

MR. BISWAS IS BORN by V S Naipaul.

Shortly before he was born there had been yet another quarrel between Mr. Biswas' Mother, Bipti, and his father, Raghu. So Bipti had taken her three children and walked all the way under the hot Trinidad sun from Port of Spain to the village where Bissoondaye, her mother, lived.

Bissoondaye sent for the midwife, made a meal for her grandchildren and prepared beds for them. When the midwife came the children were asleep. Some time later they were awakened by the screams of the baby, Mr. Biswas and the shrieks of the midwife.

"What is it?" Bissoondaye asked. "Boy or girl?"

"Boy, boy." The midwife cried. "But what sort of boy? Six fingered and born in the wrong way."

Bissoondaye groaned and said, "I knew it. There is no luck for me."

Though it was night, she at once left the hut and walked to the next village where there was a hedge of cactus. She brought back leaves of cactus, cut them in strips and hung a strip over every door, every window and every aperture through which an evil spirit might enter the hut.

But the midwife said "Whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father."

Next morning the pundit came, a small thin man with a sharp face and a dismissing manner. Bissoondaye told him what had happened.

"Hm," said the pundit. "Born in the wrong way? Hm. Well, there are always ways and means of getting over these unhappy things." He undid his red bundle and took out his astrological almanac, a sheaf of loose thick leaves, long and narrow, between boards. The pundit lifted a leaf, read a little, wet his forefinger on his tongue and lifted another leaf.

At last he said, "First of all the features of this unfortunate boy. He will have good teeth but they will be rather wide and there will be spaces between. I suppose you know what that means? The boy will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well. It is hard to be sure about those gaps between the teeth. They might mean only one of those things or they might mean all three."

"What about the six fingers, pundit?"

"That's a shocking sign, of course. The only thing I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water. Particularly water!"

"Never bath him?" said Bissoondaye.

"I don't mean exactly that," said the pundit with some annoyance, "When the book

says "water" I think it means water in its natural form."

"Natural form?"

"Keep him away from rivers and ponds. And of course the sea. And another thing," he added with satisfaction "He will have an unlucky sneeze. But listen. Much of the evil this boy will undoubtedly bring will be mitigated if his father is forbidden to see him for twenty-one days."

"That will be easy," Bissoondaye said.

"But on the twenty-first day the father *must* see the boy. But not in the flesh."

"In a mirror, Pundit?"

"I would consider that ill-advised. Use a brass plate. Scour it well. Then pour oil over it."

From the knot at the end of her veil Bissoondaye took out a florin and offered it to the pundit, mumbling her regret that that she could not give more. The pundit said she had done her best and was not to worry. In fact he was pleased; he had expected less!

Mr. Biswas lost his sixth finger before he was nine days old. It simply came off one night. His poor mother, Bipti had an unpleasant turn when, shaking out the sheets one morning, she saw this tiny finger tumble to the ground. Bissoondaye thought it an excellent sign and buried the finger behind the cowpen at the back of the house, not far from where she had buried Mr. Biswas' navel string.

In the days that followed Mr. Biswas was treated with great attention and respect. Morning and evening he was massaged with coconut oil. All his joints were exercised; his arms and legs were folded diagonally across his shining red body; the big toe of his right foot was made to touch his left shoulder, the big toe of his left foot was made to touch his right shoulder and both toes were made to touch his nose.

He responded well to these exercises and Bissoondaye decided to have a Celebration on the ninth day. She invited people from the village and fed them.

Suddenly there was an unpleasant moment. Raghu, Mr. Biswas' father, appeared. He had walked from Port of Spain and his dhoti and jacket were sweated and dusty.

"Well, this is very nice," he said, "Very nice. Celebrating. And where, may I ask is the father?"

"Leave at once," Bissoondaye shouted, coming out of the house. "Father! What sort of father do you call yourself when you drive your wife away every time she gets heavy-footed?"

"That is none of your business," Raghu said, "Where is my son?"

"Go ahead," said Bissoondaye. "God has paid you back for your boasting and meanness. Go and see your son. He will eat you up. Six-fingered and born in the wrong way. Go in and see him."

Raghu moved towards the house. "He has an unlucky sneeze as well!" called Bissoondaye.

Raghu halted, alarmed.

"An unlucky sneeze?"

"You can only see him on the twenty-first day. If you do anything stupid now the responsibility will be yours."

So Raghu agreed to come again on the twenty-first day.

And on the twenty-first day he came, neatly dressed, his hair plastered flat and shining, his moustache trimmed. He held his hat on the right side of his face so that he could not see his son and stared down into the oil on the brass plate.

Mr. Biswas, hidden from his father and well wrapped from head to foot, was held face downward over the plate. He didn't like it: he furrowed his forehead, shut his eyes tight and bawled. The oil rippled, clear amber, broke up the reflection of Mr. Biswas' face, already distorted with rage, and the viewing was over.

A few days later Bipti and her children returned home. And from then onwards Mr. Biswas' importance steadily diminished. The time came when even the daily massage ceased.

