

Anjali's Christmas Break

It was Christmas Break and Anjali was very excited. For the first time she was going to travel all by herself in a plane, without Mummy or Daddy! And she was going to spend three weeks with Mummy's elder sister, Sushila Aunty and Dayaram Uncle, who was a big Inspector of Police. Mummy told her that Dayaram Uncle was an Inspector General, but that couldn't be quite right for he was a big police officer, not anybody general. And Sushila Aunty and Dayaram Uncle lived far away amongst forests, and she would see lions and giraffes and tigers and hippos!

When the day came for her to fly off, Anjali was a little scared and clung to her Mummy, who told her that the flight was only an hour long, there would be big beautiful girls on the plane to play with her, and before she knew it Sushila Aunty would be there to take her home for lunch. Her Aunty's cook had already baked a great big chocolate cake for her, with pink icing which said: 'Welcome Anjali!'

In the car to the airport, Anjali forgot her fears, she was so excited to be going somewhere. She had on her nice pink shoes, which Mummy said didn't match her blue frock, but she was allowed to wear them anyway. Pinned to her right shoulder was a large piece of paper with her name and Uncle Dayaram's name, telephone number and address.

Anjali felt really important as Mummy kissed her goodbye and handed her over to a nice lady, also in a blue dress. The lady also had a name tag on her right shoulder, and it said 'Puja.'

Puja was very beautiful with bright red lipstick. Anjali decided that when she grew up, she would also become a Flight Attendant. She clasped her new friend's hand tightly and chatted away as she was led to the plane. It was so exciting! Mummy was right, she had a grand time on the plane. She was even taken to the cockpit of the plane. A big handsome man was there. He smelled a bit like Daddy. He wore a blue jacket with four gold stripes on the arms. Puja said that meant he was The Captain! He let her hold the steering wheel of the plane as Daddy did sometimes in their car, and then she was back in her seat and down the plane glided to Uncle Dayaram's airport! It was not big and shiny

with a lot of glass like her own airport, but it a nice low yellow building. Aunty Sushila was standing at the bottom of the steps as she came out and gave her a great big hug as she always did. There were policemen in khaki everywhere, even the driver of the car was a policeman!

The cake ‘specially baked for her was scrumptious as Mummy had promised. Happy and sleepy, Anjali was led to a large room, which was to be her own room while she stayed with Uncle and Aunty. As she fell asleep for her afternoon nap she thought it was a perfect holiday, except that there were no children for her to play with. Once, Aunty had told her rather wistfully that though she had no children of her own, she would share Anjali with Mummy, and Mummy had said, ‘Yes, do keep her all to yourself!’ – but it was said just in fun, for Mummy loved her too much to give her to Sushila Aunty, she knew.

Uncle and Aunty did not live in an apartment overlooking the sea as she did back home, but they had a huge old bungalow in the middle of a large untidy garden. She wanted to explore the garden all by herself, but Uncle said a policeman should always be with her to guard her, though

she was quite grown up, almost all of seven, well, six and a bit really, but she felt grown up, and that was what was important as Shanti Teacher had told her once. Except for the flower beds in front of the house, there was nothing much to see in the garden. Most of it was full of thick prickly bushes. She was getting quite bored of playing in it when Uncle announced that they were all going to camp, where she would see a lot of animals!

Anjali jumped with joy and said she couldn't wait to see lions and giraffes and hippos. Aunty Sushila laughed, and hugged her tightly, and said those animals were to be found only in Africa and not in Indian forests. But she would see spotted deer, and bison, and any number of birds. Anjali was quite disappointed for she had seen deer in the zoo and she knew that bison were just like cows and not much fun.

Aunty brought out a big book and showed her pictures of all the birds they were likely to see, and what calls they made, and what their eggs looked like. They were such beautiful pictures, and Anjali wondered if she could take home a bird as a pet.

‘Maybe, darling, we just might be lucky enough to see a tiger,’ said Aunty brightly.

Anjali brightened up. ‘Are there ever so many tigers in camp, Aunty?’ she asked hopefully.

Aunty laughed. ‘Well, I hope not in camp, but they are bound to be in the jungle. I shall tell your uncle to have you taken round in a jeep, and who knows you might spot one! But mind, you will have to get up very early in the morning while it is still quite dark, and be very quiet, quiet as a little mouse.’

Anjali plied her with many questions, and Aunty became quite enthusiastic herself and told her many stories of all the animals she had seen, and the adventures she had had. Next morning, they set off for ‘camp’ in a convoy of jeeps with Uncle looking magnificent in uniform with badges and ribbons of his chest. He had a pistol in a shiny brown leather holster buckled to his belt, and though she pleaded, he refused to take it out. He kissed her fondly and said pistols were bad things, and definitely not to be touched by children.

The police camp was very different from the camp Shanti Teacher had taken her class to. The police tents were huge, almost as big as a small house, she thought, and inside there were chairs, desks, tables, carpets, in fact just like a house! There was a tent for a bathroom, and if you drew aside a curtain, there were beds to sleep on, just like home! They were to be there for ten days, almost till it was time to go home, and Anjali knew she would have a great time, and see lots and lots of animals.

Ravi Kumar, a nice young Inspector, was deputed by her uncle to take her round in a jeep to see the animals. Aunty got her up very early in the morning for her safari. She packed a basket with half-a-dozen club sandwiches, and a flask of hot milk for her, and another with tea for the Inspector. Within five minutes of setting off, the Inspector had told her with a nice smile to call him 'Ravi,' and she knew they would be great friends. She did see lots and lots of spotted deer, families of them, on her safari, cute little fawns, beautiful does with white spots along their shiny brown flanks, and of course every now and then majestic bucks with long graceful antlers.

The second morning, Ravi stopped the jeep at a corner of the jungle road, and pointed out the Barasingha. They were much bigger than spotted deer, but they looked smaller for they were very far off in the middle of a jungle pool. She asked Ravi to take her closer but he shook his head and said it was not safe to stray far from the roads.

‘Barasingha are just big deer, Ravi, they can’t harm us, can they?’ she said, trying to persuade him.

He gave her a quiet look and said, ‘Anjali, there are other animals out there, much worse, and your Uncle will skin me alive if I take you into the jungle.’

‘What, you mean tigers, Ravi?’ she asked excitedly.

He shook his head and laughed. ‘Oh, I don’t care about tigers – much, much worse animals than tigers!’

‘Much worse than tigers?’ She was bemused.

‘Oh, tigers are rather jolly,’ Ravi said, changing the subject.

He started the jeep and they moved on again. ‘Let me tell you about all the times I have met tigers face to face in the jungle!’

‘Did you shoot them with your pistol?’ she asked him.

Ravi looked at her gravely. ‘It’s wrong to kill tigers, or, or any other wild animal,’ he said solemnly. ‘It’s against the law. If I catch a poacher trying to kill a tiger, I put him in jail straightaway!’

‘Tigers are dangerous!’ continued Anjali. ‘They always tell us that at the zoo.’

‘Yes, they are,’ agreed Ravi, ‘but they don’t mean to harm us. If we respect their ways, they respect ours, and keep away.’

Anjali was much impressed. She didn’t like the thought of killing animals, and at dinner time always tried to make an excuse and not eat chicken. She asked Ravi what he did do when he met a tiger, and Ravi was quite entertaining with

his stories, though Anjali was shrewd enough not to believe all that he told her.

That evening she went to the cook's tent and hung around there asking him questions and tasting the kheer he was preparing for dinner.

The cook was a big jolly man with a huge big floppy moustache that fell over his mouth.

'Baby Sahib, will you like to make some chapattis for us?' he asked smiling down.

She clapped her hands. 'Yes, I want to make chapattis,' she said eagerly.

'Then you go over to that corner and Chottelal will show you how to make them,' said the cook.

Chottelal was a boy, almost double her size, and chocolatey black. He gave her a wide grin, and showed her how to roll out the dough. He talked Hindi in a funny sort of way but she understood most of what he said. He told her that if she

came early in the evening next day he would show her peacocks. She promised to meet him by four next evening, and was quite reluctant to stop making chapattis when Aunty called out to her.

Next evening as the sun was sloping down over the forest trees, Chottelal took her to the edge of the police camp and there sitting on top of a police tent was a peacock, a gorgeous peacock with a bright blue neck and a long graceful tail. She clapped her hands in excitement and Chottelal laughed.

‘He is tame, is he yours?’ she asked.

Chottelal shook his head. ‘He is free. He likes to come here in the evening and eat grain from that rubbish heap.’

They watched the bird in silence for a few minutes. Seeing them get closer, it let out a strange lilting call and lifting its long tail it flew away slowly into the jungle.

That was how Anjali first made friends with the chocolatey-black boy. Though he was much bigger than her

and much older, he was the only child in camp, so she would sit by his side at the cook's tent while he washed pots and pans, brought firewood for the oven, rolled out dough, and did other odd jobs for the cook. He told her many stories about his village in the jungle. He spoke in a simple matter-of-fact way, even when he told her strange exciting stories she hardly understood, how he had dodged the charge of a bison, how his mother had frightened off a tiger with a firebrand when it wandered into the village one night. She believed him more than she believed Ravi, for he didn't laugh at her as the inspector did.

'You mean you can talk to animals?' she asked in admiration, when Chottelal said something about animal languages.

The boy smiled and drew a circle in the sand with a stick before answering. 'No, I don't, but I understand a lot of what they say, and they also I think understand when I call out.' He shook his head and got up. 'I can't explain but it happens.'

That evening she was late getting back to Aunty for the cook had promised her a hot sugared muffin the moment it came out of the oven. He had danced the hot muffin between his hands to let it cool a little before giving it to her. It was truly the best muffin she had ever eaten in her whole life.

She heard her Uncle's angry voice as she neared the tent. Through the gauze flap of the tent door she saw that he had taken out his pistol and was waving it about, and instinctively she shrank back in alarm.

'I tell you I shall finish off the Marxist-Leninist Naxals tomorrow,' said Uncle Dayaram to her aunt, laying down the pistol on the table with decision. 'Ravi is clever. He's found out their lair. We will surround it, and damn me if I don't shoot them dead myself as they sleep! Good riddance to bad vermin!'

Aunty saw her first and ran forward with a glad cry. But Anjali saw the warning look she gave Uncle, who merely frowned as he stuffed back his pistol in its holster. Normally, Anjali would have asked questions because her

Uncle and Aunty were the friendliest grownups she had ever met, taking her seriously and answering all her questions as if she was another grownup. But there was something about the air that evening and Anjali said nothing.

What Uncle had said kept troubling her right through dinner. So, as Aunty was tucking her into bed that night, she asked timorously, ‘Aunty, are Naxals very bad animals?’

Aunty leaned down and kissed her fondly on her forehead. ‘Yes, dearest darling, they are very bad creatures. But don’t trouble your head about them. You are quite safe here in camp.’

Anjali kept on being worried and didn’t go to sleep for several minutes. Ravi had told her it was wrong to kill any animal and those who did would be sent to jail. But here was her own uncle who was going to shoot them the next day. She didn’t want any animals to be killed, and she most certainly didn’t want her uncle to go to jail. She was very unhappy as she fell asleep, and in her dream she saw the

bad Naxals, who were big as elephants with tiger heads and hippo mouths, creeping up on her poor uncle. She tried to shout a warning but no sound came from her throat, and she couldn't run to save him either, she just couldn't move at all! Then Chottelal ran out between the Naxals and her uncle and shouted to the animals.

'Go away! Uncle Sahib respects your ways! Go Away!' shouted Chottelal, and the Naxals turned and lumbered back into the forest.

She sat up with a jerk. The night was still and dark. She heard the cicadas chirping peacefully outside the tent. After a few minutes, Anjali curled back in bed, drew the coverlet well over her head and went back to sleep.

Next evening, as Chottelal was threading together a garland of flowers for her, she decided to tell him what had been troubling her all day.

'Chottelal, you said animals understood you,' she said.

He was sitting on his haunches, carefully threading the bright red hyacinths and blue cornflowers into a chain. He smiled at her over his shoulder.

‘Sometimes, yes, they understand,’ he said.

‘Do you know where the Naxals live?’ she asked.

Chottelal put down the flowers on a stone and looked at her without saying a word.

‘Uncle is mad at them,’ she said slowly. ‘And, and Ravi has told him where they sleep at night – in their lair – Uncle is going to creep out tonight and shoot them!’

‘Did Uncle Sahib tell you that?’ asked Chottelal seriously.

Anjali shook her head. ‘I heard him tell Aunty. I know it’s wrong to shoot animals but he is very mad at them.

Chottelal, tell the Naxals to go away! I don’t want my uncle going to jail, and I don’t want any animals hurt!’

Chottelal threw back his head and laughed.

Anjali was cross. 'You shouldn't laugh. This is not funny!'

Chottelal looked at her. 'Uncle Sahib going to jail is funny,' he said. 'He won't, so don't worry. I will tell the Naxals to run away. But don't tell anyone else or something bad may happen.'

Anjali promised. 'Are Naxals very bad?' she asked. 'I dreamt last night that they are really tigers but as big as elephants!'

Chottelal laughed again. 'Oh, they are bigger than elephants,' he said, 'and very, very bad. But they will go away, I promise.'

That night she kept awake for quite a bit. She heard her uncle and her aunt whispering, she heard Ravi come to the tent, and then she heard the men leave very quietly. Her heart was pounding. She hoped that Chottelal would be as good as his word, and send the Naxals away. She didn't know when she fell asleep, but it was broad daylight when she woke up.

She and Aunty had breakfast together. Aunty said something vague about Uncle being busy. He didn't return till well past lunch time, and he remained grumpy all day. Even her special friend, Ravi, had a long sour face, and didn't take her on a safari. She went to the cook's tent in the evening to ask Chottelal whether he had sent away the bad Naxals, but he was nowhere to be seen. The cook told her the boy had returned to his village because his mother was unwell.

The next morning, quite early, she heard her uncle shout orders, and policemen started to strike down the tents. Her aunt was busy as well packing their things, and closing suitcases. Soon Anjali was bundled into their jeep and they were off bumping down the road.

'Where are we going Aunty?'" asked Anjali.

'Home, darling, home,' said her aunt cuddling her. 'Uncle has finished his work here.'

‘It was all pointless,’ growled Uncle Dayaram from the front. ‘There is an informer among the orderlies, I am sure. Wait till I catch him! Some rascal warned the Naxals, I am dead sure!’

‘Hush, not before the child, dear,’ said Aunty warningly.

Uncle waved a dismissive hand, and was silent.

Anjali had been on the point of telling Aunty about Chottelal and what she had asked him to do, but she realized that Uncle was very, very angry, and she didn’t want her boy friend to get beaten.

Chottelal was right. It was a secret, just between the two of them, and she would tell no one, not even Mummy when she got home. But in her heart of hearts she was very glad that the Naxals had not been shot, and that her kind uncle would not go to jail.

The End