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BEENA'S STORY

Phil Harvey

I had arranged to meet Richard Verlock in the bar of Claridge's Hotel in New Delhi on a Saturday in late July. I brought along my friend B.K. Ahuja, who is called Bunny, to show him the sign in the bar. The sign said "Bar Open for Foreigners and their Foreign Guests Only," but Bunny refused to believe that such a thing could exist in an Indian hotel. The sign, with its idiotic redundancy, was there all right—how could I have made it up? Bunny confronted the bartender. "I am an Indian citizen," he said. "Are you telling me that I cannot be served at this bar and a bloody Pakistani or a Saudi can get a drink here and I cannot?" The bartender tipped his head nervously toward the sign.

The theory behind this law was that foreigners' vices had to be indulged for the sake of the tourist trade. Indians were presumed to be more virtuous but weak, I guess, and in need of protection. Bunny muttered "bloody politicians" as he went out the door. It was starting to rain.

I saw Richard at a corner table, smoke curling up from an ashtray in front of him. We shook hands. It wasn't exactly a cordial greeting, but we shook for a little longer than protocol demanded. I think we felt an obligation because of the work we'd done together. That had been five years before when we'd joined a famine relief team in Eastern India, in Bihar. It was an exhausting, exhilarating experience. We saved some lives.

After the famine, Richard took an assignment not far from Calcutta. From there he'd been transferred to Bangkok.

"How are you, Richard?" I said. "How's Thailand?"

"I am well," he said. "I am immersed in the United Nations. I find I am well suited to the do-nothing culture of the organization."

He seemed distracted, a little aloof, not quite the Richard I remembered. During the famine fight I had grown fond of him, though I never really understood him. He loved India almost unreasonably, it seemed to me. By the time we were fully immersed in the food program—nightmarish logistics with bullock carts, rickshaws, and rattletrap trucks that broke down with predictable regularity—Richard seemed more Indian than most Indians. His Hindi was nearly fluent and he was studying Bengali. He knew that Chatterjees had to be from Calcutta—that kind of thing. For him it was a point of honor.

One night during the famine operation the two of us sat up very late, sharing a bottle of Johnny Walker that Richard had cadged from his bosses' duty-free quota. It was sweltering hot and India, at that moment, seemed like a hellhole to me. "Why do you like this place?" I'd asked him.

"There's a flavor. The cooking fires smell good," he said. "Even the shit smells are reassuring." He stopped and we sipped that wonderfully smooth scotch. "The music," he said. "I like that wailing sound. Piercing. Sets people's teeth on edge. But it's in my blood."

Now I said, "What do you mean about the do-nothing culture of the U.N.? Unicef sank a lot of wells during the famine, didn't it?"

"Yes, they did, we did," Richard said. "But that was five years ago and we haven't done much since. I think that's probably a good thing." He stubbed out his cigarette.

"You haven't noticed that the world is improving?" I said.

"It hasn't improved much," Richard said. "Look at the sign on the bar." He took a long pull on his drink and set it down on the table. Then he pulled a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, jerked the pack until a cigarette slid up, grabbed it with his lips and lit it. "More to the point, the U.N. is sending an evaluation team out to follow up on so-called self-help projects we carried out three years ago. Someone may actually go to Tikral. If so, it would serve them right."

"Tikral?"

"Yes," he said. "My well project. Unleashed an unspeakable horror."

A uniformed waiter with a Claridge's logo on the little board that stuck out of his turban hovered over us, wordlessly suggesting another drink. I declined. My beer was only half gone. Richard ordered a gin and lime.

"You were an enthusiastic famine fighter," I said.

"Those were the days, weren't they? We thought we could save the world. All by ourselves." He took a drag on his cigarette, and the lengthening ash fell off onto his lap. He brushed at it without looking. "We did save a few lives, I expect. Not that it matters."

"It mattered to you then," I said. "It mattered to all of us."

"We were young. That happens to people," he said.

"Where's Tikral?" I said, uncomfortable with his tone.

"A hundred kilometers west of Calcutta."

"You did your well project there?"

"Yes." There was a long silence. Then he looked back at me. "I have come to prefer the U.N. modus operandi. Meetings, reports, more meetings and more reports."

"What happened in Tikral?"

"I don't think I want to talk about that," he said. He fell silent again, and I became conscious of the quiet whirr of the air conditioning and the rain running in flat streams down the window behind his chair. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "Perhaps I will tell you," he said. It was clear there was something he wanted to tell someone. "You've always been the right sort of do-gooder. The bearable kind." He paused, looked at me. "You were wrong to care so much about the

people in Bihar, but I'll . . . " I started to object but Richard held up his hand and signaled to the waiter. "My good man," he said, laying on the British accent a little thick, "I shall be finished with this drink in fifteen minutes. I will then require another, but I'm going to be concentrating on some matters and I don't want to be interrupted. Please bring me a fresh drink—gin and nimboo pani—at precisely twenty-five past."

"Twenty-five past. Very good sahib."

Richard leaned back in his chair and let out a breath that sounded heavy and tired, and he appeared to shrink just a bit into the chair cushions. Then he took a drink and began speaking.

"It was a year after the famine project, 1968. The U.N. was obsessed with 'self-help' programs, a misnomer usually. The idea was that communities that wanted something—a well or a water-seal latrine, or a godown for storing grain—had to get villagers together and volunteer to do the work and then the U.N. would provide money and maybe someone like me.

"I got sent to Tikral. They wanted a well there. They got their bloody well all right." He looked at me levelly, his eyes hard. "They got their bloody fucking well." He glanced away and then went on.

"A man named Aziz was the leader, the leader of the well project. He wasn't very bright, Mr. Aziz, but he was man of honor, of integrity. Courage too. Takes guts to be a Muslim in a Hindu village.

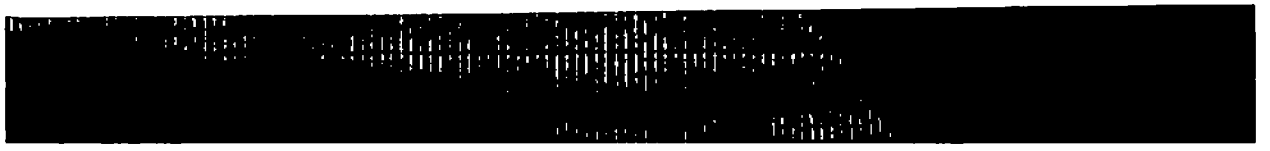
"Aziz wanted the well so his wife and his daughter wouldn't have to make the daily trudge along a dusty dirt track for nearly two kilometers to the nearest clean water supply to carry back enough water for cooking and washing, not enough water for bathing properly, but enough to survive on. Oh, he wanted that well. The whole village wanted that well; they wanted the water. So there was no shortage of volunteers.

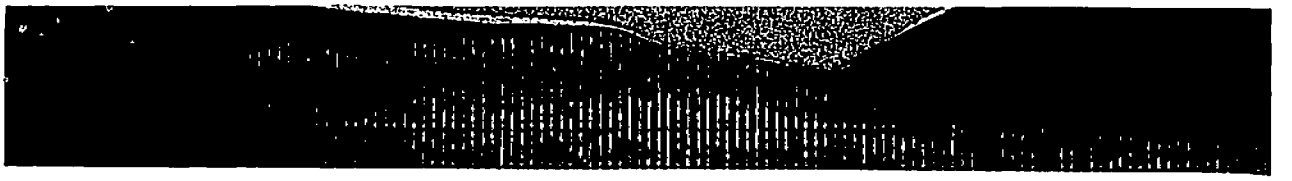
"I read the manuals. There wasn't much except a lot of theoretical U.N. technical crap, but it wasn't rocket science. You dig a hole in the ground and bang your way through any rock you encounter; you dig until it's deep enough and eventually you find water.

"There was enough information about the aquifer so I figured we'd have to go down about 50 or 60 feet. We'd hit water and then the thing would have to be shaped and lined with stone and bricks. It would take a long time, but I was confident we could do it.

"Aziz was gregarious. He and I talked a lot before the work began. His wife never spoke. She huddled in a corner, cooked food, went for water every day, worked in the fields, and did whatever it is she did for Aziz in the dark of night in that hut made of wattle and brick.

"His daughter was named Beena. He called her his jewel, his golden nugget. She was his adored, his beautiful Cinderella.





As Richard spoke of this girl Beena, his voice softened. He seemed to slide further into his story, captivated by the images he was recalling.

"I told Aziz about Cinderella. He listened with wide eyes when I told him how Cinderella was transformed from her rags to a beautiful princess in a beautiful gown and how she captured the heart of the prince at the ball. He was rapt. 'Beena will be like that,' he said. 'She will become a princess.' At the very least she would be grand and special for someone, some day, he said.

"It was a pleasure to watch the girl. She was probably 14 when Aziz and I and the other villagers started working on the well. She was strikingly beautiful. She bubbled with enthusiasm. She'd go off in the morning with that big clay pot tucked under her arm for the long round trip to the well, coming back with the water jug balanced on her head, laughing and smiling with the other girls and women.

"Her favorite shawl was bright red and when the wind blew too hard, she held the end of the shawl in her teeth. Even with that bit of cloth in her mouth she could smile and laugh, and she did.

"We began digging. We used those short-handled shovels, the ones you pull toward you like a hoe. I was supposed to provide technical expertise, but mostly I dug with the others. We sent the dirt and rock up in little wicker baskets, pulled up on ropes by the villagers at the top.

"We hit a rock shelf, as I figured we would. Normally the way villagers dealt with that was to build a big fire on the rock and let it burn all night and then dump all the water they could find onto the rock in the morning to split it and crack it so it could be broken up. My involvement at least made that part easier. I got some dynamite and we just blasted the sonofabitch out of there. Everyone thought that was miraculous.

He paused, and stirred his gin and lime with his finger. Bits of nimboo swirled up from the bottom of the glass. "Bloody miraculous," he murmured. He took a drink and went on.

"Aziz and I were down there when we hit water. When that water started flowing around our ankles it really did seem like a miracle. We shouted up. Everyone at the top yelled and whistled and that night we had a party.

"By then Aziz and I were close companions in that hole in the ground. It took a lot of work to get in and out of the well, so for a while we spent much of the day down there in the bottom, sloshing around in the water, lining the bottom of the well with rocks that had been carefully shaped by the village's masons, forming it until we were sure the water would be plenty deep.

"Down there in the well we talked about Beena. We decided I would be her godfather. I would help Aziz select a mate for her when the time came. Both he and I felt she was much too young for marriage, but her mother and the others felt differently. Fifteen was the normal marrying age for a girl in Tikral, and marriage

and motherhood would be essential for her, her destiny, her future. We all knew that, and we understood the reasons. Beena did, too, and in the abstract, she thought the idea of marriage was very funny and very good. She laughed about it and she laughed when I told her I would be her godfather and help choose her husband. She used to say how could you, a big sahib from another land, pick a husband for me, a little village girl? I said why not? I am your Richard-Uncle, and I will make sure your husband is prosperous and generous and kind. Otherwise I will not permit him to marry you. She laughed, her bright white teeth sparkling, her joy infectious. She was the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.

"The day the well was completed we began hauling up water, buckets full of water, water enough for cooking and cleaning and washing, washing the clothes and bathing, water aplenty for the first time in these people's lives. That night the men got out clay jars of toddy made from the sap of the palm trees that grow there, foul stuff but it packed a wallop and I drank it along with the others. The women, as always, huddled together nearby, giggling and laughing, probably about the men, and talking about their children and marriage and who would be a suitable husband for Beena.

"The well was a grand success. Oh my yes. A grand success."

Richard had been lost in the story, and the joy he took in seeing Beena's beauty again, in remembering it, was palpable. I think he must have been in love with her.

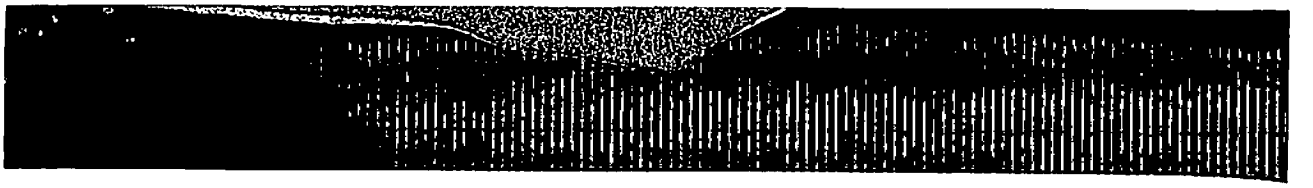
The waiter appeared with Richard's drink. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It said 6:25 exactly. Richard took a sip and looked past me toward the hotel entrance. As he did, his eyes seemed to darken, and, as he continued his story, his voice became bitter.

"Last year I went back. We'd had one of those endless U.N. meetings in Calcutta where we all agreed to study the problem and have more meetings to produce reports demanding further study. I had two days off and decided to go back and pay my respects to Aziz and meet Beena's husband. I had no doubt that she'd be married.

"I drove into the village in my jeep with the big United Nations shield and symbol on both doors, parked the jeep, and went to see Aziz. When I got to his house—his hut—there was an old woman outside, someone I'd never seen before. Her features were horribly misshapen. The skin under one eye was pulled aside in stringy scars. Her nose was half gone, her other eye seemed to be peering out from a pit of scar tissue. She was mixing dung and straw for fuel.

"I asked if Aziz was in. The woman said: 'Aziz?' Then she looked up at me and Beena's voice said, 'Richard-sahib? Don't you recognize me?'

"I couldn't believe it. I refused to believe it. I simply could not take it in. 'Are you all right?' I said, like a fool.



"'Yes, Richard-sahib,' she said. 'I'm all right. I'm in good health, you see?' She stood up and I could see reminders of the beautiful strong girl, the graceful Cinderella somewhere behind the horrid mask that now was her face.

"I was afraid to touch her. Fear of some dread disease I suppose. I should have hugged her, given her some comfort, let her know that her uncle-sahib still loved her, was still her godfather, but I couldn't do it. She was someone I didn't know anymore. I couldn't stand it. I just couldn't stand it."

He choked briefly, coughed, took a quick drink and hurried on.

"Aziz came out of the house. He said, 'Richard-sahib. Sorry. Beena has had an accident, you see.'"

"I mumbled something. 'I see. Yes.' Some idiotic words."

"I took Aziz aside and led him to the jeep where I had a bottle of whiskey. We walked through the village, past the well, which now had a fence three quarters around it, and out to a place under a clump of toddy palms where we could be alone. I drank the whisky, Aziz chewed betel and he told me what had happened."

Richard stopped and glanced up, looking toward the hotel entrance. He began to speak, then stopped again. He was torn, but something was pushing him to finish the story.

"The well had continued to flow and the villagers became more and more dependent on it. The head of the local government, the Mukya, owned the land the well was on. Everyone had known that; even I knew that, but it was agreed and understood that the well would be available for the whole village, that there would be no restrictions as to who could use the water. The Mukya had betrayed that understanding. Because he also owned most of the land that the villagers farmed, he held all the cards. He put up barriers around the well and began making demands on everyone who came for water. The tributes were minor at first. The village women would offer him sweetmeats and little flowers and touch his feet and he would nod and they could go and get their water. But sometimes, especially with the younger and prettier women, he would insist on something more. Then, there would be shouts and fighting and bad words, and sometimes these women would not be permitted to take any water, and they and their families suffered accordingly.

"He had his eye on Beena. She was the youngest and prettiest of the lot and still had no husband. Like the others she would occasionally fight with the Mukya on his porch and be denied the water. Then one day she disappeared briefly inside his house, came out, and had her turn at the well. She began to get water without offering sweetmeats, without having to touch the Mukya's feet as he sat on his porch.

"The rumors started. What was she doing for him inside his house? When the rumors persisted, the others began to ostracize her. She had disgraced her family! Nothing is worse, nothing is more destructive in an Indian village than to sully

your family's good name. Nobody knew that anything had happened. All they knew was that Beena was getting water more easily than the other women in the village. That was enough."

Richard stopped again. His drink was empty and the ice was half melted. He signaled to the waiter, who was pretending to polish a silver tray. He finally looked up when Richard's arm cut a great scything arc through the air. "Another," Richard said, his voice hard.

"I'll have another beer," I said.

By the time Richard's drink arrived, he was sitting on the edge of his chair. He held the full glass tightly in his right hand.

"One night when Beena was returning to her family's home a gang of boys, young men, probably led by Beena's brother, jumped out at her in the darkness and pinned her arms behind her. Aziz did not see this, but he was sure it happened this way."

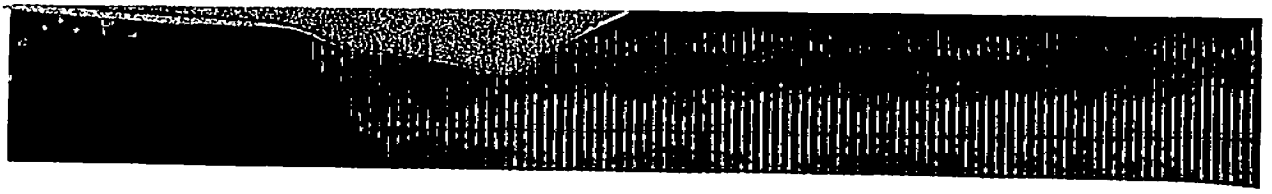
As I listened, it seemed as if Richard himself had added some details, with these nightmare images roiling in his mind, knowing what the result had been, living the nightmare over and over like a rehearsal for something that could not be stopped. He raced on.

"Two of them held her, ducking their heads down and a third—probably a boy of no more than 16 or 17—threw acid on her face, threw it repeatedly. Over and over! She screamed. Her screams echoed up and down the village in every house; they all heard her, heard her wails of terror and pain in all the little lanes of Tikral, screams of pain and horror as her face came apart under the acid, the lines of that beautiful face destroyed."

His voice was tired now, exhausted. "The muscles of that face striated, its planes disfigured, mangled, so that she would never again be attractive to any man, never be of sexual interest to any man, ugly, Cinderella transformed into a crone whose face now frightens the little children of the village. They chant and laugh about the ugly witch, and Beena tries to smile but her face doesn't really make a smile anymore." He leaned back in his chair and his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "She's a woman who will never marry, a person who has become something less than a person, something unthinkable, unmarriageable, unimpregnable."

He sat very quietly for several minutes, breathing heavily. Finally he got up, a little unsteadily. He tossed a 100-rupee note on the table. He made a move toward the exit and I followed him. He turned and looked outside, standing quietly for a moment. "The monsoon is a thing of great beauty," he said. I felt he was speaking directly to me now, more so than before. "See how the rain runs in little rivulets off the palm leaves? How green it all looks, the leaves bright and shiny even in the weak light?"

I looked.



The rain splattered on the palms, on the side of the building, on the roof of an ancient-looking taxi letting someone out at the entrance. When I looked back, I saw water streaming down Richard's face. I thought at first a gust of wet wind had blown in through the door and dampened his cheeks, but when I looked again I saw that wasn't it.