
Only Ten by Allan Baillie

We called him The Shah at first. Not that we knew where he came from, just that he looked a bit dark, sounded funny and looked at us as if he was about to have us beheaded.

He didn't talk much. Miss Ryan tried to get him going on the first few days but it didn't work.

'You all right, Hussein?' Miss Ryan would say.

And he'd look up and say nothing. 'How do you like school, Hussein?'

And he'd say yes. Just yes.

'Anything you don't like, Hussein?'

And he'd shrug.

'Oh there must be something.

I think the grounds are too small. '

'Windows.' Then he'd look away.

'Windows? What's wrong with them?'

The Shah stared through the windows at the asphalt, the fence and the road beyond. '*They* can see in here.'

Miss Ryan frowned and changed the subject.

We tried a bit more. Even tried to be friendly.

'Where are you from?' asked Pearl. Pearl's Chinese – ABC – Australian Born Chinese – but she reckoned that because they both looked foreign she had a toe in The Shah's camp.

The Shah didn't. 'Why?'

'Just wanted to know.'

'Who are you going to tell?'

'Tell? Is it a big secret?' Pearl was getting annoyed.

'Shh...' Bruce suddenly looked about him like a furtive cartoon character. 'The Shah is an undercover agent.'

'Ah, Inspector Gadget!' Pearl grinned.

The Shah stopped at the corner of the building, hesitated then seemed to push himself around by centimetres. We waited for him.

Bruce squinted back at him. 'The Shah is worried about the school. Thinks he's going to get shot at.'

The Shah stopped in the asphalt and stared at Bruce from under his eyebrows.

'Right, Shah?'

'Oh leave him alone.'

The Shah straightened, took a breath and strode from the shadow of the building. He stood alone in the sun for several seconds with his fists by his side.

Bruce shook his head and pulled his plastic rule from his bag. 'Always ready for ze attack, eh, Inspector...' and sliced the air near The Shah.

The Shah bobbed sideways, danced out of range, and watched Bruce with sudden caution glittering in his eye.

'Zo!' Bruce tried again and The Shah swayed, ducked, shimmered around Bruce as if Bruce was an old bull. Bruce began to get red about the ears.

'Stop it, Bruce, you'll hurt someone.' Pearl looked worried.

The Shah whirled away, but suddenly he was looking at Bruce

with some strange sort of understanding. Bruce leapt at The Shah with a wild yell, swinging his ruler from above his head as if it were a sword. The Shah watched it coming. He did not move.

The ruler struck The Shah on the collarbone with a dull whack and clattered to the ground. Bruce stared at The Shah in alarm, just standing there, panting.

'I'm a soldier.' The Shah said, and walked away.

'Boy...' said Bruce.

We pretty well left him alone for a while. And we thought he was avoiding us. We'd be hanging around, talking with about five kids and then we'd notice that he was standing twenty metres away, watching us. Invite him in and he'd turn away. But it wasn't just us, it was anyone. He'd be walking down the street and he'd see three men ahead, goofing off their shovels or something, not going anywhere, and stop. He'd stay stopped until the men moved. Bruce reckoned The Shah was just too tough for anyone, and anyway he wasn't much fun to tow around.

But Pearl saw him by himself and he wasn't so tough.

'Hussein was in a plant nursery,' Pearl said.

'Hussein?' Bruce said. 'Oh, you mean The Shah.'

'Hussein. I was taking Suzy – my kid sister – to the library when we saw him running his fingers over a small mandarin tree, as if he couldn't believe that it was there. Smelling the fruit, pressing at the earth and even listening to the leaves.'

'Yeah?' said Bruce.

'Said, 'Hi Shah' and he turns. 'Whatcha' doing? This is Suzy, she's three ...' And his cheeks are shining.'

'Shining? Like wet or something?'

'And gives me a shy little smile, says: "See? It's growing. They're all growing.'''

And that was it. Didn't make sense then, but Pearl carried on as if she was getting to understand him. Anyway, she started calling him Hussein instead of The Shah and she couldn't be budged.

But The Shah kept on doing queer things at school.

Like the swimming afternoon. We got ourselves pretty close to the canteen and the starting/finishing line. Fine for something to watch if you have to. Then Mr Henney raised the starting pistol and The Shah made a funny little sound, like a strangled cat, and shrivelled in his chair. Henney fired at the roof and eights girls were splashing down the pool.

But The Shah was staring at the roof, as if he was looking for the hole Henney had made, and he didn't stop trembling until Pearl grabbed his hand and smiled and squeezed it.

A few races later, a few more shots fired at the roof – and The Shah still couldn't find any holes – then he was lining up for his race. Wearing a purple T-shirt. Very modest, says Bruce.

Henney put the starting pistol down on the judge's table while some girls finished their relay. The Shah stepped out of the line and picked up the starting pistol. Miss Ryan started to say something, reached for The Shah's arm, but Henney saw The Shah and nodded and waved Miss Ryan away.

The Shah lifted the pistol, tilted it left and right, moved his finger against the curve of the trigger, aimed at a tile five metres away with both eyes open. All this with a slight frown and his lips pressed together. Then he broke the pistol open like he's been doing it in his sleep, pulled a cap from the chamber, frowned some more, examined it, put it back, flipped the pistol closed and returned it to the table with a shrug.

'Right, boys, behind your blocks,' said Henney. He picked up the pistol as if nothing had happened.

We lined up as the girls gasped in. Pearl came in last, as usual.

'Take your blocks.'

We stepped up and The Shah seemed to be pretty cold already. He was still staring at the pistol.

'You taking off your T-shirt, Hussein?' said Henney, just a polite reminder.

The Shah's eyes flared wide and he pressed his arms into his sides. He shook his head.

'Okay.' Just like that. Anyone else and Henney would have his head off. Maybe Henney's getting old. 'Face the water ...'

And we were crouching on the blocks, all of us except for The Shah, who was still watching that starting pistol.

'Ah...' said Henney. 'This gun doesn't seem to be working.' He put the pistol on the table. 'Ready, set ...'

Henney started us off by clapping his hands.

We started to get used to The Shah. He kept on being as secretive as a pet rock, but we figured that's all right, that was his business. Maybe we didn't want to know anything else. Except we kept on finding out things anyway.

Bruce came to school looking as if he'd been trying to think things out for a long while. 'Went to The Shah's place, yesty.'

'You did?' Pearl was surprised. Bruce hadn't had much to do with The Shah since belting him with the ruler.

'He caught me coming out of the vet with the rabbit. Told him was going to eat it, so he wouldn't laugh. Didn't laugh, didn't believe me either. Said he had a pet mouse at home, would I like to see it? Well, what can you say? But there's nobody at home but an old uncle and the mouse and a few old photos.

'There's one photo and it shows this woman smiling from a chair, and a skinny man holding The Shah on a wooden horse. But The Shah is maybe three years old in that photo and there's no newer one. He won't talk about the photo, about anything, just keeps talking about the mouse. The one he's got now, that fat white one sitting up, sniffing my rabbit, and the one he had in that city he was in over there. A skinny brown one, very fast.

Caught it in a wrecked house and kept it in his cellar. He thought it would last because it was so fast and smart. But it didn't. He said nothing lasts.'

Then The Shah had a go at Rules footy. No worries for a while, he could mark, bounce, tackle and kick fairly straight. But then he took a great leap, trying to pull a high kick out of the sky. It was dropping towards him from the sun, and maybe he saw something which was not there. Anyway one moment he was up there, flying like a bird, the next he was crouched into a tight little ball, falling into the mud. The ball bounced beside him.

Henney caught the ball and knelt beside The Shah. I was just close enough to hear what he said.

'It's only a ball, Hussein, look at it,' he said. 'You're not there any more. Just here.'

And he offered the ball to The Shah. The Shah looked away, but he took the ball, stood up and suddenly exploded in anger. He drove his boot into the ball with a high shriek, spinning it far down the ground.

Maybe we would have slowly got to know and like The Shah without Suzy, or maybe The Shah would have stayed The Shah, a funny kid with his private tribe of goblins. I don't know, I just wish we hadn't got to know Hussein that way.

Suzy is Pearl's giggly kid sister. Was. One afternoon she got hit by a truck on a crossing with flashing lights and everything. By the time we heard about it, Suzy was dead. Pearl was off school for two days and when she came back nobody knew how to talk to her. She walked into the schoolground and I could see some kids walk away. Bruce and me, we were waiting for someone else to speak.

And then The Shah walked up to her, looked at her and squeezed her arm. She put her hand on his and tried a very weak smile. He nodded and led her away. All this without a single word. As if he had learned just what to do. As if he had done it before, many times. As if other kids had done it for him.

In morning recess they were talking a lot, both of them looking solemn. Bruce tried to break in, but they immediately stopped talking, as though they had something between them that they couldn't share. Bruce finally saw that Pearl was still very close to breaking down and he didn't know how to handle that so he backed out. At lunchtime Pearl and The Shah were mixing lunches, her Vegemite sandwiches and his funny flat bread, and he was doing most of the talking. In the afternoon recess The Shah invited us to join them. Pearl was still pale and shaky but she was calm and beginning to talk. She even made a joke about The Shah's lunch and The Shah even laughed.

That was the last time we called Hussein The Shah. Even Bruce moved over to 'Hussein' to 'Huss', to 'Horse', without working out why. Pearl liked the change and sometimes calls Hussein 'Horse' herself. (She sometimes calls Bruce 'Moose'.) Pearl says it's all right, before we were calling him for what he was, now it's who he is. Hussein seems to like it, too.

But I guess Hussein changed a bit from that day. Before he must have thought we were a pack of apes, had to be watched and treated carefully – specially after Bruce's ruler attack – but Pearl showed that we were people too.

We saw Horse's city on TV soon after that. Buildings with shell holes, walls scarred by bullet patterns, streets coated with dust, blocked by car wrecks and rubble. Nothing green, nothing growing. Teenagers, kids, running about with automatic rifles in their hands.

Sorry, Hussein,' Pearl said at the swimming carnival next day.

He opened a hand in resignation, as if to say there was nothing more he could do. He walked to the blocks, his purple T-shirt clinging to his body.

'Hey, Horse, going to beat me today?' Bruce said, and smiled.

Hussein smiled back 'Why not?'

He hesitated for a moment, then he pulled the purple T-shirt over his head.

The main scar, a bloodless seam, ran from his right shoulder to his left hip. The second scar was a second bellybutton punched in his side. Marks of shrapnel and a bullet. A soldier's wounds.

'And only ten,' murmured Henney and shook his head. 'Right boys, take your blocks ...'

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