

## Chintu Ka Birthday: Synopsis

*An endearing middle-class Indian father, trapped in war-torn Iraq with his extremely loveable family, aspires and endeavors to celebrate the birthday of his six-year old child, against all odds, with the help of all the hope and goodness in his heart.*

Madan Tiwary lived in a small-town in Bihar before he illegally migrated to Iraq to earn a better livelihood. Once settled, he called his family to stay with him – his dependable wife Sudha, precocious daughter Lakshmi, and adorable Chintu, along with Sudha's Mom, *Nani*. Everything was fine, until March 2003 when US-led allied forces declared war against Saddam Hussein's regime. Unfortunate circumstances prevented Madan and his family from fleeing and they remained caught in the crossfire of warring nations. Over the years they have made Iraqi friends. The kids go to Iraqi schools and speak Arabic, and are even accustomed to the violence around them. It is Madan's optimism and goodness that has kept them all very hopeful that one day things will all be fine.

Today, Chintu turns six, and the entire family is committed to make this day very, very special for him. Subconsciously, Madan desires a good birthday celebration to help him get rid of the guilt he has troubled himself with for having caused all this suffering to his family. But also, today is the day when after years of struggle, Madan's old father has managed to seek an appointment with a senior Minister back home in India. Chances are good that a phone call from India today will announce the end of their long stay in this alien land, once the proverbial Garden of Eden.

The family is also being helped by their landlord – Hassan Mahdi, a local with a mysterious past, in their preparations. Chintu keeps talking about the friends he has invited for the evening party, the brightest of them being a ten-year old street-kid Waheed, who aspires to leave Iraq for America and is already 'planning' his escape – saving money by selling porn videos and cigarettes to the American soldiers. When Sudha discovers Waheed's 'gift' for Chintu in his school-bag, she is shocked. It is a set of propaganda DVDs from a secret Mujahiddin group. Chintu is made to understand that these DVDs are not meant to be watched by 'nice' people. He nods – there is too much going around him anyway to make him feel special today.

But a suicide bomb goes off near their house and a pair of American soldiers storm in for a quick inspection. Louis Jackson has been in Iraq since the start of the war and is more discerning about the reality unlike his counterpart, Darren Reed, a new recruit, full of ruthless enthusiasm and opinions. A chain of untoward instances coupled with the rookie's presence threatens to spoil Chintu's birthday fun.

Despite the dark and grim situation, 'Chintu ka Birthday' is a surprisingly funny, heart-warming story. From the family's joint effort to bake the birthday cake, to Mahdi's seemingly unreasonable panic the moment there is disturbance in the neighborhood, the story turns almost into a thriller as the American soldiers arrive. Madan tries to convince them about his innocence, as if his harmless face is insufficient in doing so, but also tries to save Mahdi who is hiding in one of the corners of the house. However, Mahdi is caught by the Americans, and this spoils the case for Madan. They are about to take Mahdi and Madan with them, when the four

are forced to stay indoors due to guerilla action happening outside – Mujahids hiding in the nearby buildings opening fire at the American soldiers.

The story, thus, does not leave the Tiwary home. The ambient sounds around are a constant reminder of the grim situation. This heightens the sense of being trapped in the house that seems to be representing Iraq, with outsiders trapped in it without any solution in sight. The only visual relief is Chintu's vivid imagination, captured in comic book style animation, through which the audience gets glimpses of the surrounding world – divided over meaningless politics and military display. Soon we realize that the Americans, at least one of them, are not villains. Just when it appears that the situation will be fine once the Americans decide to leave Madan behind and exit with Mahdi, Waheed, the Iraqi street kid arrives with the little Violet, distracting the soldiers. Mahdi manages to escape and the obvious object of the soldiers' wrath now is Madan.

The situation keeps fluctuating but Madan still manages to, with his fearless innocence, convince the soldiers to leave them so that they could cut the cake in peace. It is then that Darren spots the propaganda DVDs lying in the house and turns more furious than ever. When he interrogates Madan about the source of these DVDs, Madan does not reveal to them that Waheed, the Iraqi kid, is the one who brought them the DVDs, or they would take the kid away for torturous interrogation. Around this time, the phone call from India informs Madan of their worst fear – the politicians back home have denied the presence of any Indians in Iraq. Madan knows that they will have to start all over again with their endeavor to return home. And he also knows that celebrating this birthday, now, is even more essential to restore hope and joy in the hearts of his kids. Eventually, to save Waheed, as well as make the soldiers leave, Madan does the unthinkable. He quietly requests the Americans to take him away for questioning and not release him until they are convinced of his innocence. But he adds his request of letting his child cut the birthday cake in his presence.

The climax, thus, is the cake-cutting, where the family and friends cheer for Chintu, unaware of the price Madan is going to pay for it. However, as the story comes down to this beautiful and innocent moment of celebration, the arrogance and pride of the soldiers is overcome by it and by the realization of a simple truth – all are victims of this war and the least one can do is to try to keep smiling and hoping for the best. It is indeed poetic justice in the end, when the soldiers leave without Madan – it is not just their kind gesture, even the family seems to have forgiven them for their harsh action. The pardon is mutual, as is the pain. Both parties can only hope that they will be leaving this country soon. In the end, 'Chintu Ka Birthday' comes across as a small but affecting story that endeavors to remind us of the little joys of life that are more powerful than the disillusion of the human race.