

Waiting at the Window: A Daughter's Reflections

By Bhavna Bawa

I do not remember where it all began, but I remember how it felt to be near him – warm, safe, held. My father once told me that when he held me for the first time, he felt a quiet recognition. I did not cry. I looked at him and smiled, the way I would later whenever I saw him, and the way I still do when I return to him through memory.

That recognition took many forms over the years. One of them was the phone call.

I could call him at any time. He would tell me his schedule, so I knew when he was in the studio. I still remember his number by heart. I would dial and say, 'Hello, may I speak with Mr Manjit Bawa, please?' He would play along, ask me to hold, and then pretend to fetch himself, or say gently, 'Yes, it's him. May I know who's speaking?'

In this small ritual lived much of who he was – playful, gentle, never sharp. There was something quietly magical about his presence. His voice, his way of being in the world, was soft and kind, yet alive with an unmistakable energy.

While the walls of our home remained bare, he filled our lives with colour through small, loving gestures. Each morning began with flowers placed beside my bed. Evenings ended with television, mostly of his choosing, which he defended nightly before I could accuse it of causing brain numbness. As a child, I waited for him with offerings: a dance, flowers picked from the neighbourhood park, or simply a glass of cool water held out before he stepped inside. As I grew older, I waited at the window. Every sweep of headlights filled me with anticipation. When his car finally arrived, I opened the door before he rang the bell. The joy of his return is difficult to name.

He never taught through instruction. He showed me how to live by the way he lived. His lessons arrived through stories, through actions, through care. Once, I asked him why he bought Ravi a new register every day instead of teaching him to finish one. Ravi, my brother, has special needs. My father replied gently that I could not see the world only through my own lens. What clothes, perfumes, jewellery, and travel are to us, registers and cassettes are to Ravi. He likes to begin anew. He likes order. This is his life, and it deserves respect.

Compassion flowed naturally through him. He would come running if I called him to help an injured bird. He helped tend to puppies I brought home from the street, always reminding me, without preaching, of kindness and karma.

My aunt often recounts a story that captures this instinctive empathy. When my grandmother once noticed that tea and sugar had been charged twice at the local shop, she learned that her son had bought the second lot for a friend who was struggling financially. My father encouraged him to start a tea stall and repay the money whenever he could. Even as a teenager, growing up with very little himself, he was attentive to another's hardship and careful to protect dignity.

Our early life unfolded in modest circumstances in a small *barsati* in Rajendra Nagar with a leaking tin roof. It was there that Ravi was born. Ravi lives with CHARGE syndrome, a rare genetic condition that requires lifelong care. My father accepted this reality completely. He fed him, massaged his body, helped him build strength. He found joy in caring for him. Over time, Ravi

became his greatest muse. The warmth of Ravi's body, the softness of limbs not yet shaped by bone, slowly entered his visual language. Limbs in his paintings began to merge, uninterrupted by harsh lines.

Love, however, does not exist without its shadow. Alongside devotion lived a quiet, unspoken grief, anticipatory grief. The fear of what would happen to Ravi after him. To live with such fear requires presence: an ability to stay with the moment, to find joy in the everyday, and to allow art to hold what words cannot.

His lived experiences shaped his visual world. His search for balance – between pain and pleasure, loss and joy – found expression in the harmony between positive and negative space. Vibrant colours learned to coexist. Though many people touched his life, none shaped it as deeply as Ravi. Ravi was his Krishna, his Ranjha.

His search for the divine emerged not from abstraction, but from emotion – loss, longing, devotion. Over time, the quest for the beloved transformed into spiritual seeking. In his paintings, gods of power and destruction appear serene. Turbulence exists around them in deep reds, charged backgrounds, but the core remains still. Peace is never disturbed.

When my father slipped into a coma and passed away three years later, I entered survival. Practicalities took over – money, legal matters, caring for Ravi, holding a household together. Beneath it all lived a quiet waiting. My brother believes that in another life our parents will return and everything will be the same. I once dismissed this, without realizing that my own unspoken belief sustained me. In holding on, I never let him leave. I remained, in my mind, at the window of our home waiting for him to return.

Only now have I begun to face grief. And in doing so, I see him more clearly.

These reflections come from proximity, from knowing him as a father, as a caretaker, as a man of gentleness and resolve. I encounter his work as a daughter. A daughter who navigated through grief of losing her father too soon.

Grief does not disappear; it settles into the body. Loss changes shape, but it remains. Even today, when I miss him, I dial his number and wait, hoping he will answer on the other side.