

DIFFERENT

TAKE

Krishen Khanna A Grand Story Teller

In this essay *Himali Singh Soin* recalls her childhood days spent in the company of the artist Krishen Khanna's grand-daughter, her closest friend, and views his paintings in the light of the stories he used to tell the children.

Our early years were meant to be spent mostly in uniform, learning discipline, values, the ways of literature and mathematics, sport: really anything that could make us 'better,' more 'knowledgeable,' 'well-rounded,' was to be learnt in school.

But as children, the last thing on our minds was to sit stuck to our red plastic seats in the classroom, smelling the chalk and imagining the dust that we could be rolling around in; hearing the fan and imagining a train or even better, a plane, in which we could be exploring all the coxes of the world in; looking out the window and dreaming of far away fairy lands or simply the sandpit outside, that waited to be molded with little hands and no judgment. So when the



Krishen Khanna | *The Old Story Teller* | Oil on Canvas | 80" x 80" | 1989

weekend came, and our imagination had time and space to conquer itself, we were silly with glee. The perfect pallet on which to lay out our dreams and our adventures appeared every Saturday and Sunday – the once-removed, ever-doting, always forgiving, post-colonially distinguished, joking, old-fashioned, grandparent. Grandparents had Universal qualities: though they were once lawyers, bankers, teachers, doctors, artists and later became golfers, eaters, readers, drinkers, gardeners, they were all perfect storytellers. It was like they went to Storytelling School, steering us through all the magical universes that we dreamed of, just by spinning a yarn. This is the story of one particular *Nana* (maternal grandpa), whose work – art – created and was created by the stories that he told. Krishen Khanna, one of India's foremost contemporary artists, was my best friend Tarini's *Nana*. She would visit her

grandparents every other weekend, like all of us. The worlds that Tarini entered those weekends, however, were unlike any other. Simple life lessons were taught through complex treasure hunts, through which she stumbled and stooped and traipsed in and out of the blue *jali* doors, over jagged stone steps lined in English ivy. She finally reached her *Nana's* art studio, where the last clue rested. There, *Nana* was at work dabbing a strange mix of yellow, orange and green onto a colossal canvas. The paint appeared as a thick veil concealing figures eating chunks of watermelon. Tarini stood there staring up at the seemingly arbitrary lines and colours trying her hardest to find the men. *Nana* always insisted they were there but she could never find them, it was like attending class on a weekend! "It looks like *guchar muchar* to me," she said about the conglomeration, eliciting loud laughter from her grandfather. Then she leapt behind some

paint buckets and was uncovering the grand treasure they had been after. Dug into the mud was a little camera film tube filled with a coin. What did *Nana* expect her to buy with 1 rupee? She couldn't even buy one bag of Ruffles Lays! Looking dejected, she began walking out with her *Nana's* voice thundering in the background, "That is 14 *Annas*, I'll have you know!"

Krishen Khanna and his wife, Renu, began spending an increasing amount of time in their family home in Shimla after Khanna quit his job at Grindlay's Bank in Mumbai in 1961, took off his tie, and relocated to 3B Mathura Road in Delhi. His wife and family fully supported his decision, seeing that he never stopped drawing, that he had an irrepressible 'itch.' There were times, however, as Khanna's younger daughter, Malati Shah (also a painter) recalls, when several of the artists from the Progressive Artists Group of which Khanna was a part, would come to their home to eat and drink and delve in passionate discussions till the wee hours of the night. The reactions in the house, inevitably, were, "yey log itna shor kyoo macha rahe hai?"

But Tarini has never thought of her *Nana* in singularity. *Nani* has always been by his side. As little children, they were neighbours who shared the same *ayah* (housekeeper). *Nani* was there when a *jamun* fell on his head and the *ayah* bandaged him up. She was there when *Nana* announced he would be going abroad to study in England at age 13. She was there when he returned. She was there when, as a successful young banker, *Nana* chose to leave his job and needed encouragement to pursue his passion. And she was there when he won the Padma Sri in 1990. *Nani*, voices Khanna's whole family, has been the rock that *Nana* relies on, his "nano," his ballroom dancing partner, his intellectual inspiration, and his one true love.

Krishen Khanna's paintings – though dark in subject and formally, in light – evoke this same love, a sense of idealism, a confidence of decision. Despite having seen the freedom struggle and the wreckage of partition, his work continues to radiate a sense of humour. Krishen Khanna even painted various characters of the Mahabharata chucking to themselves even as wars are waged. "You have different ways of resolving a problem. People try to prove themselves superior to another, which is a violence of another kind. As a nation, we have a terrible sense of humour and we can settle many issues through humour," he says. Archiepemento was *Nana's* favourite

character. Philipostento lived in a post box, and Captain Tainchu Tainchi with his long *bodi* made appearances now and then. When the TV stopped working, it was Archie who was in there confusing the cables. If an expected letter didn't show up, Philipostento was to blame. All his grandchildren would huddle together in their *Nana's* study, captivated by these stories. The characters became more and more real as the years grew. Archie had a bright red and pointy somewhat Santa-like hat with a little bell on top and Philip was a little man in a blue and yellow striped shirt. Captain Tainchu Tainchi was an antediluvian dhoti-clad fellow with a large nose. It



seemed as though he arose from the Mahabharata, always fighting wars to defend his honour. This unlikely trio appeared in the most arcane places. Tarini saw them crouched under her *Nana's* canvases and she often wondered if it was Archie or Philip who unleashed their creativity on *Nana's* paintings causing the explosion of colour on his canvases. She saw them in the kitchen sitting on Prem the cook's shoulders mischievously tossing some extra salt into

the mulligatawny soup. *Nana* would sometimes present them with charcoal sketches of Archie causing trouble inside a washing machine or of Captain Tainchu Tainchi brandishing his *lathi*. They would squabble over these sketches trying to grab for themselves the ones they liked best. "Careful children," *Nana* would teasingly warn, "those cost a lot of money!"

These 'ordinary' people appear on Khanna's canvases as well. In his painting *Exodus* depicting the Independence movement and partition, when he and his family moved from Lahore to India, lay people are seen moving with their everyday belongings. In his truck series called *Rear View*, he sketches the backs of trucks loaded with construction materials, the feet of anonymous truck drivers jutting out of them. He says it's about "people who live in it, sleep under it. Ordinary man is everywhere. Our house would be open to common men. I remember no sage was ever turned away."

It is no wonder that Krishen Khanna's work seems to be fascinated by locomotion – trucks and wagons and *tongas* and wheels appear often. It was not only his back and forth to England at the age of 13, and his movement during partition that led his fascination to vehicles of transportation, but I suspect also his extensive travels as a famous artist, having exhibited all over the world.

And it was this same worldliness that built up his wealth of stories as a master storyteller. Khanna wrote 'The Time of my Life: Memories, Anecdotes, Tall Talk,' hinting to us a little of what went on with humour and the household. Grandparents had lived on earth for hundreds of years, and as far as we naïve grandchildren were concerned, they were born with white hair. So when they told us stories of swimming or fencing or playing tennis as young children, it made us burst in peels of laughter, and then comedians. So of course, when Khanna boasted about attending the Queen of England's birthday party, Tarini would not have any of it.

"Nana!! Don't lie," she screeched, "you did not go to Queen Elizabeth's 16th birthday party." "I most certainly did." "I don't believe you!"

She can still vividly picture her *Nana*, a handsome young student in England during World War I. They called him 'Brownie' despite his fair skin. She imagined him with his friend Fatty Jones racing around London ducking behind lampposts avoiding bombs raining from the skies.

& different take



Krishen Khanna | Exodus | Oil on Canvas | 72" x 96" | 2007

Every night, he'd tell a story till he reached an insatiably suspenseful moment, and before ending, he would run out the room and leave the girls squealing for more. And every night, the story would continue.

Nana – watching in bewilderment as Fatty diffused the bombs.

Nana – the 'Brownie' – Captain of the Men's Fencing team and a champion swimmer.

Nana – the unassuming young lad with a gorgeous girlfriend in India that he wrote long letters to.

Nana – painting in his small pre-war room smoking an English pipe.

Nana – the sixteen year old at the Buckingham Palace eating a creamy slice of royal cake.

In his painting, *The Story Teller*, an old man sits at the center of the canvas, with young children magically hanging in the air, on his shoulders and his knees, listening to a tale. The canvas is a square, as if the length and breadth of the story itself were perfectly tied together. Each child has a mesmerized glaze over his or her face, enwrapped in the old man's tall tales. Further, the form of the painting itself tells a story: the orange walls balance the old man's blue dhoti, the sharp edges of the counters and pillars contrast the curvilinear form of the children and the malleability with which they hover over the old man, the tree and the concrete uniting nature and society. The dualities in composition, thus, in the end, serve to comment on the technique and ingredients

of the narrative form itself.

It was all about narrative: real or imaginary. His daughters, Rasika and Malati, recall the times when their father would tuck them into bed, and make up great conflicts and intriguing characters. Every night, he'd tell a story till he reached an insatiably suspenseful moment, and before ending, he would run out the room and leave the girls squealing for more. And every night, the story would continue. They described him as a unique dad: he never went to office but he could take care of all their needs! Even as a grown woman, dad would come to the rescue. The year after his daughter Rasika was born; Krishen Khanna moved to Madras and was greatly influenced by the Bharatnatyam tradition and Carnatic music, resulting in his series on musicians. His daughter, no wonder, became a Bharatnatyam dancer, full with mindful expression and grounded energy. She recalled a lonely spell when she lived in Mumbai recently. When her father came to visit her, he sensed her sadness and asked her what the matter was. She said she was lonely; her musicians were in Delhi and her dancing lacked their energy. Her father took out a canvas and painted a set of musicians for her. She played a CD and pretended as though the music emanated from the canvas, and never was lonely again. Such is the

power of Krishen Khanna's art.

I recall visiting Tarini at her house in Panchsheel Park every other week. In the living room hung *Watermelon Eaters*, center aligned on a large white wall. It had energy, the colours twisted and turned and converged in a way that elevated the energy in the room. The red, yellow, orange and green '*guchar muchar*': it was a Krishen Khanna of course.

Then it happened. Whilst we were working on a school project one evening, I said I loved that painting. Tarini looked up, and there, in the chaos of colour, she saw it: three men, eating big chunky pieces of watermelon, the watermelon seeds embedded in the red flesh and a dog tucked away behind that splash of red and green staring jealously at the juicy watermelon. And more--there is a philosophy embedded in it--of chaos and order, of individuality, and most importantly of unity within contradiction--unity of family, of ideas, of colour--the most vital ingredients of any great story. The stories behind the thick paint are many, too many to ever be told in such a short time. We'll just have to rely on Grandpa Archiepemento to tell us the rest. ☺

* Image Courtesy: Karan Khanna

** A version of the text was first published on <http://artconcerns.com>