

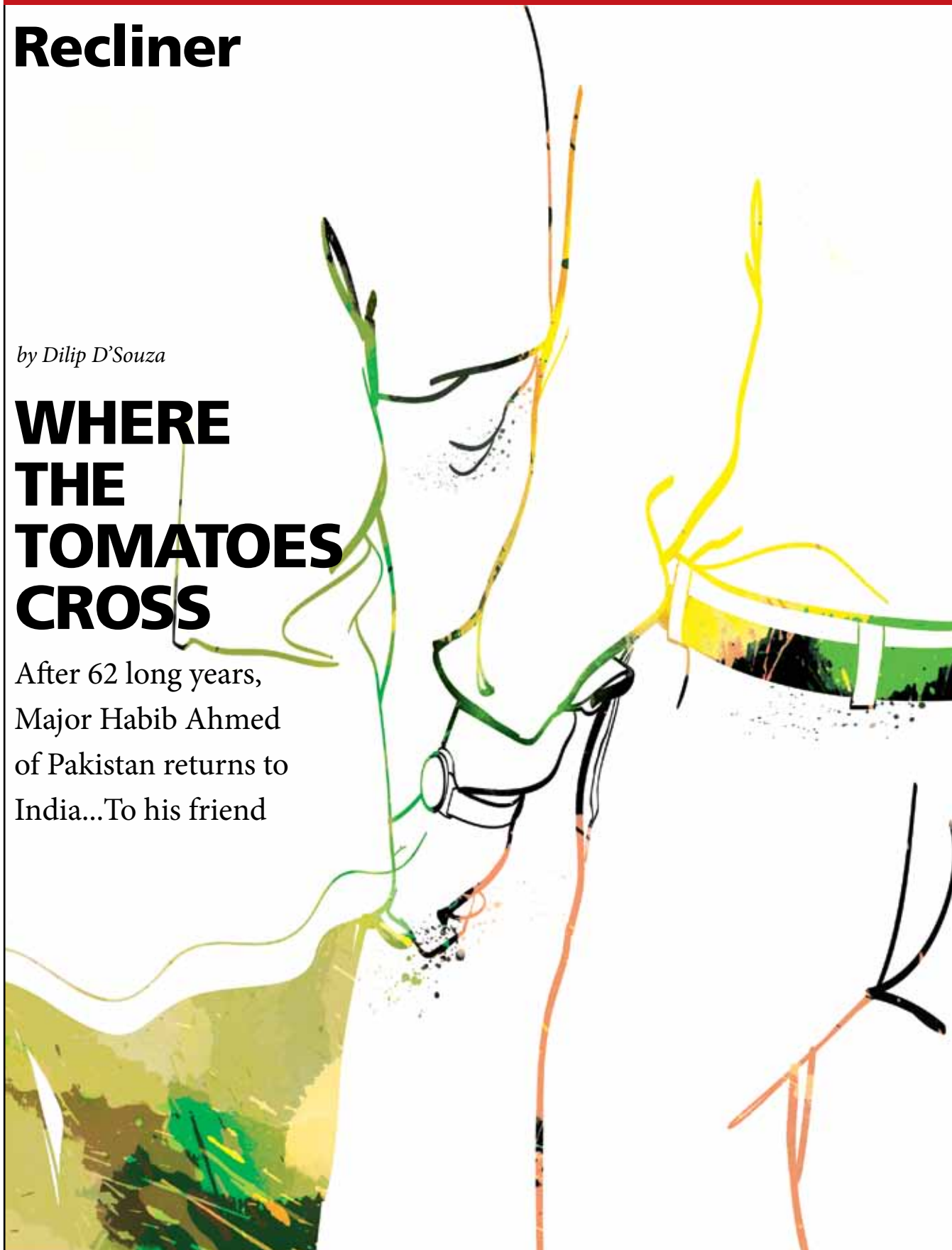
Recliner

by Dilip D'Souza

WHERE THE TOMATOES CROSS

After 62 long years,
Major Habib Ahmed
of Pakistan returns to
India...To his friend

Illustrations: Vidyanand Kamat



The first time I went to Wagah, I gawked. It's really the only thing you can do there, and you need feel no embarrassment either. All around they're gawking, across the border in Pakistan they're gawking. So I was just one more gawker in the crowd that gathers to watch the carefully choreographed ritual that is the lowering of the flags and the closing of the border gates.

The climax of the ceremony comes when lines of immaculately uniformed men quick-step to the gate, ending up nose-to-nose with counterparts from the other side. In their wake, random folks run to the gate carrying flags, and back again. Slogans ring out on both sides, led by young men in powerful voices. It's "Bharat Mata ki Jai" in India, and as loud as it gets, it never quite drowns out "Pakistan Zindabad" from over there. Nevertheless, everyone is in a cheery, festive mood. This is choreographed hostility, amusing and spectacular and at least to me, a whole lot more palatable than the real kind that kills people in both countries.

And this is what happens at Wagah in the evenings.

The next time I went to Wagah, it was one morning. No ritual this time, no slogans, no nose-to-nose meetings. Just a large number of trucks parked on and to the side of the road, packed to the brim with crates. "Those?" said my driver, "They're tomatoes, going to Pakistan."

In the *dhabas* just short of the gate, clumps of truck-drivers and blue-uniformed men mill about, waiting for I can't yet say what. I find a seat somewhere among them and sit down, for I've got at least an hour to wait too. Order a chai, then another. Then

something to eat, and I am served the fieriest paratha ever made. Luckily it comes with a large dish of cool dahi. All around me as I sweat through the paratha, the truck drivers sit, chat, drink, munch. Wait.

Suddenly, a commotion. Someone has emerged from the gate carrying a sheet of paper. Men leap up from all around me and run to him. He's quickly surrounded by a knot of curious drivers, more joining the parade as he walks, reeking importance, to a concrete column, sticks the paper on it, ducks back through the men and is

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gone. Whoops of delight now, as drivers find their names or numbers or whatever listed on the sheet. In seconds, a line of smoke-belching trucks forms and starts barrelling through the gate, some drivers playing who-blinks-first to edge the others out. The tomatoes are headed across the border.

When, months later, onion prices in India set new records and the government announces plans to buy onions from Pakistan, I remember the tomatoes. I wonder if there were similar scenes on the Pakistan side in Wagah, doughty truck-drivers jostling to rumble across the border with their loads of onions. And I also wonder, if onions and tomatoes can make the crossing,

why can't some degree of peace and goodwill do so too?

But on this crisp morning, I chomp on my paratha, using plenty of dahi to douse its spice. Trucks rattle past for the best part of an hour. I while away the time with idle estimates of how many Indian tomatoes have entered Pakistan this morning, losing track at somewhere around 154,329. I am waiting. Not for onions, not for Godot, but for 86-year-old Major Habib Ahmed, retired from the Pakistan Army.

Habib Ahmed grew up in Kapurthala, about two hours from here. His father and grandfather were well-known doctors there, so respected that the chowk near their home was named for the grandfather. Young Habib attended Randhir College, playing tennis and basketball regularly with his friend Rattan Chand Ahluwalia and other young men in town.

When he graduated, he found work in Delhi. But Kapurthala exerted a magnetic pull. Every weekend, in that first year or two of his career, he would jump on his motorbike and tear north through the plains of Punjab to see family and keep up with tennis. It was such a wrench to return that he would often put off leaving till worryingly early on Monday morning. Five hundred kilometres southward as day broke, and by 10 a.m. he'd be at his desk in Delhi.

Came Partition, and Habib gave up the Delhi job and migrated to Pakistan. In Lahore where his family settled, India was only a couple of dozen kilometres away, Kapurthala itself only a few dozen more. But in the mind, in the consciousness of two hostile countries,

it was an infinitely greater gap. Habib's friends, his tennis-playing days, were lost to him.

In his new country, he joined the army, rose to Major, fought three wars against India. What must it have been for men like him, I wonder as he relates all this later, to fight the country that nurtured you to manhood?

Yet Habib's soldierly duty to Pakistan did not translate, as so many might assume it would, into an automatic hatred of India. It just heightened his yearning, kept alive his desire to see Kapurthala again.

But the years went by and visa applications were made and rejected and Habib retired from the Army and more visa applications were rejected and he grew to old age and began to fear he might never see Kapurthala again.

In the late 1990s, he had re-established contact with Rattan Chand through a nephew he ran into while he was visiting his own children in the US. The greying men wrote letters to each other and spoke on the phone, but it wasn't enough. Acutely conscious of the passage of time, both men were desperate to meet. How to cross the line, how to bridge that divide of the mind?

Meanwhile, I had met Habib's daughter Arifa, ironically at a camp in the US for children from across lines of hostility. She and I were escorting teams of kids from Pakistan and India. "Seeds of Peace", they called these

bright-eyed innocents, seeds who must travel halfway around the globe to meet and learn about each other.

Arifa and I became good friends. She mentioned her father and Rattan Chand and asked if there was any way I could help. Back in India, I fired off letters in every direction I could think of, about these two old friends' desire to meet again.

Habib was then getting ready to apply once more for an Indian visa; fortuitously, at about the same time, my appeal made its way to the desks of a couple of officials at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad. They said they would consider the Major's application. Encouraged, I made plans to travel north, looking forward to being there when Rattan Chand and Habib met again.

One October morning, the Commission in Islamabad told Habib that he would get his visa and could cross into India the next day. Elated, he called to let me know, reaching me at a hotel near the Golden Temple in Amritsar. "My son has driven to Islamabad to pick up the visa," he said.

It struck me, and I told him, that as we spoke I was physically closer to him than his son was — Amritsar being less than 50 km from Lahore — and yet,



what a chasm lay between us. What a formidable obstacle is this baggage of six decades.

The next morning, Habib and his son Abid cross the border at Wagah. Waiting for them is Rattan Chand's grandson Vikrant. Also waiting for them is me. Fiery parathas and tomato-watching and a long journey from home notwithstanding, no way am I going to miss this step back in time across Partition.

Vikrant and I eventually catch sight of them: Habib, tall and sturdy in a grey shirt, baseball cap, white sneakers and Army moustache; Abid, burly and bearded, pulling a small black suitcase on wheels and carrying a blue duffel bag. They dodge past the tomato-bearers, walk through blue and white gates that are marked, prominently, "IN" — and just like that, Major Habib Ahmed, retired from the Pakistan Army, is on Indian soil for the first time since 1947.

"I have been longing for this for 62 years!" he tells us as we greet him on this side of the line.

We drive two hours to Kapurthala, Major Habib full of stories and memories. Vikrant drops us off on the main road because his car cannot en-

ter the warren of narrow lanes that is the heart of Kapurthala's jewelery market, Sarafaan Bazaar.

We get out of the car and walk in: Past the Hindu Putri Pathshala, past M/s Roshan Lal Shuttering Material, past Krishna and Sonia Beauty Parlour and a sign with just "Gold Coins Gold Chains", all the way to a door that says, simply, "RC Ahluwalia 1926".

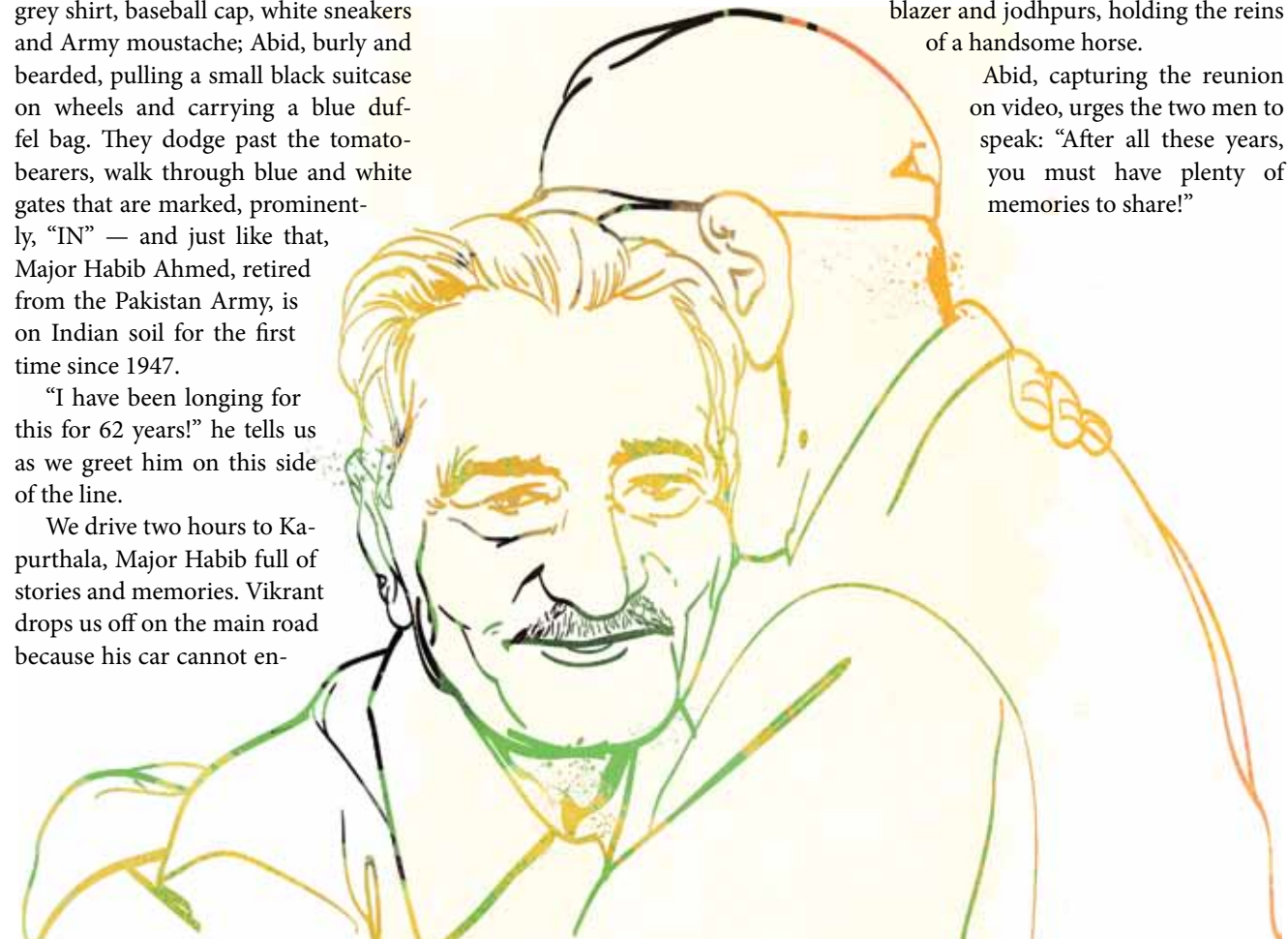
Behind the door of this house that's over 80 years old sits Rattan Chand Ahluwalia, and today is his 94th birthday. His present, knocking on his door and

walking in, suddenly a little unsteady, is his friend from a lifetime ago.

Rattan Chand is a small man, and he nearly disappears in the bear hug he gets from the much taller and heftier Major Habib. Only his hands are visible, on Habib's back. When we sit, both men's eyes are glistening with tears.

There are long silences, for how do you immediately pick up the threads after six decades? How do you start catching up? Looking around as they struggle for words, I see a few stuffed animals — there must be a child in this house — and on the wall, a portrait of Rattan Chand from 1934, dressed in a blazer and jodhpurs, holding the reins of a handsome horse.

Abid, capturing the reunion on video, urges the two men to speak: "After all these years, you must have plenty of memories to share!"



Rattan Chand has one. It dates from those languid tennis evenings, and it's about a man called Rakha Ram who always claimed he was a very good player. One day, says Rattan Chand, the Maharajah's tennis marker came to play with the gang. Rakha told everybody he would easily beat the marker.

When Rattan and Habib came over a half-hour later to see how Rakha was doing, they found the marker playing "holle-holle" — slowly and gently —

"...though I tried for years, I never could cross this laxman rekha. I never could come home"

Major Habib Ahmed

more or less patting the ball over the net so Rakha could keep up.

And Rakha? Gasping and stumbling about.

Habib and Rattan chuckle, and the memory triggers more stories. Of two brothers whom everyone called Manni and Fanni — the names themselves set off more chuckles — "Fanni went to America", says Rattan Chand. Of going to Amritsar for household supplies with a ten rupee note and returning with change. Of Habib coming to this very house for the *mundan* of a boy (Rattan Chand's son, whom I realise is the grandfather of the little girl who plays with stuffed animals).

In the house there are memories. As we walk the Sarafaan Bazaar lanes there are memories. At the chowk once named for Habib's grandfather there are memories.

Habib identifies the place by an old *pyau*, a water-tap on a pedestal. "It was there in my time," he says, "but it had a different shape then." From where, I wonder, does a memory of a *pyau* spring up?

The local senior citizens' club has an evening function planned to celebrate Rattan Chand's birthday ("Heartiest Congratulations to Sh. Rattan Chand" says a black-and-white sign). With Major Habib here today, it's a doubly special occasion. Member after member comes up to garland both men, gift them shawls ("tokens of our love"), greet them with respect and affection. I watch in an almost perverse fascination: When will the hatred for the enemy country surface, directed at this soldier from there? But there is none.

There is instead an outpouring — for once, the clichéd word fits — of curiosity and emotion and warmth. Someone recites couplets composed for this moment, rhyming "Habib" with "*karib*" (close). Someone speaks of his feelings, his memories. Someone sings into the dusk. Old men, they openly weep.

It's nearly dark when Habib rises up to speak. He tells us his story, talks of the "*laxman rekha*" between India and Pakistan. He says: "I have travelled the world, but though I tried for years, I never could cross this *laxman rekha*. I never could come home. I am so happy to be here finally, and today, on my friend's 94th birthday."

Later, we visit Habib's old family home, a few metres down the road from the *pyau*.

It's now owned by a man in a spotless white *kurta*. He insists that we come in.

Someone produces Limcas. A clutch of young men from the area crowd the door, listening intently to Habib. Then Abid speaks of when he was their age. Growing up in Pakistan, he says, especially as the son of a soldier, he had one desire and one desire only: Join the Army, fight and defeat India. "Then," he says, "I met some Indians and I realised how foolish I had been."

When we leave, the young men flock to touch the Major's feet.

Some *laxman rekhas* must be crossed. With tomatoes and onions, maybe. *Holle-holle*, perhaps. But crossed, they must be. ■

