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Richard Moore
A Death in the Hot Season

My phone rang at about five o'clock in the morning in late June 1966. It was my boss, Dr. Engle. I was in charge of administration and finance for The Ford Foundation in New Delhi, which supplied foreign experts in agriculture to the Indian government and other institutions. I provided, furnished, and maintained housing for the experts and their families.

Dr. Engle announced without preliminaries, "Rick, there was an electrical fire at Dr. Klein's house during the night. Looks like his little daughter Sonia was asphyxiated. I'm heading over there now. Meet me there in thirty minutes."

Tired from a poor night's sleep and stunned by the message, I had trouble taking in what had happened. I barely knew Dr. Klein, the most senior and prestigious professional on the foundation's technical team in India. I hadn't exchanged more than a dozen words with him since coming to Delhi a year ago. I didn't know his family at all, had seen his wife only from a distance, and had never set eyes on the little girl. I splashed water on my face and dressed quickly. I said a few words to my sleepy wife about what had happened, then left.

The sun blazed on the horizon as I drove the two miles to the Klein house. Despite the early hour, the streets were already teeming with walkers, taxis, cows, scooters, motor rickshaws, and busses belching smoke. To lessen my growing anxiety, I focused on surviving the cut-and-thrust anarchy of Delhi traffic. When I arrived at the house, I didn't see Dr. Engle's car, but Harilal Singh, my most senior Indian staff member, was just pulling up.

A distraught servant let us into the house.

"Are Dr. Klein and Memsahib here?" I asked.

"Sahib, they went up to they bedroom when Dr. Engle Sahib left with baby girl body," the servant said.

"Is Dr. Engle Sahib here?"

"No Sahib," Harilal replied. "He and ambulance come, and they gone ten minutes back."

"Any idea where Engle Sahib and the ambulance went?"

"When he called me, he said he had arranged ambulance from All India Institute of Medical Sciences to take girl's body. Said he would go there, too, to make arrangements."

"Okay, we'll go over there to help out, but first let's look at the room where the girl died."

The small bedroom was empty and quiet, the air pungent with smoke. Curtains and windows hung open. From the blackened front of the air conditioner, it was evident that the unit had emitted flames. I could taste the acrid chemical smell of an electrical fire, could almost see it in the still air. I glanced at the girl's small bed, empty but for rumpled sheets. The

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window curtain was grimy and torn, ripped by desperate hands in a futile attempt to let in air, to save the child. The sunlight was rapidly evolving from the soft red of early morning to warm yellow to incandescent white. It poured through the open window, continuing to heat the already stifling room.

I wondered, had her death come slowly or quickly? Did she just never wake up? Did she in her child's consciousness know she was in trouble, dying? Did she feel choked, feel fear, panic? I tried to put these thoughts and unwanted visions out of my mind.

"Hari," I said, "that looks like a really old window unit. Have we had problems like this before?" Not waiting for an answer, I continued, "Call Voltas right now. Get them out of bed and tell them to take this unit for examination, and to check the safety of other units in the house." I paused to consider the parents, grieving in their room. "Don't disturb Klein Sahib and his wife, though."

Harilal wagged his head in the Indian way of showing agreement, then used the hall phone to rouse out the head of Voltas, the electrical contractor. While Harilal was talking, I stepped into the hallway, where I noticed a photo on a table. In it was a child of about three, with blond hair, blue eyes, a dimpled smile, and plump cheeks. She peered out from under a white cowgirl hat, squinting, the sun too bright for her blue eyes. This must be Sonia.

I felt weak and heavy, dreading what I would be called upon to do that day. Although I was thirty, I had never even seen a dead person, never lost a friend or relative, and had no idea how I would react to displays of emotion at the funeral ceremony.

Chaotic morning traffic clogged the streets as we drove away. I felt relieved that I had escaped having to see or deal with the grieving parents. The All India Institute of Medical Sciences was a huge warren of buildings not far from the Kleins' house. Harilal parked in front of a large metal door, and we entered what looked like a small freight receiving room. One of its walls was lined with a large stainless steel cabinet. Dr. Engle, huddled in conversation with two staff members, nodded and gestured for us to come over. Engle had a hard, angular face with enormous salt-and-pepper eyebrows. He preferred giving blunt orders and making judgments to listening to what his inferiors, which included most everyone, had to say. Without any comment on the tragedy that had just occurred, and with no trace of emotion, he launched into a situation report.

"This is India, you know, and they cremate people here—don't bury 'em. The Kleins told me this morning they want Sonia buried. So, you'll have to figure out how to arrange for that. The whole thing: death certificate, burial plot, coffin, flowers, and transport for the body. Put out the word to all staff and Klein's counterparts at the Ministry of Health, so they can come to the funeral, or send condolences. You understand? The Kleins are Jewish, so I have no idea who can preside at graveside—I'll deal with them about that."

He beckoned me to a large drawer in the stainless steel cabinet and pulled it open. Here was Sonia's little body, packed in ice. I recalled the photograph at the house and realized for the first time that my own

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daughter, Christine, was Sonia's age and size and, even more shocking, her twin in terms of hair, skin, eye color, even facial characteristics. The immensity of the Kleins' loss suddenly became real for me. Tears welled in my eyes. I felt Dr. Engle's austere gaze and looked away.

Dr. Engle continued, "I have no idea how to get embalming done here but, given the hundred and fifteen-degree temperature, we need to get her in the ground today. I'll have my wife get the name of a rabbi and some clothes from Mrs. Klein, and we'll dress the child for the funeral. Rick, you have to do all the things I mentioned, and get them done by noon—that clear?"

I was in a state of shock, overwhelmed by what was expected of me. With feigned confidence I stammered, "Sure, Dr. Engle, I'll do my best. Harilal will be a huge help."

"Get on with it, then, and don't let me down," he said. I waved to Harilal to come with me as I walked to the door.

I went home to clean up and change clothes, promising to meet Harilal in an hour. I felt nauseous and wobbly when I arrived at the office. Harilal had already talked to a couple of Anglo-Indian Christians on staff and gotten the telephone numbers of two cemeteries. We both manned the phones, working as quickly as possible. The morning passed in a blur, and despite the rock in my stomach, I was able to relegate my feelings to temporary storage. We purchased a plot in a cemetery near Lodhi Estates, not far from the center of New Delhi, and set the funeral for four o'clock that afternoon.

I didn't want to attend the ceremony, but I had to be there to ensure that everything went smoothly. I dreaded seeing Dr. and Mrs. Klein in the midst of their grief. Would they carry on like people did in the Middle East, staggering, fainting, and weeping loudly? I was worried about how well I could deal with such emotional outpourings.

I arrived at the cemetery a half hour early to check out the arrangements. The eighty-year-old cemetery was surrounded by a seven-foot brick wall. It occupied a half-acre sanctuary of green bushes, hedges, and tall conifers. Trees muffled the sounds of the traffic beyond the high walls. Flowering jasmine bushes perfumed the air. The mid-afternoon heat was drenching, even in the shade. The drive from the wooden double gates led straight to an open grave near the modest chapel. To my relief, everything appeared to be in order: signs posted, gravesite ready, flowers arranged, a parking area designated.

Foundation staff and friends of the Kleins drifted in until a fairly large crowd had gathered near the gravesite. I felt anxious, but maintained control of my feelings until the ancient black hearse drove into the cemetery, followed by a chauffeured office car with Dr. and Mrs. Klein as well as Dr. Engle and his wife. As they approached the gravesite, I watched the Kleins to see how they were managing their loss: they were ashen-faced but betrayed no signs of emotion. Their dignified, courageous demeanor affected me more than any overt emotional display.

As the coffin was taken from the hearse and set beside the open grave, my composed façade cracked. Tears ran down my face. Not wishing to be

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seen, I moved away and stood behind a tree. When I regained some self-control, I returned to the edge of the group and stood there at a distance while the rabbi spoke some words I couldn't hear. Suddenly the ceremony was over. The mourners left. I stayed on, needing to be alone in the quiet of that green sanctuary.

I was surprised to see Dr. and Mrs. Klein arm in arm in their dark clothes, walking along a path on the other side of the cemetery. White-faced and silent, they grieved together, supporting each other through an invisible but powerful bond.

I slipped out the cemetery's side door.

I returned home red-eyed and deflated. "God, you look terrible," said my wife, Pat. She gave me a hug. "You poor thing. Come sit down while I make you a stiff gin and tonic. When you're ready, tell me what happened."

I told her about the events of the day, but avoided revealing my feelings, mostly out of habit, having grown up in an austere Protestant family that discouraged any display of emotion. I had also fallen into a pattern of unintended, but real, detachment from my family in my obsession with "making it" in my prestigious new foundation job. As a result, I rarely shared with Pat about developments outside our home. So, it wasn't surprising that she seemed to sense nothing of my turmoil over little Sonia's death. I feared that these intense feelings wouldn't go away, even here with my soothing and calm wife in our own safe house. I couldn't tell her that Sonia and Christine were nearly identical in looks and age. I didn't want to think about it, didn't want to envision my daughter in Sonia's cowgirl outfit, or in that steel drawer, packed in ice, or in a little girl's dress lying in a coffin.

One month after the accident, Delhi was still hot despite the gradual shift into the cooler season. I was catching up on office paperwork at home on a Sunday afternoon when the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find Mrs. Klein holding a small box.

"Please come in," I said.

"No, I haven't time, but I wanted to bring you this," she said. "I understand your daughter and my Sonia were the same age and size. I was going through some of Sonia's things the other day and found these clothes and books. I thought your daughter might be able to use them." Before I could say anything, she handed me the box, turned, walked quickly to her waiting car, and drove away.

I put the box on the dining room table and returned to my desk. How could Mrs. Klein have the sangfroid to pack her newly dead daughter's belongings into a box and, with apparent calm, deliver them to someone else?

When Pat came downstairs from her nap, I pointed to the box and told her about the visit. "Would you mind opening it?" I asked. "I can't bring myself to do it."

"Sure," she said, "I'll do it, although I'd rather not." Pat tore the tape and opened the flaps. Sonia's cowgirl hat sat on top of the other clothes.

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Her books lay underneath. Although I was horrified and would have preferred that Christine not wear Sonia's clothes, Pat didn't hesitate. When Christine woke up, she was delighted by the new outfit and the books—it was like having an extra birthday party.

I wanted to get away. From the heat, from the Kleins, from Dr. Engle, from all that had gone on, so I booked the foundation guest house in the Himalayan foothills at a hill station named Mussoorie. Pat, Christine, and I drove up late on a Friday afternoon. Every evening, after putting Christine to bed, Pat and I sat on the deck of the guest house talking and reveling in the cool and quiet of the hills, watching the now-benign sun slide behind the mountains. I slept fitfully and dreamed—or now imagine that I dreamed—of Sonia in her fringed denim skirt and yellow cowgirl blouse, pictured her in her yard as she had been in the photograph. But then Sonia's face, squinting in the bright sun, disappeared and was replaced by Christine's.

On our last night in Mussoorie, we stayed up late talking, punctuated by periods of contented silence, listening to the wind soo through the tall, green-black cryptomeria, watching the masses of bright stars silhouetted above the jagged horizon. I felt a calm come over me, felt Pat and I growing closer there in the dark, as we talked about Christine, asleep inside, about what kind of a person she would be when she grew up, about our plans for the future. I realized for the first time how much I had been missing by obsessing about a job, my career, instead of returning the love of the people who loved me.

I am now old and death is all around me, but I have put all dread of it behind. Still, from time to time, I remember that hot summer morning when Sonia died, and how Dr. Klein and his wife looked as they walked through the cemetery alone, their hearts broken.