

Shashi Tharoor

The Pyre

5 He died in my arms that night, died slowly with his head on my lap under the tree into which our scooter had crashed. He moaned once or twice, but his moans were soft, crushed, insensible. I cried then; cried for a friend I knew and loved, who was now slipping away from my life, and from his. His eyes were open as he died, but I don't think he recognized me.

10 In the morning, when they came with daybreak to the scene of the accident, they found a dead man and a spent one, both silent and unseeing. They had to carry both away, and from a distance it must have been impossible to tell which was the corpse and which the lucky survivor. We shared the single ambulance, he and I, and when I saw him lying there, so near and yet so far away, the memories came flooding back and I wished I could weep. But sorrow required a strength I didn't
15 possess any more. I looked away dry-eyed as the ambulance jolted across Delhi on its futile errand. All I had was a fracture. The plaster didn't prevent me from either speaking or signing, so the police asked me to do both. He's tired, said the doctor, he's in shock. No, it's all right, I said. Sign here, the inspector said. I signed.

20 I, Raminder Singh, son of Joginder Singh, residing at E-17, St. Francis' College Hostel, Delhi University, hereby state that on November 3rd inst. at 3:30 a.m., I was riding on a motor scooter driven by Shri Sujeet Kumar, student, who did not possess a license for the same. While on the Ridge, Shri Kumar, who was in a state of partial intoxication, lost control of the scooter, left the roadway, and struck a tree. He was not wearing a crash helmet...

25 I didn't recall putting it quite that way. "Lost control of the scooter?" Or had I said that Sujeet, to avoid what he thought was a black cat crossing his path, had swerved to one side and crashed head first into a branch? The cat didn't exist, not outside of Sujeet's imagination, but the branch did, and it shouldn't have been there, practically overhanging the road. Somebody who was
30 supposed to trim it had screwed up, inspector. Had screwed us up. I fell off the pillion onto my arse but Sujeet flew over the handlebars onto his head. Sure he was a little stoned, but it was that branch that did us in. No, he didn't have a license, but there was nothing wrong with his driving, inspector. No, the scooter didn't belong to him. No, its owner was unaware that we were using it. But what are you saying, inspector? Sujeet's dead! He's dead, inspector, and you're asking about
35 Bobby's scooter?

"Poor Bobby's going to blow up" had been my first thought when we hit the tree. It wasn't the first time we had borrowed Bobby's scooter, and he'd never noticed. We knew he was so possessive about the damned thing, and it was just a question of whacking the keys from his desk while he
40 was sleeping and wheeling the scooter out of the shed past the chowkidar, who'd been given a packet of Charminar to look the other way. As I said, we'd done it before; it was nothing new. But with each successive trip we'd been less careful. But Sujeet drove bloody well for a guy who did all his driving on the sly. And on a high.

45 "State of partial intoxication:' That was a laugh. He'd had enough grass for three cows. Which is
why he started seeing black cats on the road when you could barely see the road itself. "Hey;' he'd
called out in that half-crazy way of his, "hey-I don't want that black cat crossing our path, that's
bad luck. I'm going to go right round him and beat that son-of-a-bitch to it-watch:' My yell of
50 protest was drowned by the extra revving of the motor. And cut short as we crashed into that
tree. I began swearing as soon as I got my breath back and could feel the soreness of my arse and
the pain in my leg. "I can't stand up, you stupid bugger;' I screamed. "You've broken my frigging
leg, you bastard!"

But the expected reply in kind didn't come. After a minute or two I stopped swearing and looked
55 in his direction. He was lying horribly still. I started calling out to him then, softly at first, then
more insistently, but there was no response. I crawled towards him, dragging myself along on my
good leg. He didn't answer me. My elbows were hurting and there was a gash on my right arm,
and the pain in my behind sent shock waves through me with each forward thrust of my body, but
60 finally I reached him. He was still breathing-I remember that, and the brief sense of relief I felt. I
put out a hand to touch him and felt the terrible warm stickiness of his blood. It was then that he
moaned, for the first time. And I knew my nightmare had begun.

I moved my hands and felt blood everywhere I touched. I called out to him, shouting loudly, and
tried to shake him back to life. Nothing, not even a moan this time. I tried to recollect anything I'd
65 ever read or heard about first aid. My mind remained blank. God, I wished I wasn't draxed, I
couldn't even think properly and I had to help him. That was all I could think of. I had to help him. I
collapsed onto my arse and dragged his head onto my lap. He moaned again. I shouted once,
twice, into the stillness of the night. It was of no use. No one was going to be on the Ridge at that
time. I thought vaguely of going and calling for help, but the pain told me I couldn't get very far.
70 And where, when, how could I go? The best way I could help was to hold his head on my lap and
give him comfort until help arrived at daybreak.
And Sujeet lay dying on my lap.

The postmortem called it a brain hemorrhage. The concussion had been so severe, the fat, balding
75 and antiseptic doctor told me at the hospital with his paw on my shoulder, that he would never
have been normal again even if he had recovered. So perhaps, the doctor blinked behind owlsh
glasses, perhaps it was better this way. I nodded and wormed away from his patronizing hand.

His parents came by the first train. Poor people. They had struggled so much to give Sujeet an
80 education at the best places, to fight for every seat, every quota that their untouchability entitled
them to. He had always made the grade, and they must have been so proud of his English, his
jeans, his upper-caste friends, his Zapata moustache, quite unlike any Harijan boy they had ever
known. And now He was their only son, their only hope in an unjust world, the eldest in a family of
daughters, the blessed future provider. He was dead. He had always made the grade, but he had
85 never conformed: he had realized early that his devilry was what made him acceptable to his
peers. There were other Scheduled Caste boys at college, small, dark, mousy scholars who spoke
when they were spoken to and sat by themselves at mealtimes. Sujeet was not like them. He cut
classes, interjected at campus debates, chased girls. And took drugs.

90 I guess it was I who first got him into it, though it could have been any of us. I remember, though,
his hesitation at the out-stretched joint in my hand. I'll never know now whether it was at the act
of drug-taking or at the prospect of putting his mouth to something being smoked by a Jat and
about to be passed on to a Brahmin. He hesitated, and then through the swirling mists in my mind
I remember someone's curled lip and the words, "what's the matter-scared?" He took the joint
95 from me immediately, and it was as if he was laying everything he'd ever feared on the line.
I wanted to say something to his parents. Sujeet wasn't afraid; he wasn't afraid of the things you
are afraid of. But I didn't, because I couldn't; and because I knew that if he had stayed afraid, had
not dared, had not chosen to defy every convention the world had thrust upon him, he might have
been alive.

100 And then I thought of Mira. Mira, the girl he screwed and I wished I could; Mira, the General's
daughter, sultry, exciting, unattainable Mira. Mira, of the dark eyes and the painted, carefully-
shaped eyebrows, of the hip-hugging pants and sleeveless shirts that somehow never reached her
waist and gave me so many tantalizing views of the small of her back; what would this do to Mira?
105 Mira who was so much in love with the one guy who didn't give a damn about her, Mira who
defied society with a toss of her head and bedded the grandson of a cobbler, Mira who let him
hump her regularly in the little room next to mine in the dormitory while I sat on my side of the
wall and tried to read-what would Mira do? I'd have to be the one to tell her. To say that Sujeet
wasn't going to be at the back gate of her dorm the next day. To inform her about the funeral.

110 The funeral. The funeral will be held this evening at 4:00 p.m. at Haldi Ghat, the college
announced. I didn't want to go. How could I go there and see a friend I'd been talking, laughing,
joking, smoking with for the last three years being burned to ashes? At four o'clock we should
have been in the cafe together, not at some crematorium with one of us dead. It just didn't make
115 any sense.

The only funeral I'd ever attended was my grandfather's. They'd called me from school after my
last exam and told me in hushed tones that it had happened at last, and I had to rush home. The
Sikh driver from the office was there, and instead of his usual indifference, he picked me up very
120 tenderly and put me by his side on the front seat of the car. When I got home there was a crowd
of people, mostly subordinates who'd envied him and competitors who'd hated his guts, standing
around in the living room looking suitably grieved. And there was mother in the bedroom trying to
console grandma, who was weeping bitter tears into the end of her sari, wailing so loudly it was
embarrassing, while my father, his face set, sat completely still by grandfather's bed, as if still
125 maintaining the vigil the family had kept for the last eight weeks. And I, the only one who'd really
ever loved grand-father, the only one he'd always got along with and whose company he could
bear, I wasn't allowed in to pay my last respects because the sight of death was considered too
much for my eleven-year-old sensibilities.

130 But I saw him at the funeral, lying on his bier, triumphant in death as in life. He had had plenty of
time to meet his end, to make his will and issue his last instructions before handing over the firm
to my father. He was over seventy and had lived a full life, and his final illness, when it came, had
not ravaged him. Even in death his face bore the look of arrogant self-confidence it had always
done; no crease of pain marred those perfect, haughty, aristocratic features. It was a fitting way to

135 go, and I had the sense of participating in a moving, but not sad, family ritual as I stood behind my father and he held my fingers tightly in one hand while he lit the pyre with the other. That was what death and funerals should be about. Not this.

140 "Ram, you son-of-a-bitch;" Sujeet had said once. "I know what a lot of you guys thought about me when I first got into this elite little college of yours. One more chamar on an affirmative action program, right? Wouldn't even have got in if the government hadn't obliged the college to reserve a couple of seats for the Scheduled Castes. Well, I don't give a shit what those turds think, or you too, for that matter. It's my right, my right and that of my people, because you bastards have got to pay for centuries of bloody discrimination. And I'm going to enjoy that right, Ram, and I'm not
145 going to be apologetic about it. I'm going to enjoy everything this bloody college has to offer, the library, the theater, the rich buggers' motorbikes, the booze and the parties-and I'm going to enjoy the girls. And then I'm going to go right on to the bloody Indian bloody Administrative Service, and I'm going to get a posting to my family's home district. No Foreign Service for me, my friend, no fobbing off the untouchable with offers of New York or Paris, no sir. I'm going to be District
150 Magistrate in Chhoti Haveli and I'm going to get every bloody Jat and Thakur in the area to kiss my arse. You just watch me, Ram my friend. You just watch me:" And he had taken another drag, and he had turned smiling to me and said, "And you know what? At the end of the whole bloody thing, when I'm finally dead and gone, bloody Brahmins are going to come to my funeral: They came. Most of the college dorm was there at Haldi Ghat. So was I. I stood there with Mira sobbing softly
155 into my shoulder and stared glassy-eyed at the funeral pyre while I patted her silky head in sympathy. His parents wept openly, and the little knot of Harijan scholars stood in a solemn circle away from the rest. The priests talked among themselves, and chanted, and pulled out the tins of vanaspati. As they poured it into the crackling fire the flames leaped higher, enveloping the body in its shroud under the wood. And the smoke that was Sujeet rose towards the sky.

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