Jat Raja's palace, but he did gather some provocative information from the villagers in this Highness's jurisdiction—that the Hindu princeling was as venal as his Muslim counterpart but that, unlike the girls in the Nawab's harem, who grew old and often died there, the girls in the Jat Raja's harem did only two or three years' service, after which they were pensioned off and presented with plots of land. These women, having property, had no trouble attracting husbands and, being of independent means, they often dominated their men after marriage, so much so that, unlike women who had never been favored by the Jat Raja, they could even be unfaithful to their husbands with impunity.

Despite Chander's revulsion at the doings of the two princelings, he felt tempted by the idea of getting to know one of the Jat Raja's pensioned-off women. But he worried about the danger not only to his moral well-being but also to his physical health. He left the hills as celibate as he had been when he arrived.