Ray Will

THE MOST FRAGILE KITE

When the monsoon came, it carried its clouds high and some years there was no rain at all. But it always blew hard and he was forced to drive with the windows closed until he was out of the sand and into the city.

The site was small now in his mirror and he began to feel the restlessness which grew each time he left. The job was almost over and he was impatient to see it complete and to taste the first fresh water made from the sea by his plant.

He wiped perspiration from his eyes. Had it been this hot when he was a child? No doubt it had, sixteen years was time enough for the blood to thicken.

Two camel carts were stopped on the road ahead, the seated drivers deep in athletic conversation. He slowed and gave a long blast on the horn.

The contestants did not even look down.

He stopped.

They continued, ignoring his repeated horn blasts as runners might ignore the roar of the crowd for fear of being rushed into an unwise move. He waited. And gradually the action became more vigorous: thighs were slapped more frequently, arms waved more wildly, there was more spitting and more rocking in seats until, at last, it was the final sprint. Betel-red teeth were bared, eyes closed and it was all over with shouts of laughter from both sides.

Then the solemn salaams and he was able to move again.

As he passed the man riding towards him he looked up and saw that he and his camel wore the same haughty expression. The drivers were all as stubborn and proud as their beasts.

As a child he had seen a camel kneel on a small car when refusing to be hitched and today, the two men behind him on the road would only have moved for the Prophet himself.

He shook his head and felt the despair he had felt a few days after he had arrived. He had still not pinned the feeling down. It often returned when he was not working, and it worried him because he could not understand it.

He was approaching a village. All around it he could see boys flying kites in the hot wind. He remembered a year when he had sat out the summer monsoon watching these same kites from his bedroom window, not daring to try it. There had been no white children playing, only the native boys and even the youngest was an expert.

He had watched them until he knew how it was done, and the next year, on the first good wind, he had bought a kite and it had been destroyed before he had fastened the string.

The wind devoured his second kite and burst the third but it picked up the fourth and played with it for thirty breath-held seconds. And then it exploded it and carried the pieces high over the rooftops.

They were the most fragile kites he had ever seen.

The other boys called after him every time he went back to the stall and he knew they were on the side of the wind.

It was no longer uncommon to see a white child flying a kite, but he could remember when he was the only one and the whole population knew he couldn't get it right.

The boy who had shown how it was done was called Hanif.

It was really very easy and they had had a glorious monsoon together. They had stood at the edge of the desert, hanging from the tail of the wind by the longest strings in the world, pulling it, twisting it, hurting it, until the wind slowed and no longer had the strength to hold up the clouds and dropped them on the city one Saturday afternoon.

Soon after that the wind had died. . . . They had tormented it to death.

Hanif had a sister. The nuns called her Mona. He could not remember her Moslem name.

She had been about his age, thirteen perhaps—it was hard to tell. She spoke better English than her brother, but when they were together she spoke the mixture of English and Urdu the boys used.

He was out of the desert now and he opened the window. The city swept into the car. The uninhibited voices, the squeak of a bullock cart, the interminable music, the cry of a child all carried on the seasoned smells of cooking and the drainless smell of the streets. Two women in purdah crossed the road in front of him and shuffled along in the shadows.

Ghosts. Black ghosts of women a thousand years old. In their shrouds they reminded him of chrysalids from which no butterfly would emerge. They had died in the cocoon and only the caterpillar ghosts lived on, silently and for ever.

You could never know them, you could not even tell their ages. But he knew their husbands. They were helping him build a nuclear de-salination plant.

When he met Mona she had looked old enough to be in purdah, and he thought it was only a matter of time. But when he went to her home, her mother was wearing a sari and he knew they were a modern family and Mona would never have to hide her lovely face.

He became a frequent visitor to their house that summer. He would go to help Hanif and Mona with their English and would stay for the evening meal. And afterwards the three of them would sit on the floor listening to Hanif's mother playing the sitar while they sucked enormous sticky red sweets. She was a tall woman with a bad scar on one cheek from a fire and she was blind in that eye. Her left hand was scarred too, but you wouldn't know if you just listened to her play and didn't look.

He stopped the car behind a line of traffic waiting at a level crossing.

It was more than ten minutes before the train came through, slow on the narrow gauge line to the hills. Already it had picked up the inevitable non-paying passengers. Gecko flat against the sides of the carriages, their hands and feet found holds which weren't there and he knew that some of them would last for a hundred miles, before they fell off.

He had once ridden that train all the way to Rawalpindi with Mona and Hanif and Uncle Usman.

Uncle Usman was a textile mill owner. He was a devout Moslem and as the eldest in the family he often expressed his disapproval of his youngest brother's attitudes to the faith. He felt that Mona and her mother should be in purdah. But family loyalty and a love of children kept him close to his brother. He had had a character building education in an English Army school and he had carefully preserved a sternness and a knowledge of the importance of discipline.

As his contribution to the up-bringing of his nephews and nieces he invited them each year to his country house in the Himalayan foothills.

The children were never worried by the strict programme of riding, swimming and walking he prepared for them. It was so easy to get lost in the forest or lose all track of time and even their uncle mellowed in that soft green country.

It was the first time he had invited a child who was not a member of the family and they were all to regret the break with tradition.

He turned off the desert road and made his way towards his hotel.

Near the car park he had to stop for a cow. The cow, emaciated and diseased, dripped saliva from her nose and mouth onto his car as she inspected it for food value and moved sadly to one side. It was unusual to get them here, the street was narrow and the trams kept them away.

In his hotel room he bathed and shaved. There was a problem at the site and he looked for a book that would help.

He tried to concentrate but the music from the cafe below would not stop and memories of a summer with two Moslem children kept returning. And with their memory, his melancholy had deepened but he still did not understand its reason. He closed the book and walked to the window.

A thin brown curtain hid the street, he pulled it back and stood, drumming his fingers on the sill to the complex rhythm of the music. The city droned on beneath him and in it he could hear the hum of a million insects, the screech of birds, the chatter of monkeys in the trees, the whispering of leaves and the dry brown crackle you made when you walked through bracken as high as your waist.

He remembered that the horse chestnuts had been ripe and that nobody in the village knew how to play conkers and he had taught them. And the Nawab of Sind had seen the game and he had taught him too.

He remembered Hanif showing him how to catch lizards without their tails falling off. He remembered how disappointed he had been when he found out that Everest was a thousand miles away and he couldn't see it. He should have checked on that, but he had been so sure.

You could see Nanga Parbat though, and they said that had the world's highest glacier—it was almost as high as Everest as well. He remembered his first stick insect, and riding around the mountain to look down at Kashmir and he had thought they could see the whole of it because they were so high up.

He remembered a race to the house down an avenue of monkeys when their hearts had been too young to notice the thinness of the air. And when they stopped he felt closer to them than he had ever felt to anyone, and he had hugged Hanif like a brother, and kissed Mona on the face because she was like a sister—and blushed straight away because she was lovely and not his sister at all.

And Uncle Usman had called them in for a meal.

He turned away from the window. He had been happy then, but he knew it was not nostalgia that worried him.

Perhaps it was rooted in the past. Or perhaps it had no roots, perhaps he had just grown up and cynical and was no longer excited by change. He was tired of worrying about it and he buttoned his shirt and walked towards the door. He stepped into the hall and checked his pockets before locking the room. As he dropped the key on the desk he reflected that he had not been expecting excitement when he arrived and he forced it from his mind as soon as he walked into the blinding street.

He made his way towards the bazaar. There was a rug he wanted to buy. The rogue had asked thirteen hundred rupees at first but he was sure he could get it for five-fifty. He had already knocked him down to eight hundred.

The beggars were becoming more numerous with the narrowing of the streets.

You should never give them anything in the bazaar. He had learned that as a child. He had once dropped a coin into the bowl of a legless woman who held up a tiny baby and he had been immediately surrounded by a nightmare of deformity and poverty. An eyeless man with no ears; a woman with arms which had not grown since birth; ugly cripples, living skeletons crying Allah to him, a small white boy who had been sick when his cat gave birth to a six-legged freak.

There were too many of them in the bazaar, you should never give them anything. It was terrible the way you got used to them along with the flies and mosquitoes. But what could you do? Their problems were so great that you could not understand the magnitude of their suffering and it was difficult to feel even pity for them.

An old man crossed the crowded narrow street, his belt and pockets bursting with thin paper kites and bundles of string. He shouted his wares in a high monotonous tone like a muezzin calling the hour of prayer.

His mind returned to that summer when this had been a new country. He did not know of its hopes and dreams then, he knew only his own pleasures.

When they came back from the hills, school was beginning so a week went by before he was able to call on Hanif and Mona.

Hanif had opened the door, and stood in silence.

'Are you . . .?'

Hanif said 'No. I'm not coming out'.

'Shall . . .?'

'And you can't come in'. They looked at each other.

After a long time 'Is Mona . . .?'

'My sister cannot see you'.

He said 'Perhaps tomorrow'.

'Not tomorrow either. Mona can never see you again'. He did not understand what Hanif was saying to him, his brown face was cold, his eyes were not the eyes of a friend.

Without knowing it he asked 'Why?'

'She is in purdah'.

He felt his brain empty. He felt it drop through his body with his ears and his heart. He stood, an empty, quiet, useless shell as Hanif's words took on meaning.

'But why?' he whispered. Hanif looked at the ground.

'But your mother?'

'Mother is also in purdah now and my father has told me to make sure the law is obeyed. You cannot come in'. And suddenly Hanif broke down. In tears he said 'I don't know why. He had a letter and then he took Mona and Mother away and talked with them for hours. I know nothing else'.

Before they both wept, he turned away from Hanif and walked onto the street.

He never went back.

It had been good of Hanif to pretend he did not know what was in the letter. He had often wondered how much longer she would have had if he had not been so impetuous. Another year, perhaps two. At first he had felt as if he had murdered her and later he spent many hours dreaming of coming back one day to marry her and take her away to where there was no purdah.

It was a long time before he had realized that her father's action was inevitable. It was easy for a man to be revolutionary with a disfigured wife, but a lovely daughter was a much stiffer test.

As he passed a woman on the street he wondered if it was Mona. Should he lift her veil and realize his boyhood dream? But the humour died quickly and gave way to anger and he felt like tearing off all their veils and shouting in their faces that he had meant no harm and it wasn't his fault.

He had reached the carpet dealer. He stepped into the dark shop, the dealer was at prayer. While he waited for him to finish he stood looking out of the open shop. The bazaar lived noisily in front of him, behind him was the carpet-muffled quiet of the man at his devotions.

Through the crowd, the clanging of a bell, and an English boy came slowly by on a bicycle. On his back was a box-kite. Aluminum tubes and nylon cloth. He watched until only his head was visible and then the dealer spoke, 'So you have changed your mind sahib'. He had finished his prayers. He turned to face him.

'For the rug I want thirteen hundred rupees, not one paisa less'. And he looked at the dealer's blank expression and felt an overwhelming melancholy. But this time he knew what it was.

Outside he heard a thin muezzin like voice and the distant ringing of a bicycle bell.