ON RUSKIN BOND'S 92ND BIRTHDAY, SAVOUR A LAYERED SLICE OF THE AUTHOR'S STORY THROUGH A NEW ANTHOLOGY

On the occasion of the 92nd birthday of Ruskin Bond, Penguin Random House has published an anthology of short stories — *All-Time Favourite Friendship Stories*, curated by the grandmaster of storytelling himself. The book packs in 25 sumptuous stories, written by Bond over seven decades of his writing career. Holding all of them together is the dominant theme of friendship that forms the spine of the new book. It lets the reader discover the meaning of friendship — one forged without much effort during childhood at boarding school, and through the various adventures that Bond indulged in, whether with his 'Four Feathers' or individuals like Somi and Omar, who still hold a special place in the multiple award-winning author's heart.

While trying to define friendship, he mentions in the introduction to the book, "Friends have kept up my spirit. I have made friends in hospital wards, in school dormitories, on railway platforms, on ocean voyages, and in lonely boarding houses. Sometimes I have provided that feeling of comfort, of companionship. More often, I have been the recipient." The sentences and the stories tell us that friendship was an important pillar in the nonagenarian's life, and also that he was a rather easy friend to make. Most importantly, Bond's friendship moved beyond humans, and his chapters on Tinker Bell, the goat, and Caesar, the crow, give us a comprehensive understanding of friendship in his life.

Bond is an ardent nature lover, and that is also evident from the various passages of the book — the way he describes the garden, the flowers, and the scenery in simple yet evocative words. "Water trickled down from the hillside, from amongst ferns and grasses and wild flowers, and the hills, rising steeply on either side, kept the ravine in shadow. The rocks were smooth, almost soft, and some of them were grey and yellow. A small waterfall came down the rocks and formed a deep, round pool of green apple water," he writes in the chapter *The Hidden Pool*, which he discovered and later enjoyed with Anil and Kamal.

The book is a very compact universe of Bond, like a decadent layered cake, savoured chapter by chapter. The experience is enhanced by the illustrations that add visual depth and meaning to the stories. The 25 stories have a lilting spirit, a moral structure, and humour. Speaking of the latter, one cannot help but chuckle when Bond mentions a leave application by his friend Ranbir, which he was tasked with improving.

"Dear Headmaster, as I am studying too hard in school, I am suffering from a headache. I request you to give me leave today." Bond further mentions in the chapter how his writing skills helped his friend secure a leave.

But whoever said that Ruskin Bond is merely a children's author is mistaken. His stories deal with many complicated matters such as migration, loneliness, and identity — themes that are particularly pertinent in today's world. In fact, it is these themes that made us choose *The Playing Fields of Simla* from among the other 24 stories. With the Partition as the backdrop, the writer talks about his friend Omar and how they spent time in a tunnel that was like their happy place, where the dark clouds of war and hatred could never enter.

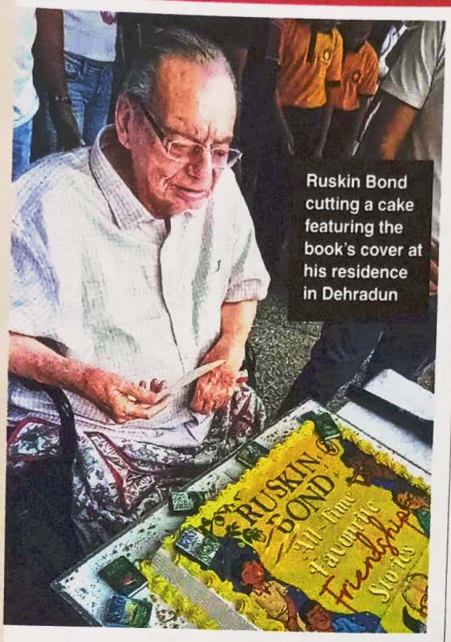
As he writes: "The common-room radio and the occasional newspaper kept us abreast of events, but in our tunnel, Omar and I felt immune from all that was happening, worlds away from all the pillage, murder and revenge. And outside the tunnel, on the pine knoll below the school, there was fresh, untrodden grass, sprinkled with clover and daisies, the only sounds the hammering of a woodpecker and the distant, persistent call of the Himalayan barbet. Who could touch us there?"

However, it was the next sentence that convinced us to choose this story: "And when all the wars are done, a butterfly will still be beautiful."

Read the story to find out how long their rendezvous lasted and what happened after that.

Farah Khatoon

THE PLAYING FIELDS OF SIMLA BY RUSKIN BOND



Ruskin Bond cutting a cake featuring the book's cover at his residence in Dehradun

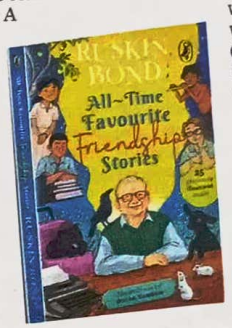
It had been a lonely winter for a twelve-year-old boy. I hadn't really gotten over my father's untimely death two years previously, nor had I as yet reconciled myself to my mother's marriage to the Punjabi gentleman who dealt in second-hand cars. The three-month winter break over, I was almost happy to return to my boarding school in Simla—that elegant hill station once celebrated by Kipling and soon to lose its status as the summer capital of the Raj in India.

It wasn't as though I had many friends at school. I had always been a bit of a loner, shy and reserved, looking out only for my father's rare visits — on his brief leaves from RAF duties — and to my sharing his tent or air force hutment outside Delhi or Karachi. Those unsettled but happy days would not come again. I needed a friend, but it was not easy to find one among a horde of rowdy, pea-shooting fourth formers, who carved their names on desks and stuck chewing gum on the class teacher's chair. Had I grown up with other children, I might have developed a taste for schoolboy anarchy; but, in sharing my father's loneliness after his separation from my mother, I had turned into a premature adult. The mixed nature of my reading — Dickens, Richmal Crompton, Tagore and Champion and Film Fun comics — probably reflected the confused state of my life. A book reader was rare even in those pre-electronic times. On rainy days most boys played cards or Monopoly, or listened to Artie Shaw on the wind-up gramophone in the common room.

After a month in the fourth form, I began to notice a new boy, Omar, and then only because he was a quiet, almost taciturn person who took no part in the form's feverish attempts to imitate the Marx Brothers at the circus. He showed no resentment at the prevailing anarchy, nor did he make a move to participate in it. Once he caught me looking at him, and he smiled ruefully, tolerantly. Did I sense another adult in the class? Someone who was a little older than his years?

Even before we began talking to each other, Omar and I developed an understanding of sorts, and we'd nod almost respectfully to each other when we met in the classroom corridors or the environs of the dining hall or dormitory. We were not in the same house. The house system practised its own form of apartheid, whereby a member of, say, Curzon House was not expected to fraternize with someone belonging to Rivaz or Lefroy! Those public schools certainly knew how to clamp you into compartments. However, these barriers vanished when Omar and I found ourselves selected for the School Colts' hockey team — Omar as a fullback, I as a goalkeeper. I think a defensive position suited me by nature. In all modesty I have to say that I made a good goalkeeper, both at hockey and football. And fifty years on, I am still keeping goal. Then I did it between goalposts; now I do it off the field — protecting a family, protecting my independence as a writer....

The taciturn Omar now spoke to me occasionally, and we combined well on the field of play. A good understanding is needed between goalkeeper and fullback. We were on the same wavelength. I anticipated his moves, he was familiar with mine. Years later, when I read Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, I thought of Omar.



It wasn't until we were away from the confines of school, classroom and dining hall that our friendship flourished. The hockey team travelled to Sanawar on the next mountain range, where we were to play a couple of matches against our old rivals, the Lawrence Royal Military School. This had been my father's old school, but I did not know that in his time it had also been a military orphanage. Grandfather, who had been a private foot soldier — of the likes of Kipling's Mulvaney, Otheris and Learoyd — had joined the Scottish Rifles after leaving home at the age of seventeen. He had died while his children were still very young, but my father's more rounded education had enabled him to become an officer.

Omar and I were thrown together a good deal during the visit to Sanawar, and in our more leisurely moments, strolling undisturbed around a school where we were guests and not pupils, we exchanged life histories and other confidences. Omar, too, had lost his father had I sensed that before? — shot in some tribal encounter on the Frontier, for he hailed from the lawless lands beyond Peshawar. A wealthy uncle was seeing to Omar's education. The RAF was now seeing to mine.

We wandered into the school chapel, and there I found my father's name — A.A. Bond — on the school's roll of honour board: old boys who had lost their lives while serving during the two World Wars.

'What did his initials stand for?' asked Omar. 'Aubrey Alexander.'

'Unusual names, like yours. Why did your parents call you Ruskin?'

'I am not sure. I think my father liked the works of John Ruskin, who wrote on serious subjects like art and architecture. I don't think anyone reads him now. They'll read me, though!' I had already started writing my first book. It was called *Nine Months* (the length of the school term, not a pregnancy), and it described some of the happenings at school and lampooned a few of our teachers. I had filled three slim exercise books with this premature literary project, and I allowed Omar to go through them. He must have been my first reader and critic. 'They're very interesting,' he said, 'but you'll get into trouble if someone finds them. Especially Mr Oliver.' And he read out an offending verse — Olly, Olly, Olly, with his balls on a trolley, And his arse all painted green!

I have to admit it wasn't great literature. I was better at hockey and football. I made some spectacular saves, and we won our matches against Sanawar. When we returned to Simla, we were school heroes for a couple of days and lost some of our reticence: we were even a little more forthcoming with other boys. And then Mr Fisher, my housemaster, discovered my literary opus, Nine Months, under my mattress, and took it away and read it (as he told me later) from cover to cover. Corporal punishment then being in vogue,

Puffin launched the new book and celebrated his birthday on May 14 in Dehradun, in collaboration with Book World. In attendance were around 100 children from nearby schools and a few teachers who joined in the celebrations. Ruskin Bond addressed his audience and chuckled while cutting the cake: "Every day should be a birthday."
The author's granddaughter, Srishti, and grandson, Siddharth, joined in, along with Sohini Mitra, publisher, Children's Division; Kavya Wahi, marketing manager; and Yatin from sales at Penguin Random House India.

I was given six of the best with a springy malacca cane, and my manuscript was torn up and deposited in Fisher's wastepaper basket. All I had to show for my efforts were some purple welts on my bottom. These were proudly displayed to all who were interested, and I was a hero for another two days.

'Will you go away too when the British leave India?' Omar asked me one day.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'My stepfather is Indian.'

'Everyone is saying that our leaders and the British are going to divide the country. Simla will be in India, Peshawar in Pakistan!'

'Oh, it won't happen,' I said glibly. 'How can they cut up such a big country?' But even as we chatted about the possibility, Nehru and Jinnah and Mountbatten and all those who mattered were preparing their instruments for major surgery.

Before their decision impinged on our lives and everyone else's, we found a little freedom of our own—in an underground tunnel that we discovered below the third flat.

It was really part of an old, disused drainage system, and when Omar and I began exploring it, we had no idea just how far it extended. After crawling along on our bellies for some twenty feet, we found ourselves in complete darkness. Omar had brought along a small pencil torch, and with its help we continued writhing forward (moving backwards would have been quite impossible) until we saw a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Dusty, musty and very scruffy, we emerged at last on to a grassy knoll, a little way outside the school boundary.

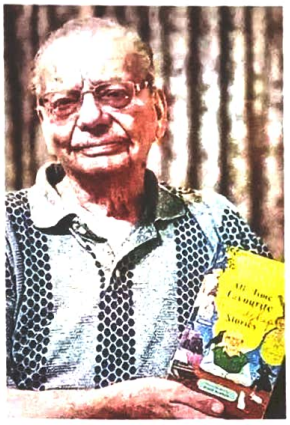
It's always a great thrill to escape beyond the boundaries that adults have devised. Here we were in unknown territory. To travel without passports — that would be the ultimate in freedom!

But more passports were on their way and more boundaries.

Lord Mountbatten, Viceroy and Governor-General-to-be, came for our Founder's Day and gave away the prizes. I had won a prize for something or the other and mounted the rostrum to receive my book from this towering, handsome man in his pinstripe suit. Bishop Cotton's was then the premier school of India, often referred to as the 'Eton of the East'. Viceroys and governors had graced its functions. Many of its boys had gone on to eminence in the civil services and armed forces. There was one 'old boy' about whom they maintained a stolid silence — General Dyer, who had ordered the massacre at Amritsar and destroyed the trust that had been building up between Britain and India.

Now Mountbatten spoke of the momentous events that were happening all around us—the war had just come to an end, the United Nations held out the promise of a world living in peace and harmony, and India, an equal partner with Britain, would be among the great nations . . .

A few weeks later, Bengal and Punjab provinces were bisected. Riots flared up across northern India, and there was a great exodus of people crossing the newly



Ruskin Bond poses with the new book

drawn frontiers of Pakistan and India. Homes were destroyed and thousands lost their lives.

The common-room radio and the occasional newspaper kept us abreast of events, but in our tunnel, Omar and I felt immune from all that was happening, worlds away from all the pillage, murder and revenge. And outside the tunnel, on the pine knoll below the school, there was fresh untrodden grass, sprinkled with clover and daisies, the only sounds the hammering of a woodpecker, the distant insistent call of the Himalayan barbet. Who could touch us there?

'And when all the wars are done,' I said, 'a butterfly will still be beautiful.'

'Did you read that somewhere?'

'No, it just came into my head.'

'Already you're a writer.'

'No, I want to play hockey for India or football for Arsenal. Only winning teams!'

'You can't win forever. Better to be a writer.'

When the monsoon rains arrived, the tunnel was flooded, the drain choked with rubble. We were allowed out to the cinema to see Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, a film that did nothing to raise our spirits on a wet and gloomy afternoon—but it was our last picture that year, because communal riots suddenly broke out in Simla's Lower Bazaar, an area that was still much as Kipling had described it — 'a man who knows his way there can defy all the police of India's summer capital'—and we were confined to school indefinitely.

One morning after chapel, the headmaster announced that the Muslim boys — those who had their homes in what was now Pakistan — would have to be evacuated and sent to their homes across the border with an armed convoy.

The tunnel no longer provided an escape for us. The bazaar was out of bounds. The flooded playing field was deserted. Omar and I sat on a damp wooden bench and talked about the future in vaguely hopeful terms, but we didn't solve any problems. Mountbatten and Nehru and Jinnah were doing all the solving.

It was soon time for Omar to leave—he along with some fifty other boys from Lahore, Pindi and Peshawar. The rest of us — Hindus, Christians, Parsis — helped them load their luggage into the waiting trucks. A couple of boys broke down and wept. So did our departing school captain, a Pathan who had been known for his stoic and unemotional demeanour. Omar waved cheerfully to me, and I waved back. We had vowed to meet again some day.

The convoy got through safely enough. There was only one casualty — the school cook, who had strayed into an off-limits area in the foothill town of Kalka and been set upon by a mob. He wasn't seen again.

Towards the end of the school year, just as we were all getting ready to leave for the school holidays, I received a letter from Omar. He told me something about his new school and how he missed my company and our games and our tunnel to freedom. I replied and gave him my home address, but I did not hear from him again. The land, though divided, was still a big one, and we were very small.

Some seventeen or eighteen years later I did get news of Omar, but in an entirely different context. India and Pakistan were at war and in a bombing raid over Ambala, not far from Simla, a Pakistani plane was shot down. Its crew died in the crash. One of them, I learnt later, was Omar.

Did he, I wonder, get a glimpse of the playing fields we knew so well as boys?

Perhaps memories of his schooldays flooded back as he flew over the foothills. Perhaps he remembered the tunnel through which we were able to make our little escape to freedom.

But there are no tunnels in the sky.