KRISHAN CHANDAR

Irani Pilau

The night was mine because I didn't have any money in my pocket. When I have money in my pocket, the night doesn't seem like it's mine. That night, I saw the cars strutting down Marine Drive; I saw the glittering flats and the dancers on the roof of the Ambassador Hotel. Yet that night was completely mine. That night, all the stars in the heavens were mine, and all of Bombay's streets were mine. When there's even a little money in my pocket, the whole city seems to subdue me. Every object scowls and rebukes me, forces me to sit far away from myself. From ordinary pants to lovely radio programs—everything says, you are far away from me. But when there isn't a coin in my pocket, the whole city seems made for me. It's as if "Built for Bishan, a Starving but Cheerful Writer" is written on every stone, on every turn in the road, on every electricity pole. On those days, I don't worry about the lockup, about being hit by a car, or about eating dinner. There's a vast, intoxicating mood of freedom and good humor that spreads out for miles. That night, I wasn't walking by myself. That night, the streets of Bombay were carrying me. Every curve in the road, every turn in the markets, every dark corner invited me: "Come here, look at us. Join us, friend. You've been living in this city for eight years. Why are you walking around like a stranger? Come, take our hand."

That night was mine. That night, I wasn't afraid of anyone. Fear comes to those who have money in their pockets. In this country of people with empty pockets, only those with full pockets need to be afraid. What did I have that anyone could snatch away?

I've heard that the government has made it illegal to walk around on the streets after midnight. But why? What is there in Bombay after midnight that they want to hide from me? I was going to find out. That night, I wasn't afraid of anything—not of any minister, not of any lockup. That night, no matter what, I was going to go exploring and take my friends'

hands.

With that thought in mind, I went past the road in front of Churchgate Reclamation and into the University grounds. My plan was to pass through the middle of the field, come out in front of the big, dark houses on the other side, and from there go on to Flora Fountain. But while I was passing through the field, I noticed a few boys had formed a circle in the corner and were singing:

> You and I have fallen in love
> You and I
> You and I
> You and I have fallen in love

Two or three of them were clapping. One was trying to make a flute sound come out of his mouth. One fellow was shaking his head from side to side and making a tabla out a wooden box. All of them were swaying with pleasure and singing in voices that were sharp and flat, high and low. I came closer to them and asked, "Hey guys, who have you fallen in love with?"

They stopped singing and looked at me for a moment. I don't know what people think when they look at me. But I do know that, after looking at me for a moment, people quickly warm up to me. They become so intimate with me that they start to tell me every secret of their lives, every picture of their own little universes, every pain and sorrow in their hearts. There's no greatness in my face; there's nothing special about it. I don't have a commanding personality or any majesty; there's no special flair to my dress. My clothes don't have the look you get from a black coat with a red rose or from a sharkskin suit. I wear ordinary sandals, above them cotton pajamas, and above them a cotton shirt. The back of my shirt often gets dirty, first, because I usually sleep on the ground in my hut, and second, because I have a bad habit of always putting my back to a wall whenever I sit. Why so many dirty walls come into my life and why so few clean ones is another story. Shirts quickly fall apart at the shoulders of those down on their luck, and there you'll see stitches. The real reason is that these people try over and over again to stitch together old, torn clothes. Not every man can stitch a red rose onto his black coat. What's the difference between one stitch and another? It's true that no two people are alike; they can't have the same face and the same form. I see different faces night and day in Bombay. Thousands and thousands of different faces, but what does it mean that all of them have the same

stitches at the shoulders? Thousands and thousands of stitches try unsuccessfully to join the ends of torn lives. After reading my stories, one critic said that he doesn't see any human face in them. That's the trouble with me: I don't express my characters' faces. I see the stitches at people's shoulders; and those stitches show me their inner face. Those stitches tell me about their struggles and their hard work, without which no novel about life and no story about society can be complete. That's why I'm happy that when people see my face some think I'm a clerk, others that I'm a junk dealer, and still others that I'm a comb-seller or a hairdresser. So far, no one has imagined me to be a minister or a thief. I'm happy to be one among these millions of little people who can become familiar with one another quickly, without any formal introduction.

After a moment's hesitation, the boys looked at me and smiled. A thin lad said to me, "Hey man, have a seat. You can sing with us."

After saying this, he shook his hair and went back to playing his wooden box as a tabla. Then we all started to sing:

> You and I
> You and I
> have fallen in love

All at once, the thin lad stopped playing his tabla, nudged another boy who had his head between his knees, and said, "Madhubala! Why aren't you singing?"

Madhubala slowly lifted his head out from between his legs. His face wasn't beautiful like the actress Madhubala. There was a burn from his chin all the way down to his left elbow. He grimaced and his tiny eyes looked like two black fissures on his round face. He seemed agitated. He said to the tabla player, "Leave me alone, sala! My stomach hurts."

"Why does it hurt, sala? Did you eat Irani pilau today?"

Madhubala shook his head and said, "Yeah, I ate it."

"Why did you eat it, sala?"

"Why do you think? I only did three polishes today."

There was another lad who seemed older than the rest of them; he had a bit of a beard on his chin, and he was growing sideburns. Scratching his nose, he said, "Madhubala, get up and run around the field. Come on, I'll run with you. After two rounds your stomachache will go away."

"No, leave me alone."

"Get up, sala. Otherwise I'll hit you!"

Madhubala brought his hands together and pleaded, "Cuckoo, just leave me alone. My stomachache will go away, I swear."

"Get up! Why are you ruining our band?"

Cuckoo lifted Madhubala up by his hands and then they both started to run around the university grounds. I watched the two of them running for a while, then the boy sitting next to me scratched his head and said, "If you eat Irani pilau, it's a problem. If you don't, it's a problem."

I said, "No, man, Irani pilau is good food. Why would it give you a stomachache?" Hearing my words, they all started to laugh.

One boy, whose name was Kuldeep Kaur, and who was wearing a torn jacket and torn shorts, chuckled and said to me, "It seems you've never eaten Irani pilau."

Opening the buttons of his jacket, Kuldeep Kaur told me that Irani pilau was their special slang. They don't eat it every day. But on those days when one of them doesn't polish many shoes or when he doesn't have much money, he has to eat it. The pilau is available at the nearby Irani restaurant after midnight. The food that people leave on their plates during the day—the pieces of bread, meat, chewed bones, bits of rice, parts of omelets, slices of potato—all of this uneaten food is mixed together in a watery stew and this stew is sold for two annas a plate at the backdoor of the restaurant. Usually even the poor people around there don't eat it, yet still every day about two or three hundred plates are sold. The people who buy it are usually shoe polishers, furniture cleaners, doormen, poor people working in the nearby buildings, and people doing construction.

I asked Kuldeep Kaur, "Why is your name Kuldeep Kaur?" He took his jacket completely off and started to rub his black belly with a lot of pleasure. Hearing my question, he had a big laugh. When he was done, he said to his friend, "Bring me my box."

Kuldeep Kaur's friend brought him his box. He opened it and inside were shoe polishing materials. On the bottles of polish was the picture of Kuldeep Kaur. He then had his friend open his own box and all of its containers were covered with pictures of Nargis cut from magazines and newspapers.

Kuldeep Kaur said, "This sala does a Nargis polish. That guy does Nami, and that one Suriya. All of us cut out pictures of some film actress and put them on our containers, and then rub their polish."

"Why?"

"Customers love it. We say, 'Sir, what polish would you like? Nargis's or Suriya's or Madhubala's?' Then the customer chooses the polish of the

actress he likes, and we send him to the guy who has Nargis's polish or Nami's or some other actress's. There are eight of us, and we sit over there behind the Churchgate Parsi Bus Stand. Whichever actress's polish one of us has, that's his name. That's why our business goes so well, and we have a lot of fun, too."

I said, "If you sit over there on the footpath doesn't the policeman bother you?"

Kuldeep Kaur had been lying on his stomach. He stood up and then flipped an imaginary coin into the air. He said, "What would that sala say? We give him money. And the people who sleep in this field, they give him money too. Money?" Saying this, he flicked another imaginary coin into the air, followed it with his eyes, and then pretended to catch it. He opened his hands and looked inside, but both hands were empty. Kuldeep Kaur smiled with a pleasant bitterness. Saying nothing, he lay down again.

Nargis asked me, "Do you polish shoes over in Dadar? I think I might have seen you in front of the Yazdan Hotel."

I said, "Yes, you could think of me as a type of polisher."

"A type of polisher?" Kuldeep Kaur raised his head and then sat up. He looked at me observantly. "Sala, speak clearly. What do you do?"

He called me sala. I was very happy. If someone else called me that, I would hit him. But when this boy called me sala, I was happy because here sala is not a term of abuse, it's a word for brotherhood. These people included me in their brotherhood. So I said, "Friend, I'm a type of polisher, but what I do is polish words, and sometimes I scratch at old, dirty leather and see what's in its rotten depths."

Nargis and Nami both spoke up at once, "Sala, you keep talking gibberish. Tell us what you really do."

I said, "My name is Bishan. I write stories. I sell them to newspapers."

"Oh, you're a writer," Nami said. Nami was a small lad. He was the smallest among the circle of boys here, but there was a gleam of intelligence in his eyes. He became very interested in me because besides polishing shoes he also sold newspapers. He advanced towards me and said, "What newspapers do you write for? *Free Press*? *Central Times*? *Bombay Chronicle*? I know all the newspapers."

He came right up next to me.

I said, "I write for *Shahrah*."

"*Shahrah*? What's that?"

"It comes out of Delhi."

"From Delhi? What?" Nami's eyes scrutinized my face.

"And I write for *Adab-e Latif*," I said, to awe him.

Kuldeep Kaur started to laugh. "What did he say? He writes for Badbe Khaltif? Sala, that sounds like some English film actress's name. Badbe Khaltif! Ha-ha! Nami, change your name to Badbe Khaltif. It sounds like a great name! Ha-ha!" When all the boys had finished laughing, I said with great seriousness, "Not Badbe Khaltif. Adab. *Adab-e Latif*. It comes out of Lahore. It's a very good paper."

Nargis shook his head indifferently and said, "Alright, sala. Say you do work for *Adab-e Latif*. What do we care? We'd just sell it over there and get paid a little money for it."

Kuldeep Kaur looked at me and then started to laugh again. He said, "But look at you. You certainly don't seem like a writer. You look like a shoe polisher, like us!" Then they all started to laugh again. I started to laugh with them since there was no other recourse.

Kuldeep Kaur kept laughing, and then became serious for a moment. He turned towards me and said, "And for these ... stories ... how much money do you get?"

"I get just about as much as you get, often nothing. When I have finished polishing words, then the publisher says thanks, takes them for free, and then makes his own magazine or newspaper shine with them."

"Then why do you wrack your brain for nothing? Why don't you polish like us? I mean it. You can come into our brotherhood and we'll call you Badbe Khaltif. Give me your hand." I shook hands with Kuldeep Kaur.

Then he said, "But you'll have to give four annas a day to the policeman."

"And if one day I don't have four annas?"

"I don't know. Get it from someone. Steal, rob, but make sure you give four annas to him. Oh, and you'll have to go to the lockup two days a month."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know why. We give the policeman four annas a day—every shoe polisher does—but still two times a month he grabs us and takes us away. It's his rule. He says, 'What can I do?'"

I said, "Okay, so I'll stay in the lockup for two days a month."

Then Kuldeep Kaur said, "Also, you'll have to go to court once a month. You'll have to get a ticket from the bailiff to go to court, and then you'll have to give them two or three rupees as well."

"Why? If I had already been giving four annas a day to the policeman ..."

"He also has to seem like he's doing his job. So what do you say, sala Badbe Khaltif?"

I winked at Kuldeep Kaur and said, "Sala, I get everything." We both started to laugh. Just then Madhubala and Cuckoo both came back from the field, dripping in sweat.

I asked Madhubala, "Has your stomachache gone away?"

He said, "The pain's gone, but now I'm really hungry."

Nargis said, "Yeah, me too."

Nami shook his head and asked, "Should we get Irani pilau?"

"So you can get a stomachache and then run around the field and get hungry again?" Kuldeep Kaur said bitterly.

Nami said, "I can give two paise."

I said, "I have one anna."

We had four annas all together. Nami was sent to get the Irani pilau because he was the youngest. The cook at the Irani restaurant liked him too. If the cook saw Nami, he'd maybe give three plates for the price of two, or at least three plates worth of food.

When Nami had gone, I asked, "Do you guys sleep here at night?"

"Except for Madhubala, we all sleep here," Cuckoo said, "Madhubala usually goes home, but he didn't today."

I asked Madhubala, "You have a home?"

"Yeah, there's a hut in the billboard. My mom lives there."

"And your father?"

Madhubala said, "Father? What do I know of my father? That sala is probably a big honcho in one of these buildings around here."

Suddenly they all became quiet, as if someone had slapped them. These boys—defenseless, homeless, and nameless—tried through film songs to fill their lives with the love they would never have.

"*You and I have fallen in love*. Where is your love? Father! Mother! Brother! Who are you? Why did you bring me into this world? Why did you leave me to be kicked from door to door on these mean, hard footpaths?" For a moment their pale, plaintive faces were stricken with an unknown fear. They grabbed each other's hands forcefully, as if they couldn't get help from anywhere else. It was as if every building, every footpath, and every footstep in the city was trampling them, forcing them, in the darkness of the night, to hold each other's hands. They seemed so afraid and innocent to me, like forgotten children lost in some unknown, endless jungle. Bombay sometimes seems like a jungle where society's nameless children are groping around trying to find their way out of the labyrinth of the streets; and when they don't find the way, they sit down

under a tree and close their eyes. Then I think, no, it's not like that at all.

Bombay is not a jungle. People say it's a city. It has one Municipal Corporation; it has one government and one system. It has alleyways; it has markets; it has stores. There are roads and there are homes. All of them are joined to one another in the way that things are connected to each other in a civilized and cultured city. I know all of this. I recognize Bombay's roads and homes. I give them honor and respect. But despite this honor and respect, despite this love, why do I see in this city of Bombay so many alleyways which have no way out? There are so many roads that don't go anywhere, so many children for whom there is no home.

Suddenly, Nami broke the silence. He came running toward us. In his hands were three plates of Irani pilau. There was a warm, sweet-smelling steam rising from them. Only when he brought the plates and laid them on the grass did we see that there were tears in his eyes.

"What happened?" Kuldeep Kaur asked.

Nami said in an angry tone, "The cook bit me really hard here."

Nami turned his left cheek towards us.

We saw there was a big mark on his left cheek.

Kuldeep Kaur started cursing the cook and said, "Bastard—"

But after that, they all dug into the Irani pilau. ❑

—Translated by A. Sean Pue