Work Detail
October 6, 1945

A stream of Army six-by-sixes rumbles past the corporal and his crew, toward a long, grey dock on the Hooley river where gangs of Hindu coolies will unload the war material and dump it into sluggish waters. Two months ago the first big blast changed everything. Now, colonels and majors and captains must get rid of teletypes, facsimile machines, radar equipment—everything but small arms—and ship the men home by Christmas.

The corporal checks each wooden box, counts its dozen cosmolined carbines, picks one up and jokes with the native foreman. “If the men work too slow, I line them up at the wall. Bang! Bang! Malum?” Ali understands, “Malum, sahib,” and urges his men to hustle.

The corporal returns from lunch and sees his coolie crew clustered around a stack of boxes, all talking at once, waving their hands. Ali runs up. “Come quick, sahib. We have problem.”

The corporal approaches, the men make way. A baby sparrow flutters weakly; its wings are broken. “Men cannot let bird die, sahib. What to do?” The men argue in Hindi, then Ali turns to him. “With permission, sahib, Mukerjee will take care.” The corporal nods. “Malum, Ali. Okay.” Mukerjee must leave for home at once. He carefully lifts the wounded bird from the corner of the crate of guns.

Harry Spigle