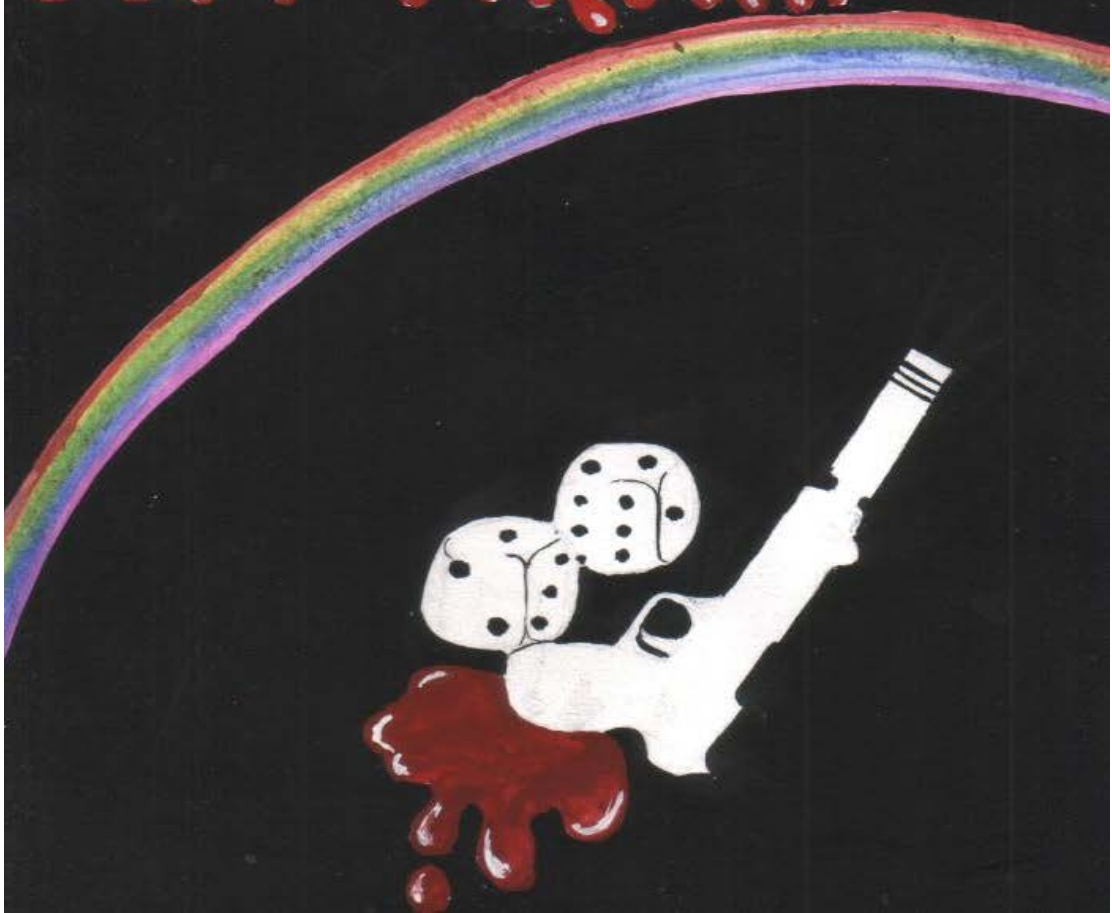


a  
**COMPENDIUM**  
of  
**SHORT STORIES.**

**JEFF TIKARI**



## **A Compendium of Short Stories**

**Jeff Tikari**

**Copyright 2012, Jeff Tikari**

This is a delightful collection of crisp and intriguing **short stories** that will enliven and charm your leisure hours . The writer employs the ‘**Today -technology** ’ of story telling : An economy of words , a simplicity of style , and a tempo and cadence that match the brisk life-style of today.

This e-book is an authorised free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author’s intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law . You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only . This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author’s written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author



**About The Author:** Jeff Tikari spent his formative years in the deep forests of Bihar to which he returned at every school break, hunting, shooting, and trekking in the forest and hills there.

He joined work on the tea plantations of northern India and worked there for eighteen years, from 1959 to 1977; and later, on coffee and tea plantations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea for fifteen years. He now resides on the outskirts of Delhi with his wife where he runs a Homeopathic clinic and from where he does all his writing.

**A Compendium of Short stories – January 2012.**  
*Copyright (cRs -213376839) Jeff Tikari – author. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying recording or otherwise), without the express written permission of the author.*

E-mail: [jtikari@gmail.com](mailto:jtikari@gmail.com)

## **Other books by Jeff Tikari:**

### **The Aroma Of Orange Pekoe**

*– Memoirs from tea & coffee plantations*

### **The Honey Gatherer**

*– Forest dwellers, their secret life and customs.*

### **Laugh Like A Dog – Sex Is A Lottery Ticket**

*– Conflict and trauma between an Anglo-Indian boy and a rich Hindu industrialist's daughter.*

### **The Future Intelligence**

*- Spiritual & Philosophical essays.*

### **Episodes Of Ecstasy**

*-Enchanting short stories*

### **To Sweeten Boredom**

*– More un-put-downable short stories*

### **Travails Of Innocence**

*– Teenage love, pregnancy and life in an Indian village.*

## Contents

The Double Whammy.....	6
Harry Bilinsky.....	16
You see, Svetlana and Harry were brutally murdered at Lovers Point, two weeks ago.....	27
A Woman’s Aura .....	28
Hypnotic Attraction .....	40
Kali’s Infatuation .....	48
Mystique .....	55
Protocol.....	63
Shikar .....	75
A Shred of Evidence .....	81
Suppressed Suspicion.....	97
The Party.....	108
House on the Left.....	117
Tripping Reincarnation .....	139
A Howl from the Past .....	178
Compelling Persuasions.....	194
A Mindset.....	207
Postprandial Peg.....	219
Angry Innocence.....	229
A Secret Seduction.....	255
Bhalwa .....	267
Spirits of the Lake.....	272
The Morning After.....	280
Final Analysis .....	291
Babu Chandra Prasad.....	301



## **The Double Whammy**

*She loved gardening; it was the love of her life. She never imagined that her love for plants would be her undoing.*

Shamim was a young widowed mother - cancer had taken her husband the previous year leaving her hollow eyed and in debt. The burden of bringing up her grade six daughter lay squarely on her shoulders. Spending money to buy plants from the nursery was now out of the question – she had to count every penny. She still collected wild flowering plants, though, from the forest situated at the far end of town. A

lonely pretty road ran through part of the forest where she would often stop to search for wild shrubs and climbers.

She reminisced with bitterness of that fate-less day when whilst digging out a sapling with a stout stick at the edge of the forest, she sensed two men closing in on her. Trained in self-defense, she faced the men defiantly, a rough digging stick at the ready. When one of them attempted to grab her, a scuffle ensued. She wielded the stick well, inflicting telling blows to both men who retreated affronted, bruised, and defeated.

She should have fled home then, but the plant needed a few more strokes to release it from the soil.

The men returned, armed with stout staves from the forest. She put up a great fight; but two armed men, though not trained like her, were too many. They beat her, kicked her repeatedly when she fell down, and left her broken body by the roadside. She had hurt their pride and they taught her a brutal lesson.

A passing car spotted her blood-splattered body and took her to the local hospital where she spent three months. She recovered but her face showed scars from the merciless

beating. She suffered a broken nose, lost her left eye and all her earnings to pay for the treatment.

Now, two years later, people stared at her and quickly averted their gaze. Her face was not a pretty sight.

She had no job and had sold her car to pay the burgeoning medical bills. She was destitute, starving, and lived on the streets and slept in doorways. A relative took in her daughter to work as a domestic in return for food and keep.

Tears rolled down the young mother's face as she sat huddled on a bench outside a roadside tea stall. She rued the day she so valiantly fought off the two men. *If only she had allowed the two to have their way, she would today have her job, her car, her home, and her daughter would be in school.* Her assailants would be in jail for a long time for rape, instead of the lighter sentence of assault and battery. Fate had twisted her kismet and she was suffering the consequences of saving herself from rape.

The men were arrested and sentenced, but set free after completing a term of eight months. They walked free and



ironically, had on occasion paid for her cup of tea...seeing her inability to do so.

“You look like you could do with some food,” said one of the two assailants. He had summed up her situation and felt a pang of guilt. “If you like, go down the lane and on the left there is a house with a red door. Knock on it and my mother will give you a meal.” he turned to leave.

“What’s your name?” she blurted, still huddled on the narrow bench, her not too clean sari tucked around her.

He hesitated, “Charan,” he said looking closely at the woman “And tell mother to let you have a bath as well. Go now and get something into your stomach. I’ll ring and tell her to expect you.”

She was eating meals at Charan’s house quite regularly after that. She got along well with Charan’s mother, who treated her with sympathy and understanding. Shamim was obviously an educated woman, she surmised, who had fallen on bad times. The mother did not probe; she would let the unfortunate woman tell her story when she was good and ready.

Shamim ran into Charan a number of times and he treated her civilly.

“Will you be my mistress?” he asked her one day. “I will put you up and give you money for the plastic surgery you so badly want.”

She screened her face behind the *pallow* of her sari in embarrassment; her ears burned in humiliation, but what was she to do? This was a *fait accompli*; in a small quivering voice she said, “Yes, I don’t have a choice.”

“Of course you do. You can say no.”

“That’s not a choice. I will do *anything* to get my face fixed. Will you give me money to send my girl to school?” she took a quick look at his face, choking with shame.

Charan smiled and expanded his chest. He had won!

He visited her three or four times a week in the accommodation he arranged: the first floor of an old house the access to which was via a steep uncovered cement and brick stairs from the outside.

She was comparatively happy now...her daughter was going to school. She paid for this with ‘sex on demand’ and

stoically endured the humiliation of crude, frenetic sex which left her soiled and disgusted.

After a longish wait, a hospital bed was secured and plastic surgery on her face was performed. Fifteen days after the bandage was taken off she looked in the mirror with some satisfaction. The swelling was subsiding and she was beginning to look quite attractive again. It was not easy to tell she had a glass left eye.

Soon the monsoon was upon them: drenching wet, gray, and windless days. Rain continued relentlessly, filling the bunded rice fields around the house with sheets of water that lay reflecting the trees, shrubs and the motionless heavy clouds above. The house was old and the walls oozed moisture. Every article in the room was damp. Clothes washed stayed damp and smelled of mould. A sunny day was one Shamim looked forward to and hung all the clothes on a line to dry. Pillows, sheets, and mattresses were taken up to the terrace and aired; she washed her hair and sat in the sun. Birds too perched on exposed branches and spread their wings to the sun.

In time the rice planted in the fields began to throw new shoots and the force of the downpour slowly abated. Rain still came, but it was light and the clouds allowed the sun to shine through.

That day Shamim wore a bright red sari and stood at the window, idly gazing at the light drizzle that had fallen since morning and would likely continue through the night. She screwed up her face in disgust when she saw Charan approaching, weaving drunkenly on the narrow muddy path. He was, obviously coming to extract his due. When he was drunk, he appeared like clockwork...eyes bleary, speech slurry, and hands that groped her breasts.

He lurched up the steps, swayed into the room, and looked drunkenly at her. He had tracked muddy shoes across the floor and stood tottering with a belligerent look.

‘Come here, bitch. You bloody saw me coming – you should have had your clothes off by now.’

He grabbed her and threw her on the bed; roughly ripped the sari off her body and attempted entry; but he was

too drunk. He couldn't manage an erection. She told him disdainfully to *sleep it off*.

“Crap!” he shouted with drunken anger. “So...what if I am drunk? It's you, you bitch. You *never* help me.” He got up in a rage, kicked her and pulled her off the bed by her hair. She fell exposed, naked, in a corner, where she huddled sobbing with deep retches. Charan stood over her, glaring and swaying. “*Bitch!*” he said again and stomped through the door and down the wet moss encrusted stairs, leaving a trail of stale booze smell in his wake.

She heard him fall, all the way down to the bottom. He made no sound but lay there...*still*. Blood oozed from a gash in his head and gushed from his nose making a bright red pool.

She stood trembling at the top of the stairs, naked and stunned her fist in her mouth. She didn't know what to think. Should she be happy? The person who had destroyed her life lay crumpled – perhaps dead. Hadn't she secretly desired a horrible death for him to avenge what he had done to her, and was still doing to her? But...but...he was *paying* her keep; and her child was again in school. A large tear stole down her

cheek. She screamed hysterically and sank to the floor tearing at her hair.

Charan's family sat grim faced in the hospital's visiting area. The doctors was putting Charan through tests and investigations. They now awaited the verdict.

"I'm afraid," the doctor said, when he got the results, "Charan is a paraplegic and will require nursing and care all his life. I'll be frank with you, I don't know if he'll get better – not in a long time anyway."

The air was *tense* with shock. Slowly every one of *Charan's* relatives looked around at Charan's young mistress. Their look clearly said – *this is your duty now*.

She panicked; fate was delivering a cruel blow again! She would *now* have to take care of the person who had destroyed her life. What was she to do? If she refused, she would be on the streets – begging alms with her daughter by her side.

In one stroke, her life was *chained* firmly to *his*. She looked desperate and on the verge of panic.

They wanted an answer.

They wanted it now.

There was no escape.

Tears flowed freely down her face. Her *nod* was imperceptible.

*“Poor girl,” they whispered, “perhaps she loves him more than we imagined!”*



## **Harry Bilinsky**

*~A tale from a hill station in the Himalayas, India.*

I sipped tea and gazed through the plate glass window of ‘*Cakepoint*’ and saw glimpses of the Upper Hill Road through the swirling mist outside. I was anxious and awaited the Inspector of Police to join me and give me the latest update.

Harry’s Curious Shop, further up the incline, was sited to the left of the *upper Mal*. To get there, one maneuvered a steepish climb; past a delicatessen and drycleaners that



displayed neatly hung coats in glass fronted windows; and proceeded further up, panting and exhaling clouds of misty air, until one reached a large level area, *the Mal...* across which Harry's shop stood surrounded by mountain pine and deodar.

Wooden benches fixed permanently along the edge of the esplanade provided seats to take in the breathtaking scenery; Harry's store enticed and beckoned from across the boulevard with twinkling lights and the promise of a cozy atmosphere.

When I entered Harry's shop one late afternoon, a little tinkle from a bell, nudged by the opening door, alerted him to a customer coming in. A lingering *smell* of pipe tobacco and coffee, a warm atmosphere, and little lights over the displays created an ambience that invited one to linger, to browse, and to take one's time. It was a comfortable place and I hoped it would always remain a hide-out for me.

Harry strode forth with a smile; he wore a brocade waist coat over white long sleeved shirt, dark worsted trousers, and black shiny shoes completed his elegant outfit. An unlit rosewood pipe dangled from the side of his

welcoming smiling mouth. Amply built and of average height he supported short wavy hair parted on the side.

“Hi, Roxana – what have you been up to?” he asked with a smile.

“Busy doing my usual stuff...”

“You are looking good. Like some coffee?”

“Yeah, would love some...it’s cold outside.”

I held the hot cup in the palm of both hands, relishing its warmth, and looked around.

Harry usually sat behind the counter at the far end of the shop. If you enquired about an item he would glide to your side exuding a faint and pleasing aroma of pipe tobacco and eau-de- cologne. If you got chatting with him and happened to ask him the way to Edmond’s Mountain Climbing School, or the Zoological gardens or the many tourist places, he would escort you to the end of the counter and give you hot coffee in a styrene cup whilst he told you, in complete detail, how to get there. Harry loved helping people. He loved people asking him how-to-get-there questions. And should you ask him about his beloved hill station...you could well be rewarded with coffee and a slice

of fruit cake that he kept ensconced somewhere behind the counter.

He met Svetlana when she came in one blustery afternoon. Sweet, waif-like, delicate, blue-grey eyes, pink lips and cheeks; she was a happy person and smiled a lot showing lovely teeth. I saw Harry looking at her – *he couldn't take his eyes off her*. He saw her delicate fingers as she bent over and handled the trinkets on the shelf; he noticed her almost translucent skin and light brown hair beaded with droplets from the mist outside. He glided up to her, “May I help you?” She turned, hair falling half across her face, and smiled at him. Harry stood stunned ...that smile hit him plumb between the eyes. *Harry was a goner!*

No one had seen Harry pay much attention to girls. He dressed smartly and neatly and was quite a ‘*looker*’; he was friendly with girls, but that was all. Perhaps, they conceded, he had been waiting all his life for Svetlana...fate did strange things.

It was a few months later that Harry started closing his shop at three in the afternoon – ‘*siesta time*’ he told people.

Who had heard of siesta time in India? He would reopen again to catch the evening shoppers - and there were many during the *season*.

After 3 p.m. every afternoon, Harry met Svetlana on the ridge - a quiet road fringed with straight trunked, tall pine trees. The road was slightly higher than town though partially visible from it. There were not many people around at that time. They held hands and walked arm in arm, laughing with a joy lovers feel in each others' company. They slowly proceed along the tree lined path where invading mist or blind spots on the road allowed them to steal kisses. They walked all the way to '*Lovers Point*', a steep climb over a stony road for the last kilometer left them panting at the top. There they would sit on a grass knoll and take in the beauty of the distant green-blue mountains that rose above the mist to form towering snow peaks. The smell of pine was fresh in the mountain air. Squirrels clambered up fern encrusted trunks of nearby pine trees and watchful hawks circled the sky above waiting for a chance to pounce.

“Whew, I’m puffed! It’s so beautiful and peaceful here.”

“Hmmm,” he said, gazing at the distant peaks and sucking at his unlit pipe.

“Do you ever light that thing?”

“Yup, sure I do, sometimes...mostly after dinner.”

She made him feel special and exclusive and laughed prettily at his comments. He treated her like a princess and tried to fulfill her every wish. She didn't have many wishes, except the wish to stay by him *always*.

There was a sound behind them of a twig breaking – like someone or some animal had stepped on it. They looked around, but saw nothing. The vegetation was quite dense in that area. Perhaps it was a wild deer. A waft of air brought a stale unpleasant smell.

Svetlana had come on a tourist bus that ground its way up the steep mountain road belching blue/black diesel smoke. The bus left the next day on its round of other Tourist Spots leaving Svetlana behind...she wished to stay longer. She didn't know what was pulling her back and *keeping her from leaving* – she hadn't met Harry then. She met him a week

after the bus left and wondered if a premonition of meeting him had kept her from leaving.

She found accommodation with an elderly Anglo-Indian widow, Mrs. Pinto, as a paying guest in her red roofed little cottage on the hillside across from town. Mrs. Pinto had posters at the bus stand informing tourists that she took in paying-guests – females only – at very reasonable rates. ‘*Hot water on tap!*’ the poster boasted in attention getting lettering.

Harry lived above his shop in two large sparsely furnished rooms. From these upper rooms, through the pine trees, he could see the red corrugated roof of the little cottage.

Sometimes when the weather was wet and windy, Svetlana visited Harry at his rooms. They sat on a large mattress pushed against the wooden wall. An electrical heater warmed the young lovers as they sat laughing and kissing during the period they had before Harry went down to open the shop again.

They made love once. It was a tender, passionate meeting of two aching hearts. She said ‘no’ to any further

such encounters, “It’s a sin and I am still married to a person who is somewhere in Eastern Europe.”

I asked Harry about Svetlana one day (and was rewarded with a cup of coffee), he shook his head, “*Damned* if I know. I’ve asked her to marry me, but she says she is not divorced. I mean, how bloody long is she going to wait. She says it’s been two years...that’s a long enough *Separation* to file for divorce.”

*She never moved in with Harry and Harry never moved in with her.*

I was in Harry’s shop one day when the bell over the door announced the entrance of two strongly built youths. Harry eyed them with some distaste and watched them closely. The lads wore scuffed leather jackets, unwashed jeans, and supported shoulder length straggly hair. They hovered around the displays exuding a stale unwashed smell. They picked up some pens, examined them closely and put them down again. They loitered around for a bit and left giving Harry a long hard look on the way out.

Harry looked down at the coffee he held in his lap, shook his head and mumbled, “*Louts,*” under his breath. “They hang around eyeing us when we go for walks.”

The afternoon mist lifted at 2 p.m. after months of bone chilling cold windy afternoons, but the rain came down, heavy and drenching. The north-east monsoons had arrived with deep rumbling thunder and cleaving lightning. Harry bundled into an ex-army raincoat and pushed his worsted trousered legs into black *Wellingtons*. He would take his usual route to the ridge, but if the rain didn't let up, he would visit Svetlana briefly at the cottage.

The rain was a light drizzle when Harry arrived. Two pairs of hidden eyes surreptitiously watched as Harry walked up the mossy incline to the cottage. Pots of wet, white Geraniums lined the sides of the steps and red Begonias overflowed the wooden window boxes. A grape vine entwined around a rain drain pipe let a bunch of grapes hang enticingly above the entrance. White painted windows supported misted-over glass panes. Pine cones lay scattered on the lawn around the cottage and the mist was making an



appearance, lazily drifting up through the pine. He climbed the steps and removed his raincoat, hanging it dripping on a hook by the door.

Svetlana sat in front of a log fire with a light blanket over her knees. She smiled when he came in and reached up as he bent down and kissed her.

“You’re wet, my sweet.”

“It’s a small price to pay to visit you.”

Mrs. Pinto came in; grey-haired, matronly, smiling...an apron over her dress, and feet pushed into fur lined rope soled boots. She bore a tray with a steaming pot of the local tea brew and a plate of salty biscuits.

“I saw you down the road and got some tea ready. You must be frozen. Here, let me get you a towel...your hair is all wet, dear!” She fussed over Harry like a mother would – he exulted in her loving concern...she was such a tender and kind-hearted person.

Later, after tea, when Mrs. Pinto retired upstairs to rest for the afternoon, Svetlana led Harry by the hand to her room. They huddled under blankets, talking *sweet nothings* and warming each other. They hugged and kissed and held each

other tight. One thing led to another and they found themselves naked, sweating, and panting. Their passion had completely engulfed them and obliterated all hesitations. They now lay holding each other, “My sweetheart,” she said with moisture misting her beautiful eyes, “We mustn’t let this happen again – I am utterly in your power and you can make me do anything. You know that.”

“But why, my love? Your marriage is as good as annulled and soon we can get married.”

“But until then, my sweet, we have to practice restraint.”

That evening, for the *first time*, Harry did not open his shop.

Two pairs of eyes noted this.

\*

I sat at ‘*Cakepoint*’ having a cup of tea one wintry afternoon. The monsoons had departed and the winter chill and mist swirled around the glazed balcony that overlooked the ridge. I sat idly gazing at the ridge and waited for the Inspector. Suddenly the mist lifted and I saw Harry and Svetlana, hand in hand off to ‘*Lovers Point.*’ My heart beat violently.

Svetlana wore a long red leather coat and he a calf length trench coat. This was the first time I was seeing them on the ridge, though the towns' people claimed they had seen them before between 3 and 4 p.m.

I lifted the binoculars from my handbag with shaking hands and studied them. They were clearly in focus. Svetlana was laughing and walking in an animated way; she looked up into Harry's face... I could see every hair of her head: she was smiling and her mouth was slightly open exposing her beautiful pearly teeth. Her skin was glowing and pink from the chill in the air. Harry lifted her jubilant face and *kissed her lips* – the mist swept in and obscured them.

I took out a handkerchief from my bag and wiped the tears from my eyes. My heart was laden with sorrow – tears flowed down my cheeks - the apparition had been so very *lifelike!*

**You see, Svetlana and Harry were brutally murdered at Lovers Point, two weeks ago.**



## **A Woman's Aura**

Seema loved the house. It was bigger and airier than the house they had moved from. It boasted a pretty lawn in the front and a vegetable garden and tube well in the back. It wasn't a patch on the house next door though, which was large and handsome and surrounded with shady *Gulmohar* trees on a large plot. '*Bloody richie!*' she said to herself.

'Bloody richie' was at that moment observing Seema through his spyglass, he liked what he saw: slim, of average height dressed in black slacks and 'tank necked' top; she

looked svelte and sexy. He would have to meet her he decided; he would call her and her husband along with some friends over for dinner.

The following *party* night Baldev ('Richie') saw Seema sashay through the front door with her husband; she was draped in a shimmering sari wrapped tightly around her stunning figure. He quickly stepped forward to meet her. 'This is my husband, Doctor Arun,' she said in a husky voice. 'And *I* am Seema.'

Baldev caught the whiff of a cheap though pleasant perfume. What his senses also recorded was the exudation on her breath of a powerful female *pheromone*: an indescribable primordial sexual aroma some women exuded; coupled with her easy assured manner and smart get-up it was heady and irresistible ... was Cupid *stringing* her bow?

Baldev had no time for any one else that evening; he was enchanted by Seema and reveled in it. If only he could have some moments alone with her. But it was not to be. He was, after-all, the host and had to look after the needs of all.

In the morning Baldev took stock: last night he had drunk the other half of the bottle after all had departed. What the hell! He could look after himself. He had encountered numerous offers of marriage through his forty-two years and indulged in various flirtations, yet he chose to remain a potential *'prize catch'*...but his market worth would have crashed and his single stature ravished had he met Seema in those earlier days.

Arun had seen it all immediately. He was aware of the sway Seema had on men; she had produced that influence on him too.

*“I see you have bowled the ol’ geezer over,” said Arun. “He was almost having a seizure over you - there’s no profit in that area, is there?”*

“Don’t be silly, darling; can’t you see he is loaded?”

“So *what* if he is?”

“Well, we could do with a bit of his wealth...?”

“Sure we could, but how do you intend getting it. I can’t see him spreading it around?”

“I don’t know... perhaps if I string him along ... who knows, it’s early days yet.”

‘And what does that “string him along” mean?’ he asked archly.

‘Oh, stop being a *fuddy*. It means nothing like what it sounds. I meant we’ll just see how things unfold. So relax, hon.’

On the pretext of borrowing a half-cup of sugar, a little milk, or an egg or two, she visited Baldev regularly. Baldev splashed on a little more aftershave every morning in anticipation of her visits. Some days only Charan and Henry, his assistants, would sample this expensive aroma. Every footfall outside his door fueled his anticipation.

Baldev offered her coffee and cakes - anything to extend her stay; she rarely stayed longer than was necessary. She noticed how he would maneuver to touch her hand in passing her a cup of tea or a plate of savory. He was always well dressed in *designer* casual wear and she loved his lotions.

On one occasion he sat her behind his large desk and chatted whilst he worked. He was on the telephone a lot and large sums of money were discussed. She was impressed. Later during her conversation with Baldev, she happened to

make the observation that one couldn't get what one wanted unless one first made an appropriate investment. Baldev fixed his eyes on her and nodded slowly.

Arun bent over with laughter, "So, after the big hint you gave him he gave you this cheap trinket? What is it anyway? Some cheap white metal with colored glass bits embedded? I knew he was a miser. How did you ever accept such cheap junk?"

"It was packed in an expensive looking box, how was I to know what it contained?" Seema was annoyed. "What does he take me for, the cheapskate?" Seema stopped going to his house; she would show him!

Baldev wondered what he had done wrong - should he change his aftershave or what? Perhaps he shouldn't have given her the present; maybe, her husband didn't like the idea of him giving her such an expensive present. It was an exclusive 'designer' piece in solid platinum studded with semi precious stones and had cost him an arm and a leg. Well, she had dropped the hint, hadn't she - and turned his bachelorhood on its head.



He knew he couldn't live without seeing her close up and without smelling her womaness; he would have to find out what was keeping her away. He would go across and enquire; and to not make it look sly, he would go when her husband was back from his clinic.

“Baldev!” Seema cried, genuinely pleased: “How nice of you to drop by! Come, come we are just about to have tea.” Arun smiled warmly. In the next half hour Baldev was more perplexed than ever: both husband and wife behaved like nothing untoward had happened; and Baldev had suffered *such* torture in the last two days.

They offered him drinks and now he was feeling in an expansive mood. These were nice people he thought; surely he could do something for them.

“Look, why don't you both spend more time in my house? You know I am mostly stuck in the back office. You can have the run of the house: cook a meal there... I would love a woman's cooking. Just do whatever you please.”

Now that they had free access to Baldev's home, a plan nudged around Arun's covetous mind; he had done some stealthy probing and discovered a large cache of money hidden in secret chambers under the wardrobe. Obviously 'black money': unaccounted and untraceable. He discovered some concealed chambers in his bedroom which could contain other valuables.

Arun decided to put a plan into action; he took Seema into confidence. He would purchase a poison he had been working with in his lab and as Seema was cooking most of Baldev's mid-day meals she could slip very minute quantities of the poison into Baldev's portion of the meal, that way he wouldn't suspect her as she was eating the same meal; he would slowly get ill and over a period of time Baldev would be bed ridden and finally the end would come quite swiftly.

Seema burst into peals of laughter. Arun was always mesmerized with the purity of her laughter, the gleam of her even teeth and the turn of her slim neck. "You are so silly, my darling! This plan of yours is so old and so hackneyed, even prehistoric humans must have tried it. This is no plan, darling; it is a red flag with our names on it. You are a doctor

you should know that the simplest autopsy would show up traces of the poison.”

Arun looked at her amused, “Do you really think I am that stupid? You just do your bit, sweetheart; I have worked out a formula that will remove all traces of the poison from his viscera and his tissue cells. It is completely full proof. Do you think I would suggest such a seemingly crude plan?”

Arun was now getting impatient. The miserly fool was not going to part with his money; if he was to use his plan he must do so now before the situation changed.

Arun consulted Seema and unobtrusively slid his plan into action: every day a small amount of the poison was mixed with Baldev’s food. Nothing happened the first few days; by the end of the week Baldev complained of vertigo and nausea. Arun was sent for in the evening and, after medically checking out Baldev, prescribed some pills. The next day Baldev was even worse. He took to bed and both Arun and Seema fussed over him incessantly. Arun was now medicating him constantly and reassuring him. Seema sat next to his bed and pressed his forehead. Baldev was pleased, but he felt too ill to enjoy it. Arun took blood samples on the

pretext of sending it for analysis. Baldev, meanwhile, was deteriorating progressively – as per plan.

Arun saw the time was near now, another couple of days and he could give Baldev the antidote - for by then he would have progressed too far into his ailment to recover. The special antidote would remove all traces of the poison from Baldev's system, but could not reverse the damage. Arun had already taken the precaution of disposing off the remainder of the poison a few days ago: he had buried the packet of poison deep in the ground in his backyard and had planted a sapling on the disturbed soil.

Arun and Seema returned late from Baldev's house one night, they had eaten their meal in Baldev's kitchen and so went straight to bed. At three in the morning Arun awoke to the sound of Seema retching. Her ingesta was streaked with blood. Arun blanched. Could Seema have possibly ingested some of the poison? No! Impossible! They had been very careful. It had to be something else.

Seema was looking at him with terror in her eyes, “what’s happening, Arun? Why is there blood in my vomit? Tell me, oh my God! Tell me!”

Arun’s heart turned cold, but he managed to control his panic, “It’s probably nothing, darling. I’ll check it out at the hospital. It is certainly not the poison. You very likely have a leaking ulcer.”

Arun knew that after a certain stage there was no antidote to the progress of the poison. ‘*Induce vomiting*’ the instructions said. He thought he might just do that to himself - to be on the safe side. He put two fingers down his throat and vomited in the bathroom washbasin. The basin turned red. Arun’s knees gave way. “This is *bullshit*, man! What the hell is happening? Please, God, what the hell is this? Shit! How the hell can this happen? This is bloody unreal!”

Arun controlled himself. “This is not happening, God! How can it? I know there is not an atom of the poison anywhere around. I have personally got rid of every grain of the stuff. So what the bloody hell is this?”

Baldev heard Arun and his dear lovely Seema were ill, very seriously ill. It was two days since they had visited - two days over which period Baldev had slowly grown stronger – now that there was no poison in his meals. He decided to visit his dear friends: supported by Charan and Henry, his assistants, he set off gingerly.

Arun heard his name being called repeatedly and forced his eyes open and saw Baldev sitting next to his bed with tears running down his face. Arun’s face was wet with tears too, he had been crying for hours. Seema’s dead body lay next to him on the double bed, one slim leg exposed. She had died a few hours ago. He knew he was very close to death too; he had nothing to live for, *anyway*.

“I’m going now; I’m going to join Seema. Please forgive me, Baldev, if you can find it in your heart.”

“Forgive you; *forgive* you? It is because of you both that I am alive now!”

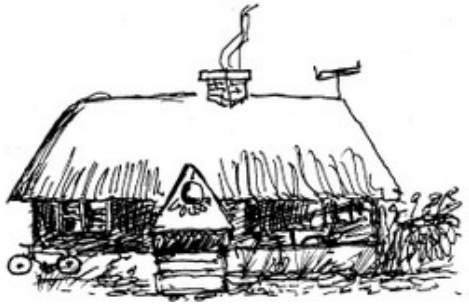
“No, Baldev, this is my dying declaration,” he whispered. “We tried to kill you, poison you for your money, but God has punished us and reversed the poison onto us.”

“What do you mean, I don’t understand?”

In a fading voice, Arun gave the outline to Baldev. He told him where he had buried the poison. Baldev saw Seema's body half covered with a sheet; even in death she looked beautiful. Baldev's heart was overcome with sorrow; he put out a trembling hand and squeezed Arun's hand, "I forgive you, my friend," he whispered, "I forgive everything!"

The twin funeral was taken out that afternoon.

The police dug up the packet of poison, it was *soaking wet*. Arun had, inadvertently, buried the poison next to an underground natural water channel to his tube well – the source of his drinking water!



## **Hypnotic Attraction**

Three thousand years ago an *insidious* metamorphosis, slow and unnoticeable took place on a remote and sparsely populated island in the Pacific. Gradually over the years the inhabitants reduced their quantity of food intake. Areas where food crops were grown previously were slowly dwindling and land was being left out of cultivation. Body weight was not affected; in fact, the average tribe weight had gone up.

There is *no* record of when the island was discovered or any details of the small tribe that occupied it. Capt Cook, on one of his journeys around the pacific, dropped anchor there for half a day and noted the position of the island in his



logbook. He also mentioned the luxuriant forests and the abundance of bird and animal life there. He, however, did not observe *any* signs of human habitation.

Two hundred years later when a team of scientists and anthropologists stopped by the island, attracted by its beauty, they found no humans, but reported that they felt a certain '*presence*' and that the serenity and peace around the island had an *hypnotic attraction*. Some members of the team had shown a great reluctance to leave. "It's so peaceful and lovely here," they said, "I feel I want to stay here for the *rest* of my days. I don't care if I lose my job! There is plenty to eat here. Look at the fruit trees, the bird life, and animals. One could *never* starve here." Some made a secret promise to return one day.

The organic metastasis, that became noticeable to the island people three thousand years ago, had a subtle start much earlier. The human body was, apparently, *undergoing* a quantum evolutionary leap: a change that chanced only on this sparsely populated remote island. The Human metabolism was slowly transmuting to a sun-energy-

absorbing photosynthetic body: a body that progressively attained efficiency in transforming the sun's rays and heat to life sustaining *energy-fuel*; very like cold-blooded reptiles that have the ability to use the sun's energy to help supplement their food derived energy. The Island populace had rapidly achieved this benchmark and progressed to becoming beings that could subsist entirely on solar energy. Night-time activities required small amounts of food to supplement their energy.

Food gathering was thus no longer the driving activity for survival and life was no longer a struggle to either combat the vagaries of weather or to pitch ones cunning against wild game to procure a meal. Time was now plentiful. Even the value of possessing material wealth was losing its attraction. Wealth, stripped of its value of being a '*pool bank*' to tide over bad times, was reduced to inconsequential trivia. No longer was ingested nourishment of importance; no longer were hands needed to till the fields or to do the chores intrinsically knitted to food gathering. The sun's radiated energy took care of food requirements for the tribe

adequately. Weapons and tilling implements were abandoned.

Families could be seen lying around on the beach and other clearings apparently cogitating while soaking up the sun's radiation. Their life style changed from a struggle for survival to one of tranquility and understanding. The only hang over from their previous living order was a need to keep their thatch and mud-walled dwellings in order.

Meditation, under the circumstances, was a natural progression. The tribe practiced uninterrupted contemplation and reflection for hundreds of years and in time perfected the art of *emerging* from the body: at first for short periods and eventually for days on end. The body eventually became a burden and so was discarded and buried. The spirits now roamed free and wide, energized entirely by the *cosmic* vitality.

Casting off of the physical body gave the tribe ascendancy over aging and consequently over death.

Tim and Hillary arrived on the Island one bright morning to spend a blissful fortnight of Honeymooning. They were a part of a team of scientists that visited the Island four years previously. Their *kit* contained canned food, emergency medical requirements, insect repellents, and a few clothes: if the Island was uninhabited, it was pointless putting on clothes.

The *elation* they experienced on their first visit immediately enveloped them. They spent lazy days swimming, exploring the forest and making love. Fruit was plentiful and animals had lost all sense of fear of humans. Tim had an accident that could have been very severe for he fell off the high branch of a wild fruit tree, but miraculously landed softly on the forest floor. Hillary foolishly swam out too far and was terrified when a large shark circled her and then rushed in with an attack, but miraculously turned away. Both Tim and Hillary wondered at how fate had intervened and saved them from severe injury or perhaps even death. Days merged into one another, for when one is enjoying ones self, *time seems to fly*.

Underlying their enjoyment was a sense of security. They felt strangely safe on the island. They seemed to receive some kind of telepathic forewarning which saved them from many accidents and dangerous encounters with poisonous snakes or insects. They explored caves and saw obvious signs of previous habitation. Cave paintings showed curious drawings of men and women lying prone with, what appeared to be, steam or some form of energy emanating from their body and mingling above the trees. This was quite baffling and left them wondering. Other paintings showed human bodies being buried. Had the whole race perished, perhaps by an outbreak of disease? They found quite a number of actual burial mounds, but on examination the skeletons showed no signs of brutality or degeneration from any disease. In fact the bodies appeared to have been buried in the prime of health. They resolved to return with another scientific team. Next time they would bring friends and family so they too could experience the enchantment of the place. If there were a Garden of Eden, this would seem to be it.

The ship arrived, as scheduled, a fortnight later to pick up Tim and Hillary. It waited in the bay for an hour, hooting

incessantly, but no one appeared from the forest. Eventually it was forced to leave a placard behind on the sand saying they would be back in ten days.

The non-arrival of the couple created a hue and cry back in town amongst family and friends. The Captain of the ship was questioned. He had no answers but said if a search team was organized, he would be happy to take it to the island in ten days time.

Ten days later the ship was in the bay again and repeated the routine of waiting and hooting repeatedly. When no one emerged, a search team was sent ashore. After hours and again after hooting repeatedly, remnants of the search team emerged from the forest and rowed across to the ship. The men were taken to the Captain's cabin where they were questioned by a team of officers.

They looked distracted and confused and wished not to say much, "The couple didn't want to come back," is all they kept repeating. Of their colleagues they said, "They too elected to remain behind."

The ship was well behind schedule and weighed anchor hurriedly and steamed away. The remaining team members from the rescue squad stood on deck and looked longingly at the receding island. Each had firmly resolved in his heart to return soon and perhaps forever.

Unknown to them, this was the last sighting of the island by humans. A severe earthquake depressed the island seven hundred feet under the rolling waves.



## **Kali's Infatuation**

Kali yawned and opened his eyes to narrow slits. His bride of two days stood in the door way of the hut against the morning sun, her semi-transparent sari revealed her *sensuous* body. Kali felt the beginnings of arousal nudging him awake. He called to her:

“Hey, Munni...”

“Don't call me that. Only my Papa calls me that.”

“OK, *yar*, Mangli, what are you looking at? Screwing up your pretty face; come back here.”

Mangli looked back and saw the mischief in his eyes. “No chance,” she said. “I have to fetch water, light the fire,



cook a meal and do a *thousand* other things,” she stuck her tongue out at him.

Kali leapt out of bed and made a lounge for her. She *took off* like a hare down the narrow dirt footpath, screaming in excitement. Kali would have chased her but he was bare-ass naked.

In an adjacent hut Mangli’s father-in-law looked up from his meal, “*Hey Ram!* Have they started to fight already?”

“Don’t be silly. You are old and unobservant,” said mother-in-law. “Can’t you hear her giggle? I’d say they are getting along fine. Thank God! I am still afraid. I hope marriage will bring some sense to his head, he is such a fickle lad, so full of fanciful ideas and *yet* so simple in the ways of the heart.”

Kali was a hard working lad...*when* the mood took him. He just couldn’t go along with the set ways of the village folk. He liked doing things his way, often with disastrous results, but at times it *did* work; like when he devised a siphon to draw water from the new elevated *all concrete* aqueduct that took water, by passing their village,

to far away places. The villagers of this very small hamlet had grudgingly accepted and adopted his idea. They had a *right* to the water too, they maintained, and Kali had shown them the way.

A young teenager, Kali loved climbing trees. His favourite was a huge old *banyan* tree on the edge of the village. Its ample branches made a comfortable lying perch. At times he would spend the whole day lying in its branches observing birds busy with their food gathering; village folk leading their bullocks to the field carrying wooden ploughs across their shoulder; women drawing water from the well; smoke curling from chimneys, and village dogs frenetically scratching themselves. When his father stood in the village square, looking left and right for Kali, he would scramble down to help him in the field.

“Oye! Munni, Mangli or what ever you are,” he said one day, “our hut is too small. I am going to make a new house for us!”

Mangli was thrilled; she hopped up and down clapping her hands with *glee*.

“Yes! Oh, lovely! When are you going to start? This ol’ hut is so ugly and decrepit. *Where* are you going to make it?” Her large innocent eyes searched his face.

“You’ll see,” he said looking towards the large tree.

Mangli followed his gaze and froze; her mouth fell open.

“No!” she wailed and clapped a hand to her mouth. “You are not, are you? Tell me you are not! Please tell me you are not! Only *monkeys* live in trees!”

Kali smiled, *I-have-something-up-my-sleeve* kind of smile, “Trust me...you’ll love the new hut.”

The village elders exchanged glances and shook their heads, “We know he is crazy,” they said. “When will he ever grow up and be practical? A house in the tree, indeed! He’s married now – no longer a child.”

It took Kali a long time to build his tree house for he worked alone. Mangli stood by disapprovingly, but finally Kali’s enthusiasm and earnest hard work infected her young imagination and she pitched in and helped. His father and mother, though, looked *unbelievably* on. They didn’t say much, their stony silence told him all.

“What is wrong with our son?” wailed his father, “Why does he think so differently? He has always been a maverick!”

Kali worked doggedly on. To pitch a level floor between branches was difficult and time consuming. The roof was even harder for the branches got in the way and Kali could not achieve an inclination that would allow the rainwater to run off.

In time, the tree house took shape and the young couple moved in. The first pre monsoon rain drenched them and their meagre belongings. Mangli was desolate and pleaded with Kali to shift back to their old, but *dry*, hut. Kali explained that he could not afford to loose face again and be the butt of derision and sarcasm that would include her as well now. He promised to re-lay the roof and achieve a better angle. If only he had some corrugated sheets - but that was way beyond his means.

“It’s only the first rains,” scoffed the elders, lounging on *charpoy’s* and smoking the *hookah*. “In a fortnight when the Monsoon hits, they will be washed down like the dust off the leaves of the *banyan* tree.” Too many of Kali’s

harebrained ideas had actually succeeded and made the wise men look silly. They hoped this project of his would fail miserably...that would make the elders look good.

Kali and Mangli spent the happiest hours with each other cozily embraced in their tree house. Daylight hours invited heavy sarcasm and exaggerated pitiful looks from all in the village.

And then one day, dark heavy clouds rolled in from the south-west; lightening displays heralded the arrival of the *monsoon*. The young couple climbed into their lair and waited with baited breath. The sound of the heavy downpour on the leaves was loud, rhythmic, and soothing. They clung to each other with trepidation and soon fell asleep praying they don't get washed down the tree. The rain continued, non stop, for two days. Their tree hut *survived* the onslaught!

The following morning was bright and clear. The young couple awoke to the sound of birds chirping in the branches. Kali smiled happily, he hugged his pretty pert nosed wife. "Our little nest has survived this huge deluge and now I stand *vindicated*. I shall walk proudly down the village street."

He threw open his flimsy door and stood aghast: the land as far as he could see, was a vast sheet of water; the village was flooded - the aqueduct had split its sides and flooded the countryside.

When Kali looked around, he saw inhabitants of the village clinging to every available tree in sight. A large number were perched on the branches of his beloved tree. He looked down and saw his parents sitting on a wide branch and stretched a *hand* to them.

“My son,” said his father with a voice choked with emotion “I am so proud of you. You had the *foresight* to build on this tree, I feel sure you somehow knew the aqueduct was not robust enough to contain our severe monsoons. Bless you, my child. The sound of your snores all night showed us the narrowness of our thinking.



## **Mystique**

*~A love story set in the capital of India: New Delhi*

### **Prologue**

He sat so he could watch those that came in through the hotel's front door; he knew only a handful of people in Delhi, all of whom he had asked to try and *contact her*.

*Will she come* he wondered.

He waited all day in the lobby watching the front door; sipping gin and rising occasionally to stretch his cramped legs. He sacrificed lunch so he would not have to move away and miss her coming in.

*Will she come?* He was told she visited this hotel quite often. He wished he had taken her *address*.

On a visit, a year ago, he had left this hotel hurriedly to catch an early morning flight because of an overnight family crisis in Karachi. Once in Pakistan, his ageing parents insisted he get married right away.

A disaster: the marriage had not lasted six months ending in divorce. He was back now in Delhi hoping to meet the girl of his dreams!!!

He walked around the lobby.

WEDDING

BANQUET HALL – GROUND FLOOR

RAHUL WEDS SITA.

He wondered idly how many *Rahuls* and how many *Sitas* would there be in Delhi? *Too* many to count he reckoned, those were common names in India. He found himself at the door of the Banquet Hall; should he take a peak? He pushed the door and stuck his head around it. He



looked directly into the eyes of the beautifully bedecked bride.

Ya Mohammed! He breathed.

## **The Story**

He studied her surreptitiously during the party: short auburn tinted bouffant hair which made her look taller than her 5ft 5inches, matching nail polish and *natural* makeup. Her quick flashing eyes met his every now and again. She laughed exaggeratedly and swung her gaze across to him: not looking directly at him and yet remaining *aware* of him. He waited until she was deep in conversation and then swiftly moved to another part of the room.

He waited and watched; and it happened as he thought it would: she laughed elatedly, looked up at the ceiling then casually glanced to where he should have been standing. Her eyes swept that portion of the room before returning to her circle of conversation.

Where has he gone, she wondered? He looks interesting I hope he hasn't left.

She casually changed place in the circle so she could observe the room behind her. She lifted her glass and looked over its rim. He waited partially hidden by a potted palm. She soon spotted him, he waved; her eyes swiveled to where he stood hidden; she looked at him for a moment then turned and went to the dining room – a slight embarrassed flush rose to her cheeks. Gosh! He’s brash and forward, but so *good-looking*; wonder who he is?

Hashim stepped out of the room to the darkened verandah and espied her through the glazed window. She was smart. Her fitting dress emphasized her body; she flitted around the table smiling at acquaintances that helped themselves to tid-bits and floated back to the sitting room to her circle of friends.

She felt an excitement in her chest – the party was becoming interesting – that man was irresistible. She looked around: now where has he gone, he won’t stay put, will he?

Hashim stepped back into the living room and stood behind her with his back to her.

“Array, Yar, where have you been?” said a male voice behind her. “Just mingling,” said a second male voice. “I smell ‘Mystique.’”

Hashim recognized the perfume she was wearing. He felt, rather than saw her turn around. He looked over his shoulder into those electric eyes. She was looking at him curiously:

“Are you stalking me?”

“No, err...well yes. May I...?”

She liked men who were open; she smiled, “I’m flattered.”

“Hashim at your service, Madam!” he made a little bow; ‘Mystique’ enveloped him. Her tinkling laugh told him he had made a favorable impression.

“May I get you another drink, m’am?”

“Love another one, it’s sherry. And hurry back – I’m parched!”

He’s suave and courteous too! I love his classical good looks and his *old world charm*. Is it the sherry or am I being *swept off my feet*?

She waited tentatively; Hashim appeared, bowed and offered her the sherry. They stood and chatted; he made her laugh a lot – he was well informed, quick, and full of fun.

I am thirty-four, she thought, and this is the first man I am enjoying the company of. Should I be brash enough to make the first move? Dammit, who cares!

“Hashim, shall we quietly get away and catch a coffee at the Hyatt?”

“What a splendid idea! *Of course*, we shall. But I don’t have wheels.”

“No problem: I have *chauffeured* wheels. Let’s escape quietly.”

They made an unobtrusive exit... covertly watched by her circle of friends.

They ordered iced coffee and thinly sliced asparagus sandwiches at the coffee shop and danced *cheek-to-cheek* till 4 a.m.

It was in the way of things that they booked a room – two rooms actually - *though one was never used*.

Languorous mornings followed prolonged mid-day cocktails that followed light lunches of cold cuts and mayonnaised salads. A luxuriating tub bath got them ready for a night of fun.

He had never got along so well with a woman. He looked at her with tenderness – he could spend his life with her. She noticed his compassionate looks and felt he was gearing up to make some kind of a *proposal*....

Next morning when she stretched her arms to cuddle him he was gone! She looked in the toilet and tiptoed, keys in hand, to the other room – *nope!* No signs of him. She had breakfast in bed and yet he didn't appear.

She checked at the reception: “He has checked out, Madam.”

“...What!!!”

“He paid for the rooms and food and checked out early this morning. He left this note.”

“Hi Sita: sorry, love, had to leave in a hurry. Will catch you soon. Rooms, food, etc. all taken care of!

Love you,  
Hashim.”

“Where has he gone? Has he left an address?”

“No, Madam. But the check-in register says: Bunder  
road, Karachi.”



## **Protocol**

### **Prelude**

Pratish and Sulaiman were close friends right through Elphiston Grammar and remained close mates at Ganga College. People called them the ‘Inseparables’.

Whilst still scholars at the academy, they made a brotherly pledge that their first born, if a boy would be named Harish and if a girl would be called Parveen.

## Harish

Tall and handsome, gifted with *easy* charm and comfortable wealth, he was a desirable catch. Well liked and popular with both sexes, but not a very good looser at sports

Jyoti was his latest flame and ran about him like a puppy would its master. He treated her perfunctorily, almost bordering on *shabbily*. When Upinder, his closest friend, remarked on how offhandedly he treated such a sweet and trusting girl, Harish turned on him telling him firmly to mind his own business. Girls were no problem for him. If they didn't like the way he treated them they could "fade.

What the hell, *yaar*? Thought Upinder, he is the campus hero and thrives on adulation. One day he will get married! I shudder to think how he will treat his wife. He is my friend, but I admit he's a bully; and like all bullies, he will marry a girl who is submissive and spineless. Well, best of bloody luck to him; hope he manages to find happiness in the bargain.



Pratish Pandey sat Harish across his large mahogany desk. “Well, son,” he said, putting his elbows on the desk, “you have finished college now, and have learnt a lot, I am happy to say, about the steel business. I would like to see you now settle down in life and take a more mature attitude. Your prime outlet appears to be ‘hitting on chicks’ as you youngsters put it....”

“Hey, hang on Dad! What am I supposed to do after work? Shouldn’t I be doing young things and having fun?” Harish put on an innocent act.

“I didn’t say you shouldn’t. You didn’t let me finish. I would like you to get married.”

Harish’s eyes did their best to vacate their sockets, “Come on, Dad, you can’t be serious. I don’t want to get married as yet!”

“Watch my lips, lad. I said *I would like you to get married*. You are an adult now. Whether you marry or not is your decision. But *I would like to see you married*.”

“I suppose, Dad, you have someone in mind?”

“Of course I have; and you have met her too. Remember Uncle Sulaiman’s daughter, Parveen?”

“Oh, my God! Not her.” Harish involuntarily shirked back.

“And why may I ask not? She is well-educated, good looking and loves sports. She also happens to be my very good friend’s daughter. Should you both marry, our business would be bound with family ties.” Pratish remembered his college days and a slight smile touched his lips.

“She’s a pain: she is self-centered and thinks no end of herself!” blurted Harish trying to avoid his father’s eye.

“Then she *must* be a lot like you; and you *can’t* handle that. You’d like women to be subservient, huh?”

“Well, that’s certainly not true, Dad. If women can’t resist throwing themselves at me, what can I do?” he shrugged.

“I have a strange feeling *Parveen won’t be* throwing herself at you,” smiled his father, “wanna bet?” he raised his eyebrows. “Anyway, she and her father are coming over at the weekend and you both can then see how you get along. You are now young adults and should be able to make a mature assessment.”

“I am due to meet with my school mate, Upinder over the weekend, Dad.”

“Okay, so call him over; let’s have a party!”

Parveen looked up from the magazine in her hand, “But, Abba *jan*, what about Minakshi? She is staying with us and may not want to go.”

“Ask her, *beti*,” said her father, Sulaiman. “Perhaps she would like to meet Harish.

The two girls, Minakshi and Parveen had shared a room at a finishing school in far away Switzerland. Minakshi was good looking, tall, and loved sports, but was more modest than Parveen. Whilst Parveen was a go-getter and a front-runner, Minakshi’s temperament was mild and demure. She played for the enjoyment of the game rather than the winning of it.

“O.K. *Abbajan*, a few days mingling with Harish won’t kill me I suppose.”

A week later Pratish and Sulaiman sat at the far end of the spacious living room where French windows opened out to a

manicured lawn. They discussed business and reminisced. The two girls sat together looking bored. They were informed by the house bearer that Harish and his friend, Upinder, had been alerted to the arrival of Sheik Sulaiman's party a while ago.

"That is typical," said Parveen to her friend, "he wants to make us feel small. He is *so* crappy!"

The girls made a plan to *avenge* this insult. Soon the duo came strolling down the grand stairway: washed, shaved, and cologned. Harish greeted 'Uncle Sulaiman' and introduced Upinder all around. The two groups measured up each other: the boys were handsome and dressed in the latest casual trendies; the girls were quietly elegant and fashionably turned out. After some polite talk and courteous enquiries Parveen interrupted and announced that she and her friend were going down the road to a friend's house and would be back in time for lunch: "Just give me a call on my cell phone when lunch is ready," said Parveen as they trooped out arm in arm.

Harish was struck dumb. He had been clearly out-maneuvered and left looking foolish. The parents looked at

each other and smiled knowingly. “Touché!” said Sulaiman quietly to his friend.

Once out of sight and hearing the girls burst into hoots of laughter “Did you see the look on that ass’s face?” asked Parveen, “I thought he would have a seizure there and then.”

“That was mean, Parveen. You should have let them enjoy their moment of glory a bit longer. Poor Upinder got caned for no fault of his.”

“Hey! Hey! All this gushing sympathy for someone you first saw only five minutes ago. What stirs, sweetheart?”

“Don’t get an attitude, hon. everybody isn’t the same. And he sure looks sorta ... you know...?”

Later, after lunch, Harish asked if the Girls would like a game of tennis.

“Sure! We’ll take you boys on.” Parveen challenged.

Harish smiled; this was going to be a cinch. Here was a chance to bring Parveen down a few pegs. He wasn’t going to pussyfoot around. He would blast them off the court.

He bounced the ball a few times (as he had seen the big boys do) and served. Minakshi fumbled and managed a high

return just over the net. Harish smashed it for a winner: 15 love! His serve to Parveen was quicker. The return left him flat footed and groping. His confident smile lost a few teeth. He sportingly acknowledged an obvious fluke shot, “*good one!*” he conceded.

The girls played hard and gave no quarters. In the end both teams were sweating freely and had enjoyed a good workout.

“There is this dance at the club tonight. Would you girls like to join us?”

“Yeah! Okay.” accepted the girls.

Parveen and Minakshi were the cynosure of all eyes at the club. Boys were lining up to dance with them and they were kept on their feet for most of the evening. Both girls loved dancing and swung into the enjoyment of it.

“This wasn’t a good move, *yaar*,” confided Harish to Upinder,” these two know all the latest dances and are making us look like country bumpkins.”

“You should know all the latest, *yar*; you keep going abroad so often,” said Upinder.

“Yeah,” conceded Harish, “but who needs to learn dancing when you have a chick sitting on each lap?”

“Well, then suffer.” sniggered Upinder.

When the two girls came off the floor, Harish suggested they go for a drive: “This place is getting to be a bore, *yar!*”

“You guys go,” suggested Parveen, “we’ll stay here a bit more.” She wasn’t going to let him dictate the evening. Anyway, she was enjoying herself and if Harish couldn’t dance, that was too sad!

On the way home, Harish drove atrociously scowling and hunched.

“If you’ve forgotten how to drive, you can let us girls out here, Harish. We have no intensions of being involved in an accident of your making,” Parveen was annoyed.

Suleiman stayed another two days. The youngsters made their programmes of hiking, riding and swimming. By the end of the stay a little romance was pulling at their heartstrings. They exchanged touching farewells.

“Well?” asked Pratish, “should I send a marriage proposal to uncle Sulaiman?”

“Like you and uncle Sulaiman made a pact when you both were in college, Upinder and I also made a pact that we would get married together on the same day and place,” said Harish.

“That’s fine with me,” said his father, “I’ll invite the families over. But would Upinder want to marry Minakshi, They hardly know each other. I see Parveen taking more interest in him than Minakshi does. Or has he someone else in mind?”

Harish looked pensive. Sure, he liked the girls, but Parveen was so exasperating and strong willed. She was beautiful caring and full of life, but she would also be a difficult person to subdue. He liked the challenge of taming her.

“That’s because Parveen can’t bully me and picks on Upinder. We have spoken about this and Upinder wants to keep his pledge and get married on the same day. Minakshi is a super gal, Dad. It is rare to come across someone like her.”



“Well, as long as you boys have made up your minds,” said his father, Pratish. “If you are not sure about marrying Parveen, I will understand, I promise I won’t take to bed with a sulk.

“It will be okay, Dad.”

“Sulaiman is very agreeable to this proposal. Now I shall have to contact Minakshi’s and Upinder’s parents to set the ball rolling. You, my dear son, will have to formally propose to Parveen and, let’s pray to God, she will accept you.” Pratish’s eye had a glint in them. “I haven’t spoken to your friend at all; I shall leave that to you, as you two have made that private pledge.”

Soon a large marriage *shamiana* was erected. To keep with the wishes of the families, the arrangements embraced the persuasions of both religions: *Pundits* and *Kazis* were in attendance.

The girls appeared in heavily draped and very similar brocade and silk ensembles, their loveliness concealed in *ghungats* that completely obscured their faces. The two

grooms too had their faces covered with all concealing flower strings that hid their handsomeness.

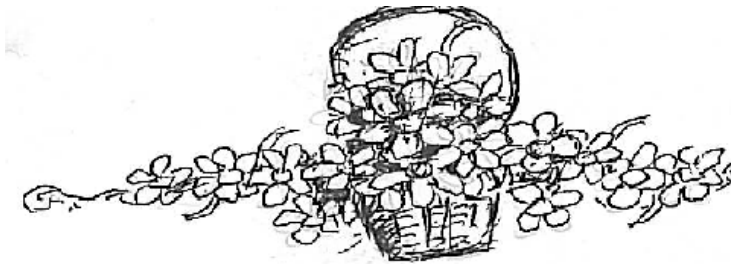
“We want a short ceremony, Dad,” Harish said, “after which we will take off to our honeymoon destination and you and your friends can party for as long as you like.”

## EPILOGUE

HONEYMOON – The Metro Plaza Hotel.

“Hey! Wake up, bugger. You still asleep?” Harish’s voice on the phone was full of light sarcasm. “Minakshi is an early riser and has kicked me out of bed.”

“Well, Parveen is sleeping like a baby,” said Upinder, yawning and stretching. I can see easy days ahead, mate.”



## Shikar

During the days of the "Raj" when hunting was considered a *noble sport*, a call was given out to indicate to the *beaters* that a tiger had been wounded and had retreated. The warning was delivered by whistles and shouts to warn the *beaters* who were then required to scale up the nearest tree and wait. The hunters - who were ensconced on *machans* - were then honour bound to descend to the forest floor and follow the blood spoor of the wounded beast and *finish it off*. Ladies and children were spared this dreadful ordeal and were expected to remain in the treetop platform with their biscuits and

coffee until the hunt was properly concluded. My father being the host took it upon himself to lead the search party.

In those days, the hills and forests of Hazaribagh and adjoining Gaya district were reputed to contain a number of tigers. Their deep bellowing roars could often be heard echoing in the wooded hills. Later, at night the penetrating, *ponk, ponk* of alert deer combined with the *piaw, piaw* of alarmed jackals would warn the denizens of the forest that a tiger was on the prowl. Villagers would huddle closer in their mud huts to hear the often-repeated stories of "man-eaters" which took on an impending reality at night. On some moonlit nights a tiger could be observed crossing a sandy stretch and wading across a shallow stream. Game, however, was a plenty and the tiger mostly found its food from the herds of *chital, sambar*, pigs, etc. It was when the tiger started picking up easier prey from amongst the grazing village cattle that it became a menace and if wounded posed a real danger of becoming a "*man-eater*."

Father was an experienced and keen *shikari*. An ex army officer, he was fit for his 40 years and knew the forest better than most. His close knowledge of the area and

detailed intimacy with the characteristics of each animal species gave him an insight into their behaviour under stressful conditions. This was certainly the prime reason for his success in tracking down and locating wounded prey. On occasion he would surprise all by completely abandoning the obvious spoor trail and heading, by way of a detour, to where he thought the animal was headed and to wait for it to get there. More often than not, he was correct. This method also gave him the advantage of lying in wait for the animal instead of being ambushed by one.

Father did not want to unnecessarily expose his guests to the very dangerous work of following up a wounded tiger, especially one that, apparently, was hit in mid belly by one of the guests. He elected to follow the beast alone, along with his trusted gun bearer carrying a second loaded rifle. All conscientious objections, hesitatingly put forward by the guests, were stilled when father pointed out that he had done this kind of work many times before; he knew the forest and a less experienced hunter with him would only distract him and put them both in danger. Father rechecked his .476 Rigby's rifle and stepped forward purposefully.

The forest floor was dry and strewn with the late November leaf fall from deciduous trees. The air was fresh and crisp and still smelt of the morning forest mist. There was a chatter of jungle babblers off on the right, which could indicate that the tiger had retreated that way. The beaters up in the trees guided Father as best they could, warning him of large bushes in his direction further ahead where a wounded tiger could lie up. They kept up a continuous flow of information, informing him of anything they thought may be of help.

Suddenly, Father sensed rather than saw a movement in a bush. Experience told him he would not have time for a second look so he hastily stepped to his right, putting a thin tall tree between himself and the tiger. The tiger simultaneously broke cover and charged with a great roar. Father took support of the tree, aimed carefully and fired. The bullet hit the tiger in the centre of the forehead and it must have died immediately. The momentum of the charge, however, carried it a few feet to hit the tree with a great resounding *thud!* The tree shook vigorously and it appeared

a body fell out of the tree to land on top of the tiger and, apparently, bounce right back up again.

In the jubilation and merrymaking on the slaying of a dreaded *cattle lifter* everyone, momentarily, forgot the beater who had fallen off the tree on to the tiger and shot right back up again. Father looked up and saw him still clutching on to a branch with a petrified look on his face. He told the men to bring him down and bring him to the house for medication.

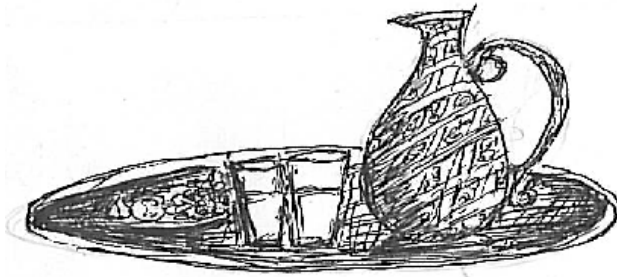
Celebrations continued that evening for a cunning marauder had been exterminated. The *beater* who had fallen off the tree was brought on a cot. He showed symptoms of a nervous fright spasm, for his body shook every now and then and his arms would jerkily mimic the act of clutching on to a tree limb. He was duly medicated and compensated with cash - an act that had the crowd's approval - and every thing was amiably concluded. Two days later, however, the stricken man was brought to the house again, exhibiting the same symptoms even more exaggeratedly. We were told unbelievable stories of the man's severe ague and that the

person had not eaten anything in the last two days. The village healer had opined that the man would probably never walk again and that his earning life was virtually at an end as the person would, in all likelihood, remain a cripple and deteriorate henceforth.

Whilst we stood around questioning the man, Grandfather came out of the house. He had, obviously, overheard the discussion. He stepped up to the man and with his riding crop delivered three swift wallops to the man's back and legs. The reaction was immediate: the man catapulted out of his cot and took to his heels.

A plot to defraud the family of a large sum had been exposed.





## A Shred of Evidence

Mrs. Thomas sat down heavily on the roadside bench; she pulled out her packet of Gold Flakes and lit up. This was her third cigarette this morning. She looked at the pack, there were four left and it was *only* nine o'clock in the morning. She would have to make the four cigarettes last the rest of the day. The bus would arrive any moment now and she would have to stub out her cigarette before boarding. Her daughter, Juni, sounded depressed on the phone last night: "Don't worry, Ma, if you can't come I will manage somehow." Such a cheerful girl she was; beautiful and winsome. Now she was careworn and perpetually tired. Both her granddaughters

(Juni's twin daughters) were running a fever and Juni was not able to manage by herself.

Juni awoke every morning at six o'clock; she made packed lunch for her husband, Ralph, to take to work; and then got down to preparing breakfast for the family of four.

Feeding, cleaning, washing the girls, and doing the morning chores kept her occupied with *not* a moment to spare. It was only after the mid day meal when the twins were put to bed for their afternoon nap that Juni found a few moments to herself.

She'd sink gratefully into the soft sofa with a *gin-tonic* and a cigarette; a snack lunch afterwards and a little lie-back. Very soon, it would be time to wake the girls and take them for a jaunt to the nearby park. By the time Juni returned – exhausted from a ball game with the kids – it would be *time* to prepare supper.

Only a mother of four-year-old twins knows what is involved in preparing supper with two over energetic kids dashing through the small three- roomed flat, screaming for attention.

Ralph's arrival would mean serving supper quickly, for after his fill at the local pub, he demanded food immediately and served hot. Juni's strain would surface again at this hour: now it would be mental *tension* and recriminations. Ralph would roundly accuse her of being sloppy in her housework and in her personal get-up. Juni would counter by saying he was less and less around, and was no help in bringing up the girls or in lending a helping hand with the chores: the dusting, washing, ironing, etc.

“Christ, Woman! Somebody's got to earn the *bread* around here!”

“Well, you could get here earlier!”

“Yeah? And tell my mates what - that I am a *wimp*?”

“Look, Ralphy, my dearest heart, I've had it up to *here* with your grogging and bad mouthing. You either cap it or I'm out'a here.”

“Yeah? And where might you be going, Miss *high-and-mighty*?”

“To the bloody '*loony bin*' very likely... I can't take it any more. My hands are trembling.” She shoved her

outstretched fingers in front of his face and exaggerated the shake.

That got his attention, “Hey, take it easy, hon. We have two little girls to bring up.”

“Very funny!” she countered.

The evenings always seemed to end not too happily these days.

Mrs Thomson arrived late afternoon, all bustling and full of concern. “You okay hon?”

‘Yeah, Mum. He’s having an *affair!*’

“What? What are you saying, child? Not my sweet honest Ralph. He’s a God fearing, son. Whom are you talking about?”

“That same *son-of-a-bitch*. His new flame must be so demanding that she milches him dry and he has nothing left for me. He hasn’t *touched* me amorously in eons.”

“Hey, easy, love, your language is atrocious! I suppose you have incriminating evidence?”

“No I don’t, but I know it's true. It's little insignificant things that one has to take note of, his flippant behaviour, his

preoccupation, his coming home later and later in the evenings. All his interest is elsewhere now. He no longer spends meaningful time with his family. He finds an excuse every evening to have an argument and *huff off* to bed,” she wiped the tears that welled up, “I’m miserable, Mum!”

“There, there, honey, let Mama sort this out. But why have you let yourself go like this? You used to be known as the ‘smartest, prettiest, and best dressed broad in our area. You look so disheveled and unkempt now; it does no good to your *self esteem*.”

“I’m so over worked Mother; and then there is no money. There is never any money - we are *always* broke!”

“Okay, honey. I’m here to take over all the chores. You rest up.”

Ralph arrived straight from work that evening. He brought two packets of cigarettes and a couple of beers for his ma-in-Law. He was all concern and solicitous, he helped in the kitchen and was *'ooh, so caring!*

“It's all show Mum! Ask *him* when was the last time he stepped into the kitchen?”

“And ask *her* when was the last time she put on some lipstick, or wore a dress that was ironed?” countered Ralph.

“Stop it, children! Quarrelling helps nothing. You’ll have to sit down calmly and discuss this like responsible adults.” said Mrs. Thomas looking exasperated and wishing all this would somehow end. She reminisced fondly of the smart young sales officer who had come a courting her lovely daughter. So polite and courteous he was. She and Mr. Thomas were bowled right over...and his salary, my sweet Jesus! It was almost a thousand smackers, and, to top it, who could hope for a church going boy these days. The wedding was a simple service at the church with relatives and some close friends in attendance. The couple had looked so lovely: she in a white flowing wedding gown looking ravishingly beautiful; he looked dapper and handsome in a dark ensemble. They were the cynosure of all eyes. God bless them!

“Ma, I need a break,” sobbed Juni, jolting Mrs. Thomas out of her reverie. Gosh, where could I go, thought Juni. She had some money stashed away, well secreted.

“You go and rest, darling,” said her mother. “I’ll finish up here.”

In the morning Juni could not be found. “But I thought she was sleeping with *you*, Mother.”

“And I couldn’t imagine she would not be with *you*. Oh, my God! Where has this daughter of mine gone? Could she have gone to the store or to the neighbours to get something?”

“What, at this hour? It’s just six o’clock in the morning. Actually she has been missing all night, come to think of it. When did you last see her Mum?”

“Last night, I don’t know what time. A little after supper, I guess.” said Mrs. Thomas beginning to get really alarmed.

“And did she seem okay then?” Ralph’s nervous twitch in his left eye was reappearing.

“Yeah...well no, really, she was very depressed and was sobbing, sort of. What have you done to my baby? I have never seen her so cheerless. Are you carrying on with another

woman? Tell Mama the truth, now,” she stood in front of him and gazed sternly into his eyes.

“No Ma, of course not! Juni is just imagining things. She probably is a bit depressed and the extra workload is wearing her down. She has let herself go which is adding to her lowered self esteem.”

This has been coming on for a while, thought Ralph, ever since the birth of the twins things have started a slow slide. “I’m bone tired, Ralph, not tonight.” was an oft-repeated excuse in those early days and Ralph thought he had better let her recover fully. And that’s when it had started: she had let herself *go*, roaming around the house all day in an old worn out shift, avoiding his touch and always tired and grumpy; so much so that Ralph started to drift away. Coming home and facing her started a long harangue. He started drinking in the pub with his mates, unconsciously stretching the hours to his departure for home.

She was a great dancer, Ralph reminisced, and when they took to the floor, the other dancers would stop to watch them. He was smooth and suave and she was full of energy and bounce: twirling and doing mincing jive steps: her



bobbed hair would bounce rhythmically and the *enjoyment* would be in her face...where had it all gone, dear Lord?

“Could she have gone to your parents place?” inquired a worried Mrs. Thomas.

“I doubt it, Ma, but I will ring and find out.”

Ralph rang, but she wasn't there and now Ralph's parents were also involved and very concerned.

“Keep us informed, son. We can't just *fly* over – it costs a heap!” said his mother.

“Yeah, Mum, I'll call you tomorrow.” his voice was strained and tired. He had married Juni against their wishes. “She's a slut!” his mother had said in those early days.

“Please, Mum. I love her and she is an innocent thing; I courted her intensively and without let up until she agreed to marry me; and that was an uphill task, believe you me! Please don't speak badly about someone I love with all my heart.”

“What's that, men?” his father asked on the phone. “Great catch eh? She didn't even finish school...and you know why? Because her father couldn't afford to pay any more for her schooling! *Great catch*, you say!”

“Please Dad! If the family was rich and they still didn’t put their daughter through school, *that* would be bad.

“No! That would be dingo bloody stupid, man, and you know it. Bloody oath! She can’t even get a decent job because she didn’t finish school. Tell me what kind of a father would do that?” his disapproval was obvious.

\*

“I want my Mommy!” screamed the twins, “where is Mommy?”

“She’s coming,” soothed the grandmother, “don’t you love granma?”

“Yes, but I want my Momma!” they cried in unison and would not be consoled.

Mrs. Thomas could feel the wariness deep in her bones. The twins were wearing her down rapidly. She didn’t have the energy of a young woman and to manage a set of demanding and extremely energetic twins at her age was not going to work.

“No, no!” they seemed to be screaming at her all day, “my Momma didn’t do it like *that!*”

“Okay, sweetheart, how did your Mommy do it?” Mrs. Thomas sighed.

“Not that way!” they wailed.

“Okay, how then?” God she would need a lot of patience.

“Not that way! Different!” they would whine.

Ralph rang his mother three days later. “You’d better come over Mum. Mrs. Thomas can’t handle the kids. She’ll end up with a heart attack or a complete collapse. I don’t know what to do, Mum. At this rate I’ll have to give up my job, and then we will soon be on the street and *starving!* Gosh, where did Juni go? It’s three days now and there is no trace of her. I can’t think anymore and I can’t imagine where she went. The Police have no leads. Bad thoughts keep intruding into my mind.”

Ralph’s mother, Daphne, arrived the following day and Ralph breathed a sigh of relief. The two women together should surely be able to manage the children, but for how long? How long would they help him out? For how long could they possibly stay with him? God! What ever has

become of Juni. Ralph's head was whirling. He had taken three days leave – very reluctantly sanctioned – but he had made no progress in locating Juni. Things were slowly sliding: the kids looked unkempt, the house looked neglected. He would, perhaps, have to employ a cleaning woman – could he afford that. A nanny was out of the question. His parents wouldn't be able to help out financially – they were retired now. What... what could he do?

Daphne and Mrs. Thomas measured each other up the first day. That there was no love lost between the two was *well* known. But there was a job on hand and it had to be done regardless of how they felt for each other. There appeared to be a tacit truce between them. They divided their duties and helped each other out with telling, hard looks, but very soon, quite willingly. Over the next few days they developed a healthy respect for each other. “She's not such a bloody cow!” each reluctantly conceded. The children too were infected with the underlying gravity of the situation and toned down their constant moaning. Without Mum, it was no fun moaning: The two grannies would get visibly upset and flustered and this frightened the children.

The call came from the Police Station late at night. The voice was terse but sympathetic and kind, “We have recovered the body of a young woman from the lake. She appears to be in her early twenties, but let me warn you, the body is highly decomposed. We would like you to come tomorrow morning to identify the body. She is wearing a wedding *band*.”

Ralph collapsed on the floor. “Why God have you done this to me?” he cried openly with tears streaming down his cheeks. He was inconsolable. “I’ve been so mean to Juni: always fighting with her and putting her down. Oh! Juni, Juni! I never meant it, I swear. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

The whole household was traumatized with shock. There was no sleep that night. The local doctor had to sedate them all. “The poor boy is in a bad way,” the doctor told his wife on his return, “the death of his wife has affected his mind and I really fear for him. I shall have to go there again later tonight for he is going into deep shock syndrome. If I don’t help him tonight, by tomorrow he will have *flipped*.”

Ralph dressed himself in the morning, wearing a jacket and slacks. He didn’t shave and his eyes were red from

crying. The family had huddled together all night consoling each other. “Be brave, my son. The Almighty has his way of doing things that we do not understand.”

“How can I be brave, Mum, when my whole *life* is in tatters. I find it difficult to find a reason to go on living,” he said with tears welling up in his eyes. “I’ll have to go through this hollow life for my daughters. Anyway, I had better be off now. God bless, and wish me strength!”

“Any one home. Where is everybody?” The clear tinkling voice had a familiar ring. The children screamed and dashed out, “Mummee!” The elders were stunned and then galvanized into action: They elbowed each other out of the way to get ahead in the race to reach Juni.

Juni stood there looking beautiful, fresh and rejuvenated. “Hi and hey! Mum and Ma! What’s on? Are you all having a party? How come every one is here?” Ralph grabbed her up in a bear hug. “Darling, darling, darling! I love you so much!” Juni was overwhelmed. She was hugged and kissed by all. The kids pulled her jeans screaming for attention. “Hey! What is happening? How am I so popular? I

was expecting sour looks and a lot of reprimands.” It took the family twenty minutes to get over their excitement. Everyone was speaking at the same time, hugging and kissing her all the time.

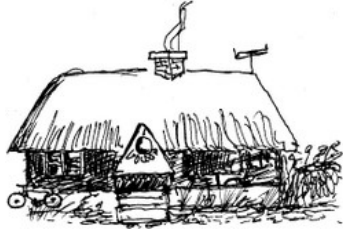
It took Juni very little time to realize what had happened. “But, Ma, I told you I needed a break. I really, really did. I booked myself into a health farm. And now I feel fully rejuvenated and fit.”

Juni took over the household affairs and *within minutes* food was cooked, the children were fed and the rooms straightened. What, without Juni, took all day to fix was accomplished, in what seemed a jiffy.

Juni was the *hero*. She had, in one stroke, brought her mother and her ma-in-law together; jolted her husband into realizing she was not lazy and complaining, but a very *efficient* and *capable* housewife. The children realized how

much they loved their mother. Ralph realized how much he loved her, and all realized they *could not do* without Juni.





### **Suppressed Suspicion**

“OK, right, I’ll answer your question,” Rahul looked at Priety’s expectant expression, she hung on his every word; he cleared his throat and started: “Now let me see, how I shall put it?” Rahul concentrated, “yes, God is not a *He* or a *She*. God is not an entity, substance, tangible and absolute. God is a *happening* a *cosmic thought* a *reflection*, a *meditation*,” he explained looking thoughtful. “We should not assign any human faculties to God: *prepotency*, *almightiness* or the human graces of *generosity*, *forgivingness*, *understanding*, etc. for these are human endowments and pertain to only Humans. Early human beings could not understand a *perception*, a *deliberation* or an *abstraction* and so to understand a force better, they gave it a name and qualified it

with a host of Human attributes”, Rahul grinned, and continued. “The operation and functioning, *per se*, of the macrocosm and of the Universe is God. Prehistoric man was frightened and exposed and longed for the *parental protection* it had as an infant. Its frenetic and terrified mind created a powerful and *omnipotent icon* that would protect it from all threats and exigencies...thus started the first fledgling steps to the ancient cult of icon worship, okay?”

“What OK? – tell me in a language we understand.”

Rahul groaned and looked across at his friend who sat on a small rock smoking. “Help, man. Explain it all to your wife.”

Nikhil smiled, “What Rahul is saying is that there is no God.”

“Did I say that?” asked Rahul incredulously.

There was a little twitter of a giggle from Priety. “Darling,” she addressed her husband, “what Rahul is suggesting is that there is no entity such as God, but rather that the functioning and energy of the *entire universe is God*. Am I right Rahul?”

“Spot on.”

Nikhil noticed that once again Priety had stepped in, to defend Rahul. Damn it! He had brains enough to see what Rahul was getting at. He had said it half jokingly, but the other half had been some inner compulsion that was forcing him to make Rahul look small. Was it that? Could there be some envy or, jealousy involved? He had observed lately that they were visiting each other very often. Whenever they went on an excursion, or to parties or to the club, Rahul and his wife, Somi were always there. Who initiated these moves? He couldn't tell. All four got along well enough, but invariably, at some stage, there would be a discussion in which Priety and Rahul would be involved; or there would be an activity in which these two would pair off. It was all very pleasant and invariably Nikhil and Somi would be left looking on or forced to be partners.

The two young friends Rahul and Nikhil came from similar backgrounds; they were both married, were well off and both had a daughter each. Nikhil was the elder and kept throwing

this fact at Rahul whenever any arguments seemed to run away from him.

Rahul was married to Somi, a homely girl, cheerful and pert. She didn't like getting into these interminable discussions about God, the Universe, Religion, etc. Rahul loved expounding on these subjects, Somi reminisced. His assertions were unsubstantiated...*new thinking* he called it – emerging from thousands of years of assimilating factual evidence and appraising it scientifically.

Nikhil was married to Priety who was a keen and engaging debater. Good looking and sharp, she got on well with Rahul and loved long probing discussions. Nikhil's outlook on these complexities, she observed, was very laid back. *How does it matter*, he would exasperatingly expound; we are here, we will live 'x' number of years and *pass on*. What *happens* after that *will happen*. Nothing can change that *inevitability!* Try as we may! So why utilize a major portion of our life in an effort to alter a future that we know nothing about and can know nothing about. It's blank speculation on nothing! I'd rather enjoy the time we have here on earth.

Nikhil wondered why the two women did not get together when the men were away at work. Their two houses were just a short stroll from each other, and they both seemed interested in similar things: books, dresses, make-up, etc. and both were always well turned out. Priety, when he asked her, said she had a lot of housework and child work to supervise and she was sure Somi was busy too. There was no bitterness between the two girls and they seemed fond of each other. They also talked a lot to each other, but only when all of them were together. Of the two, Priety was the more outgoing, fun loving type. Somi was game enough to join in the activities, but she was the quieter more reserved person - still waters run deep, some one had remarked about her.

One evening the two couple went to see a sunset from the hill top park. They sprawled on the grass shucked off their shoes, drank some wine and enjoyed the view.

“Look, the stars are peeping out!” said Priety, casually resting a slim perfumed arm on Rahul’s shoulder. “Tell me what could there be between them and our world? Is it just boring space and vacuum?”

Somi had wandered off and appeared to be walking around the clearings periphery. Nikhil was looking around generally and showed no interest in the small talk.

“Well, let’s see,” Rahul reflected - casually looking at her plunging neckline that separated her voluptuous breasts, “Theoretically, there is supposed to be a vacuum between Earth and the other bodies of the Universe. But I can’t see it that way. What about the gas, debris and cosmic dust? Energy is another form of matter, and if there is matter, debris and especially gas, how can we call it a vacuum?” He turned again and looked deep into her eyes.

“But, isn’t space pure?” asked Priety, completely missing the point and batting her eyelids seductively.

“Pure is of the impure; impure is of the pure.” quoted Rahul, blinking his eyelids in mimic... he had read this somewhere, he thought scratching his head.

He felt an increase of pressure on his shoulder and looked around...he found he was staring straight into Priety’s bright eyes, their noses were not more than half an inch apart, as Priety’s chin was resting on Rahul’s shoulder. He quickly

looked away, his heart beginning to race. He saw Nikhil had wandered over to untangle a thorny branch that Somi had walked over.

“Don’t do that.” Rahul whispered, his breath catching in his throat, “I won’t be able to help myself.” He felt a tightening in his under draws.

“I love men who can’t help themselves.” teased Priety, putting her tongue in his ear and brushing his arm with her breast.

*Ooh*, God! Shuddered Rahul and casually crossed his legs.

On the way home, all four were strangely quiet. Rahul was driving distractedly and almost missed his turning. “What’s up *Yar*?” asked Nikhil from the back seat, “have you still got stars in your eyes?”

In the weeks that followed, Priety was boldly flirting with him and not caring who was watching. Strangely, Nikhil did not seem to be aware of anything untoward. Whenever Rahul, guiltily glanced at Somi, she would be looking elsewhere. At times he thought he did catch an amused half

smile on her face and when he raised his eyebrows at her, she just looked away. He never pursued the incident thinking, *Let sleeping dogs lie*. However, the pressure was getting to him for, it seemed to Rahul, that they ignored the situation. He was seriously falling for Priety and no one seemed to notice. If this state of affairs were allowed to continue, he would give in and surrender to his aching heart. He was perforce, being inexorably sucked into a vortex, a spellbinding delicious and fragrant whirlpool of enchantment and desire... and heedless passion.

He thought of Nikhil guiltily and again wondered if he suspected anything. Could he not see that Rahul was on a path that would destroy his world of happiness? I suppose he trusts me, thought Rahul resignedly. He thought of his wife and daughter. God! What was he to do? Should he confront Priety? And what would come of that? She was in the same boat, though she appeared not to care. As a matter of fact she seemed to purposely needle Nikhil by reaching for Rahul's hand and not caring if Nikhil was around. He would just have to talk in private to Priety. They were hardly ever getting a chance to meet alone. Perhaps it was just as well for God



knows what might happen then. As it was, they were not being able to keep their hands off each other in public.

Rahul did get a chance to meet Priety privately the very next day. It was very inappropriately during the day with only time enough for a short drive. They were nervous and tense. Priety who was so outgoing was oddly huddled in a corner near the door. They kissed perfunctorily and drove around for a while. “You know, Priety, I am in love with you.” Rahul said with his heart pounding. He looked around when there was no response and saw Priety uncharacteristically quiet and nervously studying her fingernails. She looked up pleadingly at Rahul with those large limpid eyes, “I don’t know what is happening to me, Rahul. Something is coming to a head and I am feeling very nervous. Could you please drop me off, hon. and I will meet you again this evening.” He dropped her off at her house before Nikhil got home for lunch, and drove back to his place.

The house was strangely silent. He searched everywhere. There was no Somi and no daughter. Where

could they be? Nikhil's house could be the only answer. He jumped back into his car and drove the short distance. He hoped Somi was not having a showdown with Priety. That was going to be very embarrassing, though, inevitable. He would like to bring it up in his own time and confront both Somi and Nikhil and tell them of his deep love for Priety and how they could not live without each other.

He saw Priety standing on the veranda looking stricken and with tears streaming down her face. He jumped out of his car and ran to her, adrenaline pumping through his body.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Nikhil and Somi have eloped. He has left a letter behind.” she wailed.

Rahul was stunned. Nikhil and Somi? How could it be? And he suspected nothing. But didn't it make things easier for Priety and him? His mind was in turmoil. Wasn't he being offered happiness on a platter? Now he wouldn't have to explain his dilemma to Somi. His face lit up,

“The scheming little bugger,” he said aloud, “so that’s why he was always so attentive to her. He has helped himself, but in doing so has helped us too.”

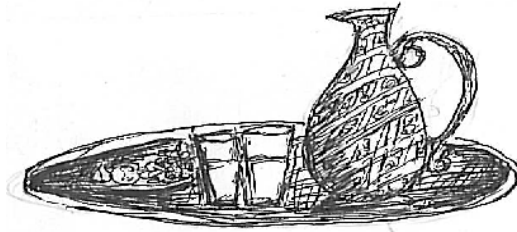
He stepped up and put his arms around Priety, “My darling,” he said hoarsely, her scent making him swoon, “God has given us our happiness in this strange way.” he consoled, “we have each other my darling!”

She pushed him away roughly, “You bloody idiot,” she spat. “I love Nikhil! Did you think I loved you? Couldn’t you see what was going on between those two? I put up an act with you to make him jealous. And you thought I loved you, you supercilious fool?”

Rahul stood stunned, his mouth hanging open. He saw the contempt in her eyes. She had so easily manipulated him.

“God!” he thought, “what a blind ass I have been.”

He turned around and fled.



## The Party

“*Why* does everyone think we are related?” Shekhar asked.

“I don’t know - some thing to do with the village of our birth, I suppose.” she slicked back her hair and took a sip of Johnny Walker. A divorcee: thirty-four, good figure, good education, one miscarriage. She wasn’t looking for men, but she got invited to parties twice or thrice a week and men seemed to attach themselves to her; mostly married men who would flirt with her whilst keeping an *eye out* for their wives. Her divorcee status, obviously, was a key attraction.

In her twenties she was attracting young handsome executives – now, ten years down the line, fate was putting only middle-aged married men in her path. She knew she still

looked good, perhaps even better than when in her twenties, certainly more mature and *sensuous*.

“Do you mean every body in our village is related? I know it is a small village, but every body married outside the village, you did, and I did.”

“So how does it *matter*? You are not about to dump your wife and propose to me and so want to know how closely I am related to you. Forget it! Who cares! There must be many who are related and don’t know it or don’t fucking care.”

“Well, *I* care because I want you to live with me.”

She snapped her head around and glared at him. It was a crude tasteless attempt at humour.

“I’m not joking. I’m serious. I’ll pay you well...and look after you.”

Temper flared in her eyes, “Get away from me! You are *sick!*”

The hum of voices in the party prevented their conversation from being overheard.

“I’ll give you a hundred-thousand Rupees a month plus accommodation. And you will be free to meet anyone you like when I am not around. *Think about it!*”

And he was gone.

She was stunned and felt violated. She looked around; no one had heard their private exchange. Slowly, over the evening, the insult began to wear off.

Is he really that wealthy?

She felt a pang of shame that she was even considering it.

*A hundred thousand rupees a month!* Gosh, that was an awful lot of money! In her present circumstance it was wealth beyond her reach. She must find out if he was actually that rich.

All were uncertain about his business – no one seemed to know definitely. She lost interest in the party and daydreamed of what she could do with that much wealth. Some men approached her during the evening, but soon left finding her strangely *vague* and preoccupied.

Over the weeks she was told he was a gunrunner, a smuggler, a dealer in foreign investments. Everyone had a

different version of what Shekhar did; the only consistent opinion was that he was ‘loaded’ and lived mostly abroad.

Months went by; she didn’t run into Shekhar at any of the parties. “When he comes to India he throws a lot of parties and in return he is called to a lot of parties,” she was told.

She would seriously have to think of getting a job, the miserable allowance her ex-husband gave her was just not enough. She needed to host a grand party - of late, invitations were drying up.

“She’s no longer fun, *Yar*”, some said, “she is vague and preoccupied. You can say something quite brash and she won’t flinch. Her vivacious smile has been replaced with a *paste-on* smile that stays on through the night.”

She arrived at parties cheerful and lively, looking forward to seeing Shekhar. Her disappointment would soon reduce her to a *joyless reveler* – just going through the motions. Her senses were numbed; she fanaticized continually of the life and wealth Shekhar had put before her.

*Someone* was holding her hand. She shook herself out of her trans-like insouciance and looked around. He was perhaps in his late teens or, at most, in his early twenties.

“*Who are you?*” she snatched her hand away.

“I am Prasant. I have been watching you – you are so lovely, but you look so sad and lost. May I continue holding your hand?”

“*Certainly not!*” he looked vaguely familiar. “Where have I seen you?”

“I’ve seen you at all the parties you’ve been to lately. You always look lovely and always bored. Who are you looking for?”

They stood and chatted for a while. She was becoming fidgety and kept looking at her watch.

“The party is almost over. May I drop you home...? *Please?*”

“Alright...it’s very nice of you. But should you really bother? I’ll find my way home.”

“*Please* let me escort you, I’d be honored.”

On the way home he held her hand and she let him. It was nice holding his hand; he had strong hands. She looked



at him: he was clean-cut and good-looking. A nice young man, she thought to herself.

He stole a glance at her: she is beautiful, beautiful, utterly beautiful! I've never met anyone like her.

They met at parties and their attraction grew. She, however, felt she should not be so closely aligned to a young person, but his charm overcame all her resistance. He always dropped her home and was very proper. He possessed expensive cars and was generous with his money bringing her flowers and small elegant gifts.

“Let me come in,” he begged one night. “One drink – I have a bottle of Scotch.”

She looked at him and smiled, “One drink only.”

*That night they became lovers.*

“This is wrong. You must not see me again!”

“What is wrong? Just because I'm younger than you are, does that make it wrong? Must the woman always be younger? Haven't you seen *'The Graduate'* with Dustin Hoffman? There are so many instances of the male being younger. You shouldn't put a taboo on our love just because I'm a bit younger.”

She stopped going to parties and she wouldn't open the door to Prasant. He would plead and finally leave. If she stayed at home like this, her allowance would cover the food bill and rental, but for how long could she stay *cooped up*?

Weeks went by; Prasant hardly came by now, she had put him off firmly. She felt sick and her abdomen felt slightly puffed. Was she pregnant? She had missed her period...oh my God, no! What should she do? She would have to see a gynecologist or an *abortionist* at least, and as early as possible.

The telephone rang: "You've got to come to this party," said a friend's voice, "Shekhar has returned. Where have you been hiding?"

"I'm working," she lied. "I hardly get any time to party."

That evening at the party, Shekhar came up to her right away. "I've got to talk to you."

"I missed you," she said looking into his eyes.

“That’s nice. *But first*: I’m now a free man, I’m divorced!”

“I don’t know what to say, congratulations or I’m sorry?”

“Don’t say anything. Just say you’ll *marry* me.”

She was stunned. She looked at him in amazement: he was always saying something that shocked her.

“You aren’t serious?”

“I am and I’ll show you the engagement ring I have for you.”

They met at parties every other day and he spent most nights in her bed. She knew *true love* was beginning to flower in her heart. He would take her home and stay over for the night. She had erased the memory of Prasant from her completely and permanently.

One evening he led her out to his waiting ‘limo’, “I’m going to announce our engagement. The family knows and is waiting for you. You can say yes or no after you meet them.”

She felt panic rising. What was she to do? Should she tell him? Could she pass off the pregnancy to him? Would she find time to abort it?

The ‘limo’ glided along the streets and passed through a large gate to an estate with manicured lawns along the driveway; it finally coasted to a halt at a stately home. He held her hand and helped her out; they climbed wide gliding steps. At the top, along with guests, stood Prasant...eyes popping out in disbelief; his jaw hanging open.

*“Son, this is the lady I am going to marry!”*

She felt the blood rush to her head. Her knees gave way and she fell rolling all the way down. She lay crumpled at the bottom. She heard people rushing down the steps.

Before she passed out she felt hot blood from her womb cover her inner thighs.



## House on the Left

*~The story of a village in the Indian Himalayas*

Sanjli pointed excitedly to her house across the valley on the far mountainside, “There it is! The one on the left.” she exclaimed breathlessly. “It’s not far, though it looks far, really, it is not far at all; we’ll be there in no time.” she told the young hiker who appeared lost.

The young man looked through the swirling mist at the distant white house with a dark slate roof...*it is far*, he thought to himself, it will probably take us over an hour to get there. He smiled at her and nodded, “Okay, let’s go!”

She had invited him to meet her father who could show him the way back to the rest house. He must have taken a wrong fork in the mist obscured mountain path and now he was lost. Okay, he thought, so what? This appears to be a more exciting venture; he would gather *first-hand* experience of how the local folks lived around here.

The young girl, Sanjli, was studying him mischievously, “What’s your name?” she blurted. “Are you married?”

He took in her clear *kohl* lined eyes, her brown hair pulled back, and her unblemished peach and cream complexion. “No,” he said. “I’m not married.”

She blushed sweetly, “You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Satish,” he said surprised by her candor. “And yours?”

“I am Sanjli,” placing her hand over her breasts and blinking innocently. "Come, let's go, Sahib." And she was all action: “Areee!” she called to her goats, striking her little stick at the bushes. Satish followed, struck and fascinated by her innocent charm and enthusiasm. She certainly did not seem to know the effect she was having on him.

An hour later they reached her place. Her parents stood in the warm sun. They greeted him with folded hands. “Namaste, Sahib, it’s so good of you to visit our humble abode.” They wore rough ‘*hill clothes*’; the mother, a heavy gold necklace and earrings that pulled her earlobes down.

Tea was prepared, hot treackley sweet tea with thick smoky milk garnished with butter. Satish studied Sanjli; she must be around seventeen, impish and charming. Satish's heart was drawn to her.

Sanjli’s father urged him to stay the night: “These hills are not safe to walk at night; you can easily lose your way. You look fit and strong, but there are *churails* (spirits) that roam at night and cause harm to befall a traveler, should you agree to stay, we will arrange a *get-together* tonight, with some singing and folk dancing.”

Satish enjoyed the evening and the catchy '*hill-songs*'. He pulled out his bottle of Red Label and the braver men folk joined him, pouring the whisky neat into their mouths. The women pulled him on to the floor and he joined them in dancing the *Naati*.

He spent three nights at the village and sent a message to his parents that he would be late in returning.

Thakur Balram Singh heard of the three nights of revelry. He looked at his teenaged son and let his disgust show, "So, you went there every evening and sat in a corner like a whipped puppy and let that *Pardesi* (foreigner) put his arms around the one you profess to love and wish to marry? Have you no shame or pride? You are an insult to us *Thakurs*."

"That's not fair, *Papaji*." whined Murzo. "Ever since Sanjli's father, Sarhad ji, refused our offer of marriage, I have no claim on her."

This reminder of the insult fuelled *Thakur* Balram's fury, "You are a dog!" he spat, "any self respecting *Thakurs*' son would have eloped with the girl. What have you *got* running through your veins, horse piss? And, may I ask, is that *Pardesi* high bred? He looks more like a half-breed *khachhar* (ass) to me. I'll see this through. You wait and see!"



Sanjli's family was from the *Goswami* clan who would only marry into another *Goswami* family. Those were traditions, time honored and binding. Murzo's father was well *aware* of this, but when drunk he could insinuate anything. Murzo thought he'd better caution Sanjli to be careful of his father's dark mood. Anyhow, the hiker from Delhi had now departed and would probably never return.

It was two months since Satish had returned to Delhi and Sanjli was constantly on his mind. He reminisced about that first morning: Sanjli, fresh as the morning mist, had given him morning tea and herded her goats down the narrow path. She waved prettily to him her head tilted to a side.

Satish waited long for her return. He made small talk with Sanjli's parents and was fed snacks constantly. It was late afternoon when he espied her coming back; ignoring formalities he ran down the path to meet her.

“Are you running down to Delhi to see your girl?” she had mischief in her eyes.

“Shut up, I have come to meet you.”

“Why? I am coming, anyway”, she teased.

He wished he could hug and kiss her. But that was out of the question. She probably wouldn't understand. He wondered if she knew the ways of love, probably not he concluded. They always had *arranged marriages* in these parts.

The following morning he was up before the *kitchen fire* was lit. He would hike in the hills to ensure he met up with Sanjli alone when she went out to graze her goats.

She was out with her goats when she saw him coming down a scree and waited. “You were up early today. You probably don't like my tea and so left before I could make some for you.” her eyes did that dance again.

He put out his hands and she put her hands in his without hesitation. “I left early so I could meet you here and spend the day with you.” They went off along the twisting hilly forested path hand in hand. The goats followed mutely.

Satish and Sanjli spent six happy hours roaming with hands clasped. They stood together and their breath mixed; he bent forward and brushed her lips; she put her

face up and they found each other. A surge of passion weakened their knees and they held onto each other. She recovered first; she knew they were both on the brink of an abyss. She shook herself out of it, grabbed him, and turned him around to face the village, she pushed him and said weakly –“Go! My parents will be worried...

Satish had breezed into Sanjali's sedate life.

She had never met anyone with such maturity and ease of confidence. She knew he was the man for her. That very first day she had fallen in love with him. But had he? The first night Sanjali had chanced him looking fixedly at her several times, but what did that mean? He, perhaps, liked her, but she could not be certain of anything else. And then he was going off in the morning and she would likely, never see him again. She decided she had better keep their relationship light and friendly and never let him know her feelings. But circumstances had changed during the walk in the hills. She joyously realized that he was as much in love with her as she was with him.

“Wait for me, my darling,” he whispered.

“Don’t you get married to someone whilst I’m away. I’m going to marry you come what may. You will marry me, won’t you?”

With eyes liquid with joy and through tremulous lips, she had managed to get out a small “Yes”.

The rest of the morning had been a flurry of *Namastes* and farewells. And then, with a wave, he was gone, and so had the rest of the morning and the rest of her days.

Thakur Balram Singh (Murzo's father) wore a scowl and his mood was blacker by the day. He imagined *everyone* on the street was hiding a snigger. His proposal to make Sanjli his daughter-in-law had been spurned and yet Sarhad Goswami had allowed a lad from the plains to be a guest in *his* house and had allowed him to openly dance and flirt with her. No *Thakur* could accept such open insult. Balram would have to right this; he had borne it stoically long enough.

He tried to incite the other *Thakurs* to join him to avenge this insult to the *Thakur* community, but they didn’t

*see* it his way: they figured it was Balram's personal problem. "In any case," they opined, "we all know the *Goswamis* do not marry outside their narrow sect; marrying a *Rajput* would be quite scandalous".

Balram had tried to coerce his son into eloping with her. "No, *Papaji*," he had pleaded. "Sanjli is not in love with me. We are friends. We don't want to marry."

"Listen, you chicken shit, you will do as I tell you! I shall arrange to kidnap Sanjli and have you both *marry* secretly. I will then arrange for you both to stay in a far away place. When the scandal dies down, and the community accepts the fact that you two *lovers* have run away to marry, I shall bring you back, and all will be fine. More importantly the dishonor to our family will be erased."

To be honest, thought Murzo, it was a pleasant sensation to be married to Sanjli. He would be such a good *Husband*.

Balram arranged a grand *Satsang* (religious discourse) to which all were invited. Murzo was asked to go and personally invite Sanjli to attend. Sanjli accepted gleefully for

life in the village could become very boring and the only highlights were religious ceremonies and festivals.

Murzo, Balram noted happily, had accepted his diktat so willingly and was so full heartedly cooperating with the plan that he must secretly love her, Balram decided. “Don’t forget to feed her the laced *lados*.” he reminded Murzo.

During the *Satsang* Sanjli felt her head swinging; she grabbed Murzo’s hand, “I don’t know what’s happening,” she said *druggedly*. “Help me out of here!” Murzo helped her up courteously, and with much concern led her out. People noted how solicitous Murzo was. She was led to a small room that had a bed, but no windows.

“You stay here until you feel better. I will come and check on you later,” said Murzo in a *new* authoritative way and locked the room from the outside

He expanded his skinny chest and stood up straighter. If he was going to marry Sanjli, he’d better show her who *wore the pants* from day one.

During the religious discourse a loud banging was heard from the inner chambers. Murzo rose immediately and went inside. Sanjli was banging on the door. Murzo opened

the door and shoved her back. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“What do you mean what do I want? And why did you push me? You are behaving like your oafish father, idiot!”

She never saw the slap coming. It threw her to the floor. “Never ever say dishonorable words about my respected father, *bitch!* Next time I will bring the horse whip to you!”

Sanjli didn’t retaliate because she was *too* shocked; she could taste blood in her mouth. He must be drugged too she concluded. Poor boy doesn’t know what he is doing! The room was latched from the outside again. Sanjli decided she might wait and see what happens. She was already feeling *anxious* about Murzo. She wondered who could have drugged them, and why.

Later that night, Sanjli was gagged and tied and put on the floorboard of a jeep. Murzo sat on the seat with his feet on top of her. Sanjli didn’t understand what was happening? Why were they doing this to her? How was Murzo involved, and *how* had he turned against her? Where were they taking her? She was getting scared now. The jeep was full of people,

but she didn't recognize anyone. Murzo was the only one she knew and he was uncharacteristically *the* meanest: he kept shoving her head down to the floorboard with his foot every time she tried to raise it. Was he trying to save her from something?

She started crying uncontrollably and fell into a deep slumber.

## **The Return**

Satish returned from Delhi and saw the house as he cleared the ridge. His heart beat faster with anticipation and he picked up pace. At this hour Sanjli would be out with her herd of goats and he knew exactly where to find her. He could picture the surprise on her face. He imagined she would *scream* with excitement; his whole being was trembling with exhilaration and his haversack was full of presents for the family and a diamond ring for Sanjli.

*"I love you, Sanjli,"* he shouted in his exuberance, "I love you! I love you! I want the whole world to know."



## Sanjli's Plight

Sanjli was led to a small room in a strange village where her hands were untied but the door was latched from the outside again. She heard voices in the corridor and heard Murzo talking. She screamed his name repeatedly till he came to the door and spoke through the closed door: "What do you want?"

"*Please* open the door, Murzo; I have to speak to you."

Murzo opened the door a slit.

"What's happening, Murzo, why am I kept tied up? And why are you behaving so badly? Aren't you my *friend*?"

"Shut up and listen carefully!" Murzo snarled, "I have eloped with you and now we are getting married. The priest will be here tonight and he will marry us. Until then stay quiet and behave. My women relatives will come and dress you for the wedding."

Sanjli couldn't believe what she heard: was she dreaming? Murzo, marry her?

“Like hell!” she said. “Who said I want to marry you? Have you been eating something strange?”

Murzo took a step towards her and she cringed and stepped away. She didn’t understand why Murzo was threatening her? She could *beat the shit* out of him any day! It must be his family’s backing that was making him put on an exaggerated *swagger*. He was suddenly so different; she couldn’t recognize him. Everything was whirling around in her brain. Why did Murzo want to suddenly marry her? They were never romantically inclined. She was like a big sister to him! Obviously that oaf, Balram has something to do with this. She would have to be very careful and very alert and work out a plan. In spite of his bluster, Murzo was the weak link; she must get him on her side somehow, or *trick* him.

Satish searched all the places he knew Sanjli would graze her herd. He was disappointed; he had so wanted to see her alone. Now he would have to meet her in her parents’ house and it would not be the same.

Both parents were sitting out in the sun. They had been watching Satish's progress up the path. When Satish got to hailing distance, he called out, "Hello! *Namaste!*"

They both looked somber and serious, like someone had just told them there would be no monsoon this year. Or had he done something wrong? Perhaps he'd better play it *by ear*.

"I was in these parts," he said, lowering his haversack, "so I thought I would cage a cup of tea. How are you all? And where is Sanjli?"

Sanjli's mother began to cry. Her father put his arms around her and soothed her. A sick feeling cloyed at Satish's stomach, his heart froze. "Please God!" he prayed, "please don't let *anything* happen to her!"

"She is missing, *Sahib*. We suspect Balram's *hand* in this. He has spirited her away and is probably trying to arrange his son to marry her by force. We are trying to locate her and rescue her before he can force her into marriage. She is likely drugged - as witnesses who saw her last said. She would never marry Murzo and Murzo would never have the

guts to spirit her away. It's all that blackguard, Balram's doings!"

They related all they knew of the situation. "Some villagers say they saw a jeep leave Balram's house late at night. It could be the one in which Sanjli was abducted."

"I'm going to see Balram." said Satish with grim determination.

News of Satish's arrival had reached Balram's ears. "So the *kutta* (dog) has come sniffing, has he? He has had a taste and now wants the entire meal!"

He descended the wooden steps when he saw Satish standing in the front yard.

"*Namaste!* We didn't meet the last time you were here, but there must be something about our village that brings you here time and again."

"Where is Sanjli?" Satish wasn't going to waste time on niceties.

Balram sized up his adversary: he noted his expensive clothes and shoes; his cellular phone on the belt; and more importantly his impressive height, broad shoulders and muscular physique. Balram was no puny specimen himself,

but he realized if it came to a fight, Satish would likely thrash him.

“Well, where is she?” repeated Satish. “And where is that lout of a son of yours?”

*Never underestimate your enemy*’ Balram had heard said. He toned down his voice and adopted a subservient attitude.

“*Sahib*, you are right: my son is a lout, a waster, and a lay about, but what can I do, Sir, if Sanjli has put ideas into his simple head to elope with her. She is in love with Murzo, very much in love, but her cruel father won’t let them get married. So, I suppose, quite naturally they have eloped. The whole village knows how close they were, it’s no secret, *Sahib*, you can ask any villager.” The bystanders all nodded their heads.

“Then why was a jeep brought here at the dead of night? And then after some minutes it left again for an unknown destination?”

“It is true, sir, that a jeep came here at night.” said Balram. “But it only came to take my relatives back to their village. This can easily be verified. Murzo and Sanjli had left

long before that. Sanjli told me, quite early in the evening, when it had just got dark, that she was feeling ill and that Murzo was going to accompany her to her father's house. That's the last anyone of us saw of them."

Satish was stunned. God! He thought, had he been *blind*? His head was in a twist. He needed time to think this out. Had he made a complete ass of himself? He quickly made his excuses and beat a *hasty retreat* ... he heard Balram's howls of derisive laughter follow him until he was out of earshot.

Satish was humiliated, embarrassed, and stunned. Had he read *too much* into her kisses? Did she kiss everyone like that? He remembered how unabashedly she had put her hands in his. It probably meant nothing to her ... or not very much, anyway. Gosh! He couldn't go back to the *Goswami* house now. What would he say? He'd best just keep walking and get home. He had his haversack on his back, anyway!

It had become night and he was still wandering around aimlessly in the vicinity. Had she been *playing* a little game with him?

His heart said she loved him. His head said if that were true why had she run away with Murzo? His heart said she could not be such a good actress. If she were playing with his love, she would have made some small mistake. His head said that is exactly what she is: pure and innocent, but with *Murzo's* love. His heart said she had said yes to his proposal. His head said that was a year ago; come on, did he *expect* her to wait forever?

He stopped suddenly. Where was he? A house loomed up on his left. He peered at it. A gentle voice from the depths of the darkness said to him, "Come in, son. Come and lie down. You have been lurching around in the dark." The kind and understanding voice of Mr. Goswami broke the floodgate of his pent up feelings. He cried like a child and stumbled into the house and fell onto his old bed. Sleep quickly overtook his benumbed mind and he slept heavily. He remembered making a resolve that he would be out of there at first light.

Hours later there was a small sound at the door and consciousness began to beat back the sleep. His mind recorded birds chirping and suddenly the ache and

remembrance came flooding back. The door was being pushed gently. That would be Mrs. Goswami with some tea, he groaned. What was he going to say? He wanted to flee, but he had left it too late. He didn't want to answer any questions or relate what had taken place at Balram's house. He just wanted to get away, away, away, and forever!

He saw a head slowly poke around the door. A clean scrubbed face appeared and a tremulous voice asked, "Are you awake?"

"SANJLEEE!" screamed Satish and vaulted out of bed. They rushed at each other and Satish picked her *up* in a bear hug. Their lips found each others and they kissed hungrily. They kissed and cried and talked all at the same time. No words could be made out, only the tone of the voices, soothing and reassuring. When the cooing and soft sounds died down, they heard Papa Goswami's voice, "Come, *beta*, come and have some tea and breakfast."

"Tell us all about it, Sanjli." said her parents. Satish was overwhelmed. Sanjli was safe, unmarried, and still in love with him.



Sanjli started from the beginning and told them every thing.

“When Murzo hit me I fell down. My urge was to jump up and break his scrawny neck. But I waited. I pretended *to be* very afraid of him. There were only a few other people around as any thing elaborate would look suspicious. I waited a chance to escape. My chance came that afternoon. People went off to have their lunch and siesta. Murzo brought my lunch in to me. The door was opened; this would be my only chance. I kicked Murzo in the stomach and slammed the food *thali* into his face. The food in his eyes blinded him. I then beat him up good until he was begging for mercy. I locked him up, threw the key in the well and ran through the fields the rest of the day and all night until I got here. I only just beat sunrise.

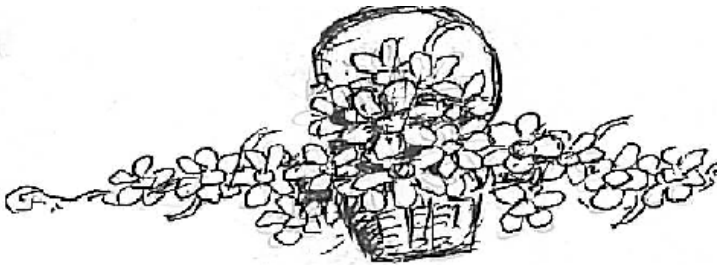
The three of them said nothing. They looked at her with pride. Her mother was crying quietly.

Satish spoke in a respectful tone, “*Papaji* and mummy *Ji*, I have already proposed to Sanjli, and she has accepted. I would now like your blessings and permission to marry her.”

“You have our blessings, son,” both parents said.

“*Papaji*, I would like you to look for a large piece of land. On the land, I would like to build a big house, big enough for all of us. Every thing will be in Sanjli’s name. I will send builders ...

Nothing was ever seen or heard of Murzo; he would never be able to show his face in that village again. Balram, too, was so ridiculed and ostracized that he left the village and moved elsewhere. He was lucky no police action was instituted against either of them



## Tripping Reincarnation

Vikas went bare feet in the dust, a piece of cloth hitched around his waist covered his nakedness and a short ragged piece lay across his shoulders. He often dozed under the shade of a wild Ficus at the edge of the scrub forest resting his back comfortably against the bowl of the large tree. Sounds of droning bees, the dappled sunlight, the gentle stirring of leaves in the upper branches induced a somnolence that glazed his sight and *drooped* his eyelids. His charges: three nondescript cows and a scrawny bull, grazed in the

scrub – the mellow sound of the wooden bells around their necks added to the midday languor.

His slingshot slipped from his hand and lay on his lap.

He had never been to school. Like some other children of small village of farmers, he had started to help his family in cultivating the few acres around the hut from an early age. Chakri village comprised twenty-three families that paid tithe to the Maharaja whose collectors came around after each harvest: sturdy, armed, heartless men, who entertained no hard luck stories, but extracted harvest dues rigorously.

\*

Salim alighted; his magnificent white horse threw its head up and neighed stamping its feet impatiently; a liveried servant hurried up to take charge of the horse. Salim threw the reins to him and strode forth across the lush outer lawns of the palace. Princess Apsara sat with her maids-in-waiting beneath a tapestried ‘cloth tent’ that curtained her privacy. She watched him approach – a handsome young man, broad shouldered and slim waisted. He smiled, bowed respectfully and raised his right hand to his forehead, “salaam alaikum,

Your Highness.” The princess Apsara’s eyes twinkled happily to see him; she returned his greeting and patted the richly embroidered soft ‘*toshak*’ beside her.

“Come Salim, sit near me. I get lonely; I want someone to talk to; never go anywhere without my consent”.

“I’d never leave your side, Princess – you know that. But this heartless Duty cruelly tares me away.”

The maids quietly backed away bowing respectfully.

Salim and Apsara hugged peremptorily. To be observed could mean punishment or worse for him. He was from a village and had impressed the Maharaja with his quick wit when the royal party passed through on a familiarizing trip around the countryside. The Maharaja, pleased with the lad, ordered that he be transported to the palace. There he was fed, bathed and given clean clothes. A tutor was engaged to teach him the basics of reading, writing, and very importantly, the elegances of the Royal Court.

The young Rajkumari (princess) gained a playmate companion. They grew up together...she in the opulent rooms of the Royal Palace and he in the barracks reserved for attendants. But in time, because of his closeness to the

princess, he was allowed to occupy private rooms in the palace annex.

\*

A ripe berry fell striking Vikas on the bridge of his nose. It annoyed him. He was enjoying his siesta ....did he dream? Was it a dream? He remained slumped against the bowl of the tree. He could hear the soft cowbells and was reassured his charges were close by.

He had dreamt something – something that felt life-like; he scratched his head... perhaps a princess was involved...it was as real as the tree he was leaning against and the ant that was biting him through his *dhoti*. He slapped at it.

Time to head home: he tucked his slingshot in his dhoti and picked up a stick to herd the cattle. He whistled and yodeled like cowherds do in India. The cattle emerged from different sections of the bush and desultorily followed him nibbling at any piece of greenery in their path.

\*

The Commander of the Palace Guards was approaching along the path from the opposite direction. Salim would have to step off to let the other pass. The Commander was a respected man and all would step off the path in deference. But, Salim reasoned, he was more important for whilst the Commander lived in the barracks, he lived at the palace annex and was known to have the Princess's ear. The palace servants bent low when he passed. So he would just have to establish a pecking order here. He strolled along the path nonchalantly – hoping to convey the impression that his exalted state precluded even eye contact. He never saw the heavy muscled swipe that threw him off the path and sent him sprawling to the bushes at the bottom. The Commander continued on his way with unfaltering step. He did not tarry to view Salim's swift demotion.

\*

The stinging slap brought tears to his eyes. He put his hand up to his burning cheek.

“You've been gone for hours” his father glared with anger, “what kept you? Are you on *Opium*? Your mother and I have done all the chores while you were gadding about

somewhere. You are supposed to graze the cattle for only two or three hours. Are you secretly seeing a woman in the forest? You disappear for hours at a time... where do you go?"

Vikas looked up wide-eyed at his father...his guess was close...matter of fact he had guessed right...he *was* seeing a woman...a princess! And he did not know if he was daydreaming. Perhaps he should tell his father about it... and very likely get slapped again for speaking such horseshit.

He saw his mother heading to the cowshed to milk the cows. They would each get a glass of milk with their evening supper. This was possible because they had a *Mahua* tree on their land. The tree was valued for the heavy sweet scented flower which when distilled made country hooch (Mahua). For the produce from that single tree, the local contractor gave the family more revenue than they got from the produce of their farm or from selling milk.

Vikas pulled his slingshot and proceeded towards the fields. He may get close enough to a cattle egret to bag it. That would improve the rice and lentil soup meal they unerringly had every night. His father enjoyed the curry his



mother made with the birds Vikas killed, but cautioned him to not over kill. ‘Once a week would be fine,’ he said.

That night the meal was good; Vikas had surprised a large, juicy heron. Nevertheless he had no appetite and ate sparingly. His mother worried about his appetite:

“You don’t eat much these days, son. Are you all right? You seem to be growing strong and robust though. Are you eating jungle herbs?”

Vikas couldn’t answer that. It was true he often felt full and when he burped, the smell of rich spice was, bewilderingly, in his nostrils.

\*

Salim washed his fingers in an ornate basin held for him by a servant. The venison curry was spicy and he burped behind his fingers.

A foot pageboy appeared by his elbow, bowed and informed him that the Rajkumari wished his presence for a game of chess. Salim rose and burped again. His body was muscular, taking on the heavy contours of a Man. The combat lessons he had to attending at the palace grounds gave him large, steely muscles.

Other than her father, Salim was the only male allowed into the Princess's chambers. He slipped off his richly woven house shoes and entered. The Rajkumari sat on a large, blue velvet carpet that covered the room. A central white ornate cloth was spread where she sat. Salim bowed low in greeting.

“Ass Salamalaikum, Princess. I trust your meal was satisfactory.”

“Shut up! Just come and sit down – and don't try to impress me! You are going to get thrashed today...all your fancy moves won't help you. You are going to slink out of here a defeated man!”

Salim smiled. Last time, he recalled, Aphsara had beat on his head with both fists when he had checkmated her white king.

“You stupid boy! You're lucky you won last time...I lost concentration for a while that's all.”

She was playing well today he noticed. Someone was tutoring her. She took time to think out her moves; and he spent that time looking at her: round face, a well shaped nose with a diamond nose pin, beautiful lashes; her eyes were naturally lined black. Her hands and feet were beautifully

formed and her young figure was in great shape. “Why are you gaping at me? Are you trying to make me lose my concentration?”

“There’s nothing in this room more easy on the eyes than...”

“Shut up or I’ll beat you up!”

She wrinkled her forehead in concentration. “Don’t imagine that you can purposely let me win this game to pander to me. If I win you’ll be banished to the hard beds of the barracks – so you’d better try your very *bestest*.”

\*

Vikas lay on the hard ground. They only possessed one bed, which his father used. There was no other furniture in the hut. Their cooking and eating utensils had been washed and polished with wood-ash and stacked next to the mud plastered stove.

Father had consumed his daily *bati* of local hooch and snored loudly through the night. Vikas and his mother were quite used to the sound and slept through it. Any other sound, other than the snoring would immediately alert them.

In the very early hours of the morning, when the moon was three quarters across the sky, there was a sound. All three sat up. It sounded like the latch of the cowshed had been raised and released. Father gently opened the door of the hut and crept out followed by Vikas. Three men emerged from the depths of the cowshed leading their cow with a rope. All three carried *lathis* (stout bamboo staves) and crept stealthily forth.

Father challenged them. Two faced him with lathis on the ready; the third continued to quickly lead the cow away. Father hesitated – two armed men were more than he could handle. But Vikas strode forth. In two swift moves he unarmed one of the men and used this lathi to attack the second one. The fight was over quickly – both men were beaten soundly and all three took to their heels. Vikas led the cow back to the cowshed.

His father watched it all. Without any help Vikas had thrashed all three men soundly and done it expertly. He was awed and astonished. Where had his son learnt to fight like that? He had moved swiftly without any hesitation – it was

like he knew exactly what moves to make...very professional. Father waited until they returned to the hut.

“What happened?” asked mother.

“Some chaps were trying to steal our cow, but we beat them up and they ran away,” said Vikas.

“That is not true,” said father. “Vikas single handedly wrested a lathi from them and beat them up. I had no hand in it.”

There was silence in the hut. “How did you do that, son?” asked mother.

“I don’t know, Mataji. I just seemed to know what to do and how to fight.”

“Has someone been teaching you son? We ‘commoners’ are not allowed to learn the art of combat. We fight as best we can - untrained”

“No one has taught me, Father...” he hesitated bewildered. “I don’t know...maybe someone did...my mind is all confused.”

His father saw his perplexity, “Was it in another *janam* (incarnation) son?”

Now it was Vikas' turn to look baffled. "What other janam? I don't know." He searched his father's face.

"Well then how do you explain your prowess with a lathi?"

How? The boy questioned himself, how, how, how....? He was beginning to get a headache. Something was in the deep recess of his mind, but it would not surface. His skull was tightening and the pain was increasing.

"I'll arrange a meeting tomorrow between you and the village *pehalwan* (wrestler) who has received training whilst at the Royal Court."

\*

It was morning of the big day. Eight boys who were under training to use the lathi would pair off and compete for top prize. Salim was the only boy from the Palace. The others were quartered in the barracks.

Tents were pitched adorned with flags and banners. An air of festivity enveloped the *maidan*. Rumors said Maharaj Vishnu Singh may attend, as Salim was representing the Palace – the Rajkumari was sure to attend and maybe her

mother, Maharani Jahanara Begum, as well. A large ornate and colorful tent was pitched for the Royal entourage: stout bamboo fencing discouraged local entry to the Royal Tent. Street hawkers set up stalls to display their wares. They shouted in ululating singsong tones to attract customers. Street acrobats took up positions and exhibited their agility in exchange of a few copper coins. Little children, bare-feet and half naked, ran around excited shouting to each other in the festive commotion.

Salim was tingling with anticipation. Since 3 a.m. he had practiced ‘lunge’, ‘parry’, ‘evade’ ‘swing’, etc. on the straw filled, and now battered dummy. His body was oiled with mustard oil. Now he waited.

The pehalwan arrived accompanied by Vikas’ father. Vikas was sitting on the charpoy weaving a bamboo basket and seeing them coming stood up. He joined his palms in a respectful *Namaste*. The pehalwan measured up the boy – he was probably eighteen he guessed (he was wrong for Vikas had grown bigger than the village lads of his age).

“So, I believe you are quite an expert with the lathi, eh?”

“No, Sir, I am not.”

“Where did you learn the art of combat?”

“I...I didn't, Sir. I mean I just swung the lathi and was lucky.”

“That's not what your father says. Here take this lathi and assume a combat stance.”

Vikas stood there holding the lathi awkwardly whilst the pehalwan circled him with lathi on the 'ready' in combat style. I suppose I'll have to hit him a few blows before he defends himself, thought the pehalwan. He did a few coordinated disciplines taking wide steps and twirling the lathi above his head. It looked most impressive. Then with two leaps he brought the lathi down – not too hard - on the boys head.

There was a blur of bodies and lathis. The pehalwan found himself flat on the earthen floor with the boy's father helping him up. Vikas had a bewildered look on his face. The pehalwan felt stung and insulted and ignored the pain where the opponent's lathi had struck him rapidly on the head and



legs. He saw now he would, very sadly have to attack seriously, breaking through the boy's defense and, much as he may not want to, cruelly hurt the boy. He assumed his power stance ten feet away from the boy who stood stupidly staring at him.

The opponent charged using the 'Maithul' attack – the most difficult one to repel. Salim stood his ground till the last moment – as he had been taught – then threw himself flat on the ground and tripped his opponent with his lathi. He would now leap up and smash his lathi on his opponent's head.

A loud yell, "STOP" from the referee brought the match to a halt. The Maharaja had called off the tournament as four boys had been severely injured and he did not wish other boys to get hurt. These boys were being trained to join the elite arm of the combat interceptors.

Salim stood over his opponent breathing heavily. They both knew who had won. Salim put his hand out and pulled up his prostrate opponent and clasped him to his chest. A thunderous roar of approval greeted the action.

They stood side-by-side and bowed to the Maharaja then proceeded to their different tents.

The Rajkumari, Aphisara, had clapped gleefully every time Salim won a point. The maharaja glanced smilingly at his daughter's joyful enthusiasm, was she getting too fond of the boy he wondered. She was sixteen now – a vulnerable and impressionable age. Maybe there was nothing in it...he took note and kept an open mind.

\*

The Pehalwan blew into the tumbler and noisily slurped the tea, holding the metal tumbler with both hands. He addressed Vikas' father.

“Well, I am pleased you persuaded me to break off the demonstration, for I may have hurt the young lad severely with my next move. That he has received training I have no doubt. But where and how is quite bewildering. As you have pointed out he is a cowherd and spends most of the day grazing your cattle and sometimes takes out your neighbors' animals too. Plus, of course, there is *no one* in these parts that has any idea of the art of *lathi combat*.”

Vikas' father, Ram Singh, offered him a *beeidi*. He'd better keep him in good humor for he could report the incident to the authorities and then who knows what action would follow.

They sat on a charpoy outside the hut. Vikas had gone off to the forest with the livestock. Vikas' mother was making some fried tidbits to serve the men folk.

"Are you sure you don't know where your son learnt to fight?"

"Of course I am sure. Who is there to teach him?"

"Another thing, Pehalwanji, just between you and me...I don't know how to put this, but I notice he can read. Now he has never been to school, nor have I, nor has his mother been to school, and he spends most of the day sleeping under a tree. How could he have learnt how to read? It is quite baffling."

Pehalwan was looking at him with a quizzical expression, "Eh, what's that?"

"Read, I said he can read."

"Yeah, I heard you – what does that mean, how can he read?" His chin jutted out belligerently, eyes glinting steel,

“you hiding somethin’ from me?” He stood up, “I’m going to the forest to see for myself...the lad is up to something. Something diabolical”

\*

Salim went in search of Apsara; she would praise him and say encouraging things to him: things that pleased him. He stood outside her chambers waiting for a maid so he could send Apsara a request to enter her chambers.

The door opened and Apsara’s father, Vishnu Singh stepped out.

“What are you doing here?”

Salim fidgeted, “I thought I would have a word with the Rajkumari, Your Highness.”

“You haven’t got free access to the private chambers of the palace. Only if the Rajkumari sends for you are you to come here. Now off you go.”

Salim bowed low and left; his heart heavy, he had offended the Maharaja. He went to the *akhara* (gym). He would workout to take his mind off the reprimand.

He worked extra hard throwing himself into the intricacies of the advanced discipline. The Guru noticed the heavy work. He was likely working off the frustration of not being allowed to win in the tournament.

\*

Vikas worked in the hot sun to complete a tree platform upon which he would sit to watch over the grazing cattle in the surrounding bush. The elevation would allow a larger area to be surveyed and he would less likely be surprised by an unwanted approach. Now he sat under the loft, out of the sun, and fanned himself with a leafy branch. He mulled over the earlier incident when he had repulsed the attack mounted by the pehalwan.

Had he just acted in self-defense? But how had he so expertly repulsed the onslaught? If he thought too hard about his prowess with the lathi, his head would pain. He picked up a stave left over from building of the platform and took a stance...similar to one adapted by the pehalwan. He would practice that move or what he could remember of it.

The pehalwan walked softly and soundlessly to reach the place where Vikas stood ready with a stave. He parted a bush and peered at Vikas. Ha! He thought to himself, so this is where he practices...the wily swine. I wonder where his Guru is.

Vikas shut his eyes and concentrated. He would try and remember every move. He bent low, scooped up some earth from the forest floor and smeared it on his forehead.

The pehalwan felt an excitement and his heart rate picked up. He would catch Vikas and his Guru *red handed* and report them to the authorities. He may even get a reward from the Maharaja and, if his luck held, he could be recalled to attend the Royal court.

Vikas put one leg out in front – exactly as the pehalwan had done – he lifted the lathi above his head, bent his knee and launched himself in the air, twirling the lathi above his head and twisting his body 360 degrees to land cleanly on his feet with the lathi pointing menacingly at his opponent. Instead he landed in a heap in the dust – the lathi wrenched his shoulder and jerked out of his hand. He lay there with dust in his mouth.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha,” the pehalwan stepped from behind the bush and gave a helping hand to Vikas. “What was that, a pantomime performance?”

Vikas stood holding his aching shoulder.

“What happened to your shoulder?” Apsara asked.

The princess had summoned Salim. He was still smarting from her father’s rebuff and was contemplating sending her a message saying he was tired and hurt and would present himself tomorrow, but thought better of it.

“I strained it while practicing in the gym after the tournament was called off.”

“You were practicing how to strain your shoulder?”

Salim kept quiet; he looked at the delight in her eyes; she was in a teasing mood.

She laughed elatedly. “Would you like one of my maids to massage your shoulder?” her eyes twinkled with mirth. “Or are you looking for sympathy from me?”

“God forbid!”

“I heard that,” She gave him a hard look. “Sit here; let me look at your shoulder.”

“I don’t know how advisable that is – we are no longer kids. I daren’t sit next to you with my shirt off, Princess.”

“Do you want a tight slap? Just sit here,” and she indicated a cushion next to her, “and take off your shirt.”

“I couldn’t possibly do that, Rajkumari...take my shirt off...? I don’t think so” He took two steps back.

Aphsara jumped up – eyes blazing, fists tightly clenched...Salim had never seen her look so utterly ravishing.

“Listen, fathead, and stop calling me Rajkumari...”

The door opened gently and a maid bowed in with a carafe of sherbet and golden goblets on an ornate tray.

Salim sighed with relief. If she were to surprise them sitting next to each other...and him with his shirt off...her father would surely get to hear, and who knows what might have happened then...a caning would be the least?

The Princess stood pretending suppressed rage – eyes aflame, lips compressed. The maid placed the tray slowly, very slowly on the white sheet. The princess was about to yell at her to leave it and get out! Salim beat her to it.



“Princess, may I leave, please. My shoulder is hurting and my Guruji will massage it.”

“GO!” Just the one word. Her shoulders slumped as she sat down – hurt and let down.

The pehalwan rotated Vikas’ arm. He winced with pain.

“Is it hurting a lot – I will massage it for you.”

“Thanks.”

“What were you doing, anyway?”

“Trying to do what you did this morning...I’m afraid I am no good at it.”

The pehalwan put his arm around Vikas’ waist, “Come, I’ll take you home. Will the cattle be OK for a while without you?”

“I’ll whistle for them to follow us.”

Vikas lay on the charpoy in the sun and pehalwanji massaged him with warm mustard oil from a shallow dish. He wondered at his fit muscular body.

“Tell me, boy, do you have any idea how you learnt to fight the way you did this morning?”

“No, Pehalwanji, it is an enigma to me. When I try to do it, I trip and fall down. I don’t know how it comes to me; it comes of its own accord.”

“Do you know swordsmanship?”

Vikas twisted his body to look at Pehalwan, “Sword...what sword. I have never even *seen* a real one.”

“I’ll take you to a *Sadhu* a sage; he may be able to resolve this mystery. You must tell him everything you know – hold nothing back. Will you come with me?”

“I’ll have to ask Papa – take his permission.”

Salim asked permission to go to his village to see his parents. It was five years since he’d seen them. Permission was granted and he was allotted a warhorse from the Royal Stables and a guard to accompany him...the roads are rife with *dacoits*, he was told; and the road to Allahgarh was a full day’s hard ride.

“When are you coming back?” demanded Apsara when Salim went to bid her farewell.

“Soon, Princess, very soon.”

“Liar! You have no intentions of hurrying back. You are going to strut around in that chain-armour you are wearing and try to impress the local *laundies* there in the village. Probably get married to one of those slope-eyed wenches.”

“Princess, Apsara, I am going away for a week and I shall miss you, Your Highness. Please don’t quarrel with me – I want to hold pleasant memories of you to recall on my lonely journey.’

“Then come here and kiss me.”

“God forbid! And be ripped asunder by my limbs by the Maharaja’s elephants? I don’t think so.”

She threw a flower vase at him that glanced off his shoulder. Her regal eyes, brimming with anger, bore into him – he gaped at her loveliness. *He cast his life to the winds*, stepped up and gathered her petite body to his chest – clasped her tight and bruised her lips with his, in a long kiss.

“Put me down you brute.” She flayed her legs about. “I said kiss me, not devour me. Now go! And if your lips are cold when you return, I will know someone has stolen the

warmth from them...and your life won't be worth living.”

Salim bowed low and salaamed her.

He rode a white sturdy horse. A large turban shielded his head; half chain-armor covered his arms and chest; a sword hung strapped to his waist; a dagger lay tucked in his waistband; and a small flag with the Coat of Arms of the Maharaja flew from the horn of the saddle. An escort rode behind with a well-oiled lathi strapped lengthwise along the saddle. A formidable twosome that most would avoid an encounter with.

The mid-day sun was hot. Salim looked for a place to stop for an hour – stretch his legs and water the horses. He saw a temple atop a small hillock surrounded by large trees. The white temple walls gleamed in the sun and a red prayer flag fluttered from the dome. He swung his horse and headed for the cool shade of the temple trees.

The pundit greeted the travelers and provided water for them and the horses. He noticed the half-armor across Salim's wide shoulders and chest and took note of the guard with him. He wondered if he would make a small cash contribution at the Lord's altar, for he looked like a person of

some standing. Salim, however, headed for the *charpoy* laid under the shade of a large banyan tree and lay down to rest for a while – the ride had been tiring.

Vikas followed his father and the pehalwan. They headed for a small temple atop a small hillock. The bright white walls and a red flag atop the dome indicated it was in use. The wide branching trees were inviting for they afforded shade from the mid-day sun. Crows *cawed* loudly and hopped from branch to branch.

Vikas felt tired for he was carrying a pitcher full of water, a food parcel containing food his mother had cooked, and the shoes belonging to his father, the pehalwan, and his own. These items were tied with a large piece of cloth to the end of a stout lathi, which he balanced on his shoulder.

The pundit watched them approach. They would likely lay a copper coin at the feet of the deity and rest under the shade of the trees. They greeted the pundit who returned their greetings. He looked at the two men – one looked like a wrestler... and then his jaw dropped for the boy carrying

their belongings was the *spitting image* of the knight who lay on the charpoy.

Vikas lowered his load and stretched to relieve his aching muscles. His eyes took in the slumbering knight on the charpoy. The effect was electric. He gasped and took a backward step. *That was **he** himself... on the charpoy.* The face, the figure, the build, the hands, the feet, the deep scratch on his forearm... everything. Memories started to flood his mind. His name was Salim; he lived in the Maharaja's Palace; the princess Apsara's image loomed before his eyes; the palace rooms; his ride here on a horse from the royal stables... he looked around for the horse – it stood under the shade of a young *Sal* tree, the guard sat slouched, eyes half shut, his back supported by the tree.

Vikas looked at his father; both his father and the pehalwan were staring astonished at the prone knight.

How could he, thought Vikas, be two people? And yet he was!

His father looked at him and beckoned him near.

“He is you in every detail!”

“*He is I. And I am **he**!*”

“What do you mean...?” His father peered into his face. “Has the sun got to you my son?”

“My name is Salim. My father and mother live five miles from here...” Vikas went on to relate his life in the Palace, every little incident – almost a day-to-day chronology, but there were long blank areas too. The knight, Salim, lay eyes shut listening to Vikas. His breathing grew rapid. What the boy was relating...no person could have known. They were the most intimate details that only he knew.

This must be a *gin* – a wandering spirit - that entered and exited his body at will... an evil spirit that had to be expunged.

Salim leapt off the charpoy drawing his sword. Vikas scrambled and grabbed the lathi that he had used to balance their meager belongings. The young men faced each other. Salim lounged with his sword and knew how Vikas would parry, deflecting the swipe by sloping his lathi to let the sword harmlessly pass by his body. He knew Vikas would change his grip and counter by applying a telling blow to his head. Salim ducked and brought his sword up to rip Vikas’

belly in a counter. Vikas stood firm, not moving forward, thus remaining out of range of the upward swinging sword. Salim threw his sword down and grabbed the lathi the guard had left by the charpoy. Now the two were equally armed and matched.

The young men smiled at each other. This would be an *equal encounter* and they knew there would be no winner – for they read each other’s minds and anticipated and knew the others next move. However, they were enjoying it. Dust was kicked up and hung over the battling duo. The watchers: the father, the pundit, and the guard were mesmerized. Never had they seen such an exhibition of pure talent. The fight continued for an hour, with neither of the combatants hurt. Sheer exhaustion forced the antagonists to break off.

Vikas’ father approached him, “Beta,” he said, “I do not understand this, nor can the pundit enlighten me. I gather Salim comes from a village not far from ours – his parents still live there, but the Maharaja took Salim away to his Palace. I do not know how your ‘*mayas*’ got mixed up, but that is the *will of the Lord*. Let us go our separate ways and try and understand this. You are *one person in two bodies*. I



will not pretend to understand it. Let us now proceed to our village and pray to God for wisdom. Salim, you are my son too and Vikas is you! You cannot fight with yourself for *you are both one*. You are two bodies with one soul...and I don't know how!"

"Papaji," said Salim, "as you say we are one soul in two bodies. But Vikas has intruded into my body and my thoughts, whereas I have not trespassed into his. I think he is evil! One soul can not occupy two bodies – one of us or both have to perish."

Vikas addressed him, "remember Apsara told you to return with her kiss still hot on your lips – are you not going to do that, or are you going to bicker with me?"

"*How dare you!* How dare you intrude into my most intimate moments? I will not have it! I will not let you! *I will kill you!*"

"You will kill yourself?"

"Maybe...so be it!"

The Pundit emerged from the temple with a *thali* of *laddos* and *prasad*. He prostrated himself at the feet of each boy and

offered them the sweets. This has to be a miracle – God’s mysterious way of showing his powers. He had chosen these two young men to showcase his supernatural mystique.

Salim took his chain-armour off. It was hot. He strolled a little distance away. His thoughts were in a whirl. He knew whatever he was thinking was imaged in Vikas’ brain. He could not let this possibly continue. If he were to have an intimate contact with Apsara, Vikas could experience the ecstasy too! Totally untenable and unacceptable!

He could not kill Vikas, who at this moment knew his every thought and move. Furthermore, if somehow he were to succeed in terminating Vikas, he would be arrested by the Maharaja’s forces for murder and placed in the Palace Dungeon and then probably executed: a despicable end and one that would desecrate Apsara’s love for him.

Vikas was watching him with large wide open eyes.

There was always a way around everything. Salim determined he would find that way. Vikas was not always sharing his ‘being’.

Salim returned to the palace after staying ten days with his parents in the village. There he was feasted and fêted. Villagers from far and near came to visit him; the village belles eyed him shyly; the seniors with their garrulous wives praised the lord for guiding the Maharaja to this village to pick the son of the village ‘sonar’ (jeweler) for such honour.

Salim found it difficult to not flirt with the girls who openly looked at him with invitations in their eyes.

On the fourth day Dipti arrived. Tall slim, she wore her skirt tantalizingly below her navel. Her *choli* (top) rode high on her ribcage exposing an expanse of sinuous midriff. She was there leaning against a tamarind tree at the common well. She *stood out* in a yellow long skirt and bright red *choli*. Salim excused himself and walked slowly and with a newfound swagger to where she waited.

“Hi, Dipti.”

A soft smile lit her eyes. She took her time to answer, “Hi...you look different...grownup!”

“So do you. I’ve been here four days...and now you come.”

She nodded her head slowly, “Yes...I don’t see you falling over yourself to come to see me, either!”

“I have been kept very busy with all these people coming to see me.” He let his eyes travel over her breasts and over her midriff. She had matured and had a certain confidence about her. “Remember we used to play in the corn fields over there?” he pointed.

“We were kids, then.”

“Yes.” Salim felt un-nerved by her assessing eyes that studied every bit of him. They were childhood playmates; yet she had changed so tantalizingly that she was almost unrecognizable.

His leave passed in a blur and before he knew it, it was time to leave. He looked longingly for Dipti that day, but she was not to be found. He had been to her house twice. Eventually he bid farewell to his parents and headed for the Maharaja’s Palace.

\*

Vikas bid farewell to his parents and headed for Salim’s village. He carried his tough buffalo hide shoes balanced at

the end of a *lathi* and some food: rotis and vegetables his mother had cooked for him – in a bag slung across his shoulder. A five-rupee note was securely tied at the end of his dhoti and tucked into his waist.

Dusk was closing in by the time he reached Allahgarh. A pall of cow-dung and wood smoke hung over the village. Cattle were being secured in cowsheds and oil lamps were being lit. The women had started preparing the evening meal.

Vikas saw a young girl standing by the side of the road and staring at him. As he approached she asked: “Salim, you have come back?”

Vikas smiled at her.

“Why have you changed your clothes? You look like a villager. Where are your fine clothes?”

Vikas again smiled at her.

“Are you going to your parents’ house?”

“Yes. Will you come with me?” That may be the only way Vikas would find Salim’s parents’ house.

“*Okay.*” She said and fell in by his side.

“You are not Salim, you know!”

“No, I’m his brother.”

“He has no brother...you are the person Salim had a combat with, right?”

Vikas stopped and turned to her, “If Salim has left, I may as well turn around and go back to my village right now.”

“It’s getting dark and these village roads are not safe at night. You could twist your ankle or even break your leg on a dark night like this. Come to my house: there is room for you to sleep the night. My parents are old and will be in their room already – no one will question you and you can sleep the night in peace.”

Vikas agreed quickly. It would be difficult to explain his presence to Salim’s parents. They may not even allow him to stay there.

“What’s your name, by the way?”

“It’s Dipti. And yours is Vikas, I believe.”

“Yes.”

Vikas was led to a four-room long brick structure. The first room, he was told, was where Dipti’s parents lived. Dipti occupied the second room. Vikas was shown the last room. Dipti carried an oil lamp and pushed open the door to a room

that was stacked with bags of grain – four feet high. A wooden plough lay on top. Large spider webs covered every corner and a rickety table stood to one side. Dipti spread a narrow *durri* for him to sleep on.

“Would you like some tea?”

*Salim walked to the kitchen for a tumbler of tea. He had seen the Maharaja and princess Apsara descending the steps leading to the caparisoned horse carriages waiting for them. He stood to one side respectfully, head inclined, eyes lowered. As the royal party drew level with him, Maharaj Vishnu Singh addressed him: “Kaisae hoe, Salim?” (How are you).*

“With your blessings, I am well, Highness.”

“Salim,” said princess Apsara, “you must come and tell me all about the bout with your ‘soul brother’. I am busy now, but I’ll send for you in a day or two.”

“As you please, Princess.” And he bowed low.

They swept past headed for the carriages. Horse mounted soldiers would ride alongside.

Salim walked desultorily to the kitchen.

Word had it that the neighboring Maharaja Pratap was visiting with his young son. An alliance may be in the air between Princess Apsara and the young Maharaj Kumar.

Salim took his tumbler of tea to his room. He sat on the bed and rested his back against the wall. A picture of the ‘doe-eyed’ Dipti appeared in his mind.

Vikas watched willowy Dipti spread a blanket and take his food to warm up in the kitchen. She returned presently with two *thalis* (Indian eating plates with raised sides) of food and they sat side-by-side and ate. Afterwards they washed their fingers with water poured over the *thalis*. Dipti removed the sodden *thalis* to the rickety table.

“Are you sleepy?” asked Dipti.

“No.”

“Okay let’s talk, then.”

They sat shoulder to shoulder with their backs resting against the grain bags. Though they were strangers, they spoke with a freedom that comes with old friendship. Sometime during the conversation she slipped her fingers into his. An excitement ran through their bodies.

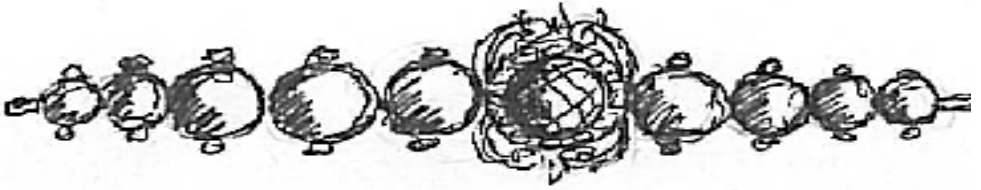


Before she left to go to her room, she kissed him lightly on his lips. He was so sweet and humble, she thought, so unlike Salim.

Salim awoke with a start. Had he been dreaming? It was something about Dipti – a kiss? Something exciting and as real as the wall he was resting against and the mosquitoes that drew blood from his arms and neck. He swiped at them.

And then he grinned, from ear-to-ear. He had his revenge!

Two can play the same game!



## **A Howl from the Past**

Intrigue, murder, and romance in a wealthy landlord family  
of India

Murli was awakened by the presence of a large number of bare bodied men armed with spears and knives, stealthily proceeding towards the opposite side of the room to a door made of iron rods through which he could see a man, with a full beard, asleep on a brass bedstead.

*Murli's body tensed, blood rushed to his head. His bed was flush with a wall and he retreated to the farthest corner pressing his back to the wall and gaping with horror. Though Murli could see the going-ons he knew it was completely dark in the room. The body of men ignored him, like as if he were*

*not there and perhaps he was not, for he was certain he was witnessing an event from the past. The room looked like what it must have looked years ago: old furniture, white washed walls, a threadbare carpet on the floor, and a high domed ceiling; very different from the modern bedroom he now occupied.*

Vir Chander - a pleasant easygoing colleague: tall, black hair, sharp features, carrying a limp from a horse-fall, had invited him to spend the *Puja Holidays* at his ancestral estate in Kamalgunj. Vir descended from a family of landlords that owned all the lands around for miles. He *should* have been heir to the large estate, but with the mysterious death of his father, the inheritance had passed, very unfairly thought Vir, to his uncle.

Vir had informed his uncle, Sukhi Chander that he would bring a friend along on leave. Sukhi was gracious in allotting the newly refurbished bedroom to Vir's friend, Murli. The room: low ceilinged, carpeted, modern light colored furniture; opened to spacious lawns and gardens landscaped and stocked with varied plants and shrubs. Murli

was pleased with the room; he was doubly *pleased* with Frisa (Vir's sister) who showed him to the room.

Murli, strong, athletic, a good tennis player (he had won the Rana Pratap, club championship cup twice) was the Senior Legal Advisor in the highly revered Coswaji Attorneys where Vir was the Administration Officer. Both men got along well and spent a lot of time together at the Gymkhana Club. A mutual respect and a strong bond grew between them. Vir liked what he saw: a sober, decent, and upright person with a great sense of fun. He would be an ideal match for his sister, Frisa. Vir hoped they would *hit it off* – a legal brain in the family could resolve the inheritance rigmarole.

Breakfast, next morning, was laid on a crisp damask tablecloth under a large flowering *Gulmohar*. Sun filtered through the leaves splashing soft shadows on the white tablecloth; bird song enhanced the feeling of freshness and vigour.

Frisa, flushed from a morning ride and still in her riding boots and breeches, joined Vir and Murli at the breakfast table.

“Good morning everybody,” she greeted, taking off her riding hat. “Hope you slept well, Murli.”

Frisa’s flowing long hair, the sheen of sweat on her upper lip, and the *sway* in her walk mesmerized Murli; he sat struck; forgotten was the toast he was buttering. Vir noticed Murli’s big grin and wide eyes – that’s it, he thought, his heart has been *slain*, and his mind boggled! He’ll come up for air but he is already floundering in the *headiness* of Frisa’s looks.

“Yes, I slept...” Murli stammered; he didn’t know how to continue. “A strange thing happened last night; I don’t know how to explain it... I was asleep and *yet* I was awake. I mean it was dark but I could see clearly; I knew it was one thirty in the morning though I had not seen any watch. What woke me (or was it just awareness) was the presence of a large group of bare bodied men in the room.”

Vir and Frisa leant forward, all attention now.

“The men were shirtless and armed with spears. They seemed interested in a man with a flowing beard asleep in an adjoining bedroom into which I could see through the iron bars.

Vir and Frisa prompted him, “What happened then?”

“I don’t know I must have gone to sleep or whatever. I can’t remember any thing after that.” He didn't mention the fact that he was scared shitless.

“Can you describe the person lying on the cot?” asked Vir.

“Only that he was a stout person wearing a white *kurta*, his most distinguishing feature was the flowing beard that covered most of his ample chest.”

“Could you recognize any of the men?” inquired Frisa; her big brown eyes searched Murli's face.

“No, I am afraid not! They were shirtless; some of them were quite well built – like wrestlers.”

“What else were they doing?”

“The expression of the men was grim and determined and they were stealthily proceeding towards the iron door (thank God not towards me) - off hand I would say they were up to no good.”

Murli absorbed the expression of interest on Frisa’s face. He wished he could tell her more, if only to keep her interest focused on him.

“That is very interesting.” said Vir. “Let me think about it. I think it could relate to an incident that happened here many years ago...” Vir was deep in thought he did not notice the way Murli cringed. “I’ll let you know. It’s a pity you could not recognize anyone. Tell you what though, I’ll take you around the estate and introduce you to the people who live here, maybe you will recognize someone from your vision last night.”

Murli saw Vir had become serious and contemplative; obviously the incident affected him in some important way, he noticed how Frisa too had become somber.

“Uncle Sukhi should be down for breakfast, he’ll soon join us,” said Frisa looking at Murli. “You don’t mind do you?”

“No, no. Perhaps we should wait for him.”

“By the way, Murli, *don’t* mention anything of your experience of last night to him or to anyone else. Let us keep it to our selves.” Vir requested.

Murli had stirred up something; he only hoped it was not something bad. The atmosphere between them had changed subtly: it was as if he had become a partner in some

secret; a bond seemed to grow between them. Murli liked this changed status; he liked his acceptance into their ‘*inner sanctum*’, a kind of close association. What this was he had no idea, but he had a feeling he would soon be told.

Uncle Sukhi arrived, affable and effusive with bonhomie. A tall gangly person with a large hooked nose that suggested defiance. He cornered the conversation and literally conducted the eating of breakfast – for his long slim arms gesticulated with every word. Murli noticed a furtive exchange between brother and sister; he could *sense* all was not well here: there was forced joviality and an undercurrent of some sort.

Frisa listened pleasantly enough to her uncle’s prattle, but her bubbly verve was subdued. Vir merely nodded and answered in monosyllables. The table talk was mostly addressed to Murli who listened with polite regard. It didn’t take Murli long to assess that Frisa’s uncle was full of *his* own importance.

After breakfast Vir took Murli around the vast homestead and grounds and introduced him to some family and staff members.



“Did you recognize anyone?” he asked afterwards.

“I’m afraid not; though it could be any of them. I didn’t really get a good look at those men last night; I was *too* stunned with what was taking place.”

Frisa too asked the same questions and let out a sigh of disappointment. “I suppose we were asking for miracles,” she said resignedly. “You see, the person you described lying on the bed fits the description of our murdered father!”

Murli was shocked, “What does that mean?”

Vir sat him down at the now cleared breakfast table. “It’s only fair that we tell you the whole story.” Frisa nodded assent.

“Grandfather had two sons: my father, the elder son, and Uncle Sukhi, the younger one. Grandfather left a will in which the property was equally divided between my father and my uncle. When our father died – was murdered, actually – Uncle Sukhi took over the entire property as we were very young and in school. Over a period of time we signed many documents thinking these were required for the running of the estate. In actual fact, we slowly signed all our rights over in favor of uncle Sukhi. This leaves Frisa and me without *any*

inheritance. This has got to be wrong in law and we intend fighting it in court. We were under age then”

Murli looked pensive, “It appears your uncle has taken advantage of the trust you both restored in him.”

“We have been misled and cheated. My father died under mysterious circumstances. They say he was killed by dacoits, but we have our doubts. Father was alone here at the time and there were no witnesses. His body, with multiple spear wounds, was found on the back verandah the next day. We were in school and were brought back for the funeral.”

That evening Murli partnered Frisa in a game of bridge. They sat in the card room – family photographs covered the walls. A fire was lit in the fireplace and the room was aglow with soft light and the sounds from the crackling fire. Dinner had been elaborate with Sukhi again holding forth. Wines had been served and now brandy liquor: a VSOP, Murli judged, sat in goblets by their side.

They played a few rubbers and before the game ended Sukhi excused himself saying he was tired and had an early morning errand in town.

The young people sat around the fireplace and made small talk. Frisa sat on the hearth, her chin resting on her hands across her knees and gazed at the burning logs. Murli stole surreptitious glances at Frisa and caught her doing the same. Their eyes met every now and then, and both held *their gaze* for longer and longer periods. A subtle excitement was running through Murli: God, how he would like to kiss her. She smiled at him from behind the hair falling across her face. Soon, too soon, it was time to turn in. One last lingering look, pecks on the cheek and then *good nights* were bidden.

Murli couldn't sleep for a long time: Frisa was fresh in his mind's eye. She had removed her jacket sitting near the fire and Murli could see her lovely figure revealed in the tight fitting sweater and slacks. He noticed her slim fingers and fine skin, and the way her hair fell curtaining her eyes. He breathed in her heady freshness – could this be the first stirrings of love?

That night the bare-chested men appeared again and entered the room opposite. The bearded man awoke and raised himself to a sitting position. He looked steadily into the faces of the men, showing no fright even though the men

were armed. Suddenly a man lifted his spear and plunged it deep into the bearded man's chest. The force of the blow threw him off the bed.

Murli was shocked and petrified – he couldn't move or he would have run out. He watched immobilized with terror. Before the scene faded he noticed a man who looked like a *young* Sukhi... but the scene faded away thereafter.

Murli awoke six hours later with a pulsating headache. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and shuffled to where his bag was stashed on the luggage bench. He pulled out some painkillers and swallowed them with water from the bedside flask. He would have to ask Vir to change his room. These visions were too real. Was the place haunted? He certainly did not want to be subjected to any more of what he saw last night.

He went into the shower and soaped himself. He was tingling with the anticipation of seeing Frisa. He shaved carefully, applied a generous dose of *Dunhill* aftershave, and looked at himself in the mirror: he was still trim and good-looking. He patted down his hair, dressed quickly and strolled out to the passageway that led to the garden.

Frisa stood at the far end leafing through a book. Murli's breath caught and he lengthened his stride.

“Good morning, Frisa.”

Frisa turned: “Good morning, Murli,” husky voiced. “Hope you slept well.” She leaned forward offering him her cheek to be kissed and he willingly obliged. He slipped his hand around her waist and pulled her close; they looked into each other's eyes and their pulses picked up as their lips met in a long kiss. Frisa gently pushed away: “Let us not get carried away on empty stomachs,” she held his hand and led him out to the garden.

He breathed in her aroma, “God, you are lovely, Frisa, you really are!”

She lowered her gaze, “Let's have breakfast first. You may change your mind after that.”

“What, what?” he said in a stage whisper. “Don't talk like that. Don't *joke* with my emotions.”

“Are we having our first *'lovers tiff'*, even before we are lovers?” she smiled.

“No!” he swallowed. “I shall never have a ‘tiff’ with you; never ever!”

Vir looked up from the newspaper: “Hey, come and have breakfast, Murli; any more visions last night?”

Murli sat down, still a bit flushed, and excited from his encounter with Frisa. Frisa took the seat next to him and he was pleased.

“Yes!” Murli blurted. “I think I saw your uncle Sukhi in the background. He looked much younger, but I think it was him.”

“Good God! I feared something like this. What more?”

Murli described the whole scene to him. “Your father showed no fear at all,” he concluded.

Both Vir and Frisa looked shocked and stricken.

“You see, we have been suspecting this all along; but what can we do about it?” Vir’s shoulder sagged with the enormity of this revelation.

“Legally no judge will accept the vision story. You’ll have to give this a lot of thought. You will have to confront your uncle with this - I can’t imagine how.” Murli’s recent *amorous intimacy* with Frisa suddenly seemed a long time ago.

The day passed in a pleasant fashion. Vir found ways to leave his sister and Murli alone so they could get better acquainted, Murli was grateful for this consideration.

Sukhi arrived from his trip to town and Vir followed him into the house to discuss matters. Murli and Frisa found each other's company easy and enjoyable; their mutual attraction made every moment joyful and they found many areas of common interest.

"I shall *have* to leave early tomorrow morning," Murli said with a heavy heart. "Back to work, boring, boring work; any place where you are not is going to be very boring," he looked up brightening. "Let's *shack up* and make a private heaven on this boring Earth?"

"O' yeah, and destroy my reputation so no decent fellow will ever marry me?"

"I'll marry you!"

"I said '*decent fellow*'... not any opportunist Romeo."

He threw his newspaper at her. She ran shrieking, hands delicately covering her head, to the far end of the garden where Murli caught up with her.

"Why are you running?"

“Because you threw that thing at me and it really hurt”, she pouted.

“Oh, it did, did it, seeing that I missed you cleanly!”

“No, but your black intensions *really* hurt me here ...” the rest of her sentence was smothered by Murli’s lips.

Six months had elapsed since Murli returned to rejoin work. Six months also since he last saw Frisa. He was only able to speak to her in snatches. He phoned a number of times, but Frisa was always out somewhere on the large estate. There were messages for him saying she was also trying to call him and would contact him soon. Telephone contact with remote Kamalgunj was tenuous. Murli decided he would make another visit to meet Frisa. The ache of her memory was now unbearable; he may even propose to her... he *would* propose to her, he determined.

Vir had resigned his job six months ago and was now staying on the estate and managing some angle of it. Murli had heard, through the *grapevine* that Vir had conducted a series of confrontations with his uncle who conceded some ground and allowed greater autonomy to his nephew and



niece. Perhaps, that was the reason Frisa was so busy and unreachable.

And *then* one morning Murli was shocked to read in the local papers:

*SUKHI CHANDER was murdered last night on his large estate at Kamalgunj. The body, with deep spear wounds, was discovered lying on the back veranda early in the morning by his servants. It appears there was no one in the house that night when it is suspected dacoits entered the house...*

Murli's midnight vision came hauntingly back and he shivered involuntarily



## **Compelling Persuasions**

*~A tale from rural India*

Young Panak considered himself a thinker and writer; his colleagues considered him opinionated and *mad*; his thinking was at variance to theirs, he was stubborn and bull headed to boot.

The human ‘*soul*’ was the singular obsession of Panak’s preoccupation. He would contemplate for days in deep thought – missing out on food, snacking when hungry, and sleeping fitfully at night.

I suppose ‘*soul*’ is a combination of energy a life-giving force, with somehow a destiny intertwined. But what is this force? And what is *energy*? Both terms are so vague and interchangeable. He decided he needed a ‘*soul*’ to properly study it. But how would he get hold of a ‘*soul*’? Nobody had ever done so!

He would kill his wife!!!

Yes, of course, killing her would help his experiment; he would have to make sure he captured her soul - that was the whole idea – he wanted her *spirit*.

Panak lay awake at night: he thought of ways to take her life and the method he would use to capture her *spirit*.

Kanika was his wife of five years, but there was nothing between them; he wouldn’t miss her – she never was anyone he thought about; she was just there. At times he didn’t notice her, *forgot* her existence, he would see her as she walked past, a couple of feet from his nose, and he would wonder who it was until his mind came back to the present

Panak had married Kanika when she was fifteen –good looking, good figure, but dumb! Her father had let out a big sigh of relief after the ceremony. Her family had painfully accepted that no one would marry her, for she was dull and stupid. The malaria that had struck her down as a child had affected her brain: she would sit for hours looking at nothing, saying nothing. She was ‘all grown up’ now and though her brain was underdeveloped, her body had matured unhindered.

Panak had married her because his mother kept badgering him to marry before she died, ‘I’m getting old, son,’ was her constant whine. He didn’t want to marry at all, but his mother’s hounding was distracting him from his writing, from his study of the occult. Though he had eventually conceded to marry, he was angry at being coerced; he would like to ‘*turn the tables*’ on his mother.

During his travels through the country to collect material for his writing, he had visited the village where Kanika lived. One look at the girl and he knew he had his *revenge*! He would marry this ‘retard’ and show his mother what comes of harassment.

His mother was horrified when she saw the girl, but he insisted. If she wanted him to marry he would marry *only* her.

And so a wedding took place.

That was five years ago; he had slept with her once! He would not take her out, for people would stare and patronize her which embarrassed him. As compensation for her loss of outings with him, he paid her bus fare back to her village every few months; she was grateful and happy to go. But her parents looked sad on seeing that fate had struck their only daughter this cruel blow.

She had a friend in the village *pundit* who was always patient with her: he would explain to her, like one would to a child, that which she could not understand. She learned slowly. She didn't mind him *groping* her breasts in exchange or making her *handle* his front part; it did nothing for her; she was glad to please him and grateful he took time to explain things to her. He had entered her a few times too, not in front...

“No, no,” he had said, “that will put a child in you.”

She realized, over time that she had a certain hold on him, tenuous though it may be, but it was there. She had never had sway over anyone before.

“But how am I going to think like you people?” she asked the *pundit* on her visits. “I know I am stupid and just cannot think, but you’ve got to help me.”

He gave her herbs to eat and concoctions to drink saying it would help her. But it did not and she became more insistent that he help her.

“Eat a lot of brain in your diet,” he told her in desperation, “it will help your brain to develop.”

She had consumed brain in her diet: chickens’, goats’ and sheep’s for years now and it had not helped.

“It’s not working,” she told him.

“You are eating the brains of animals; they are not very bright so it is not showing quick results. Perhaps, it will take a long time.”

And then one night ‘*like a bolt from the blue*’ a thought entered her dim mind: it would have to be the brain of a human being! Someone clever, someone clever like her

husband! That's it, she decided, she would have to eat her husband's brain!

She mulled over it for months; she would have to kill her husband and eat his brain. But she could not think of a way to do it...her brain was too weak to plot it. She studied him every day: he would sit at the dining table, oblivious of his surroundings, pen in hand and eyes staring into space. She would walk around him a few times, but he would not see her. This looks too easy, she thought; even she should be able to kill him.

Of late, Panak noticed his wife kept staring at him. Could she possibly be picking up some faint brain transmission from him indicating he planned to kill her? These dumb types had some strange powers. He looked hard at her, but only encountered a blank look from her glassy eyes.

She confided in the *pundit*:

“You said I was eating the brain of animals and as animals are not clever it is not helping me.”

“Give it time, it will help eventually.” how was he going to get out of this one he moaned?

“I have decided to eat a *clever* brain.”

“What do you mean, what’s a *clever* brain?”

“I’m going to eat a man’s brain, a clever man’s brain – like the brain of my husband: he’s clever, his brain should help me.”

The *pundit* was staring at her open mouthed. She couldn’t be joking – no, she was too dumb to joke. Oh my God, she is serious!

“Look, don’t be silly that won’t help.” Lord, what had he got himself into?

“Of course it will help – you said so yourself. And how can you now say it won’t help?”

“Just relax, Kanika. Let me think this out, don’t do anything stupid.” Please, God, help me, he prayed silently.

“Have you been lying to me so you can play with my breasts?”

“No, no, I haven’t been lying, promise!”

“Well then it is settled. You will have to help me.”



“Help you...to *kill* your Husband?”

“Can you think of any *other* way I could eat his brain?”

Panak was putting the last touches to his plan. There were still a few loose ends he would have to tie up. He had located a lead lined coffin: “It’s completely air tight,” the undertaker had assured him. Well, that was one angle that was covered. He still had to talk to a Christian priest. He needed clarification on certain points: if a devil’s spirit could enter a human body; then surely a human spirit could be made to enter an animal’s body - stood to reason! He would have to ensure everything was perfect; there would be no second chance.

He would refrigerate the coffin by filling it with ice and after drugging his wife place her in it along with a ground squirrel. Whilst her body would succumb to the extreme temperature, the squirrel would go into hibernation and survive – squirrels could do that. It would survive until a certain temperature, beyond which it too could perish; the trick was to catch it before it succumbed and so ensure that

its weakened metabolism would accept his *wife's spirit*. He would then have a squirrel with a soul!

Ha!

The doorbell rang jerking him out of his reverie.

“Yes?” He opened the door tentatively.

“I am a *pundit* from the village your wife comes from. May I come in please?”

“Okay... I am busy though.” He noticed the saffron robes and the smell of incense about him.

“I won't take much of your time.”

The *pundit* had come on a whim; he didn't have a plan, and would have to play it by ear.

Kanika walked in and her face lit up: he has come to *help* me, how nice! She smiled at the *pundit* and joined her palms, “*Namaste!* I'll bring you some tea.”

“Well, what is it you want?” Panak asked, somewhat annoyed at being disturbed.

“Nothing really, I was in the area, I thought we would chat.”

“Chat! About what?”

*Punditji* scratched the stubble on his chin, “Well, I believe you don’t get along with your wife...I mean you don’t exercise your conjugal rights...”

“What’s it to you?” Panak was now getting angry.

“I believe you married her to *spite* your mother. Well, your mother has been dead these four long years now – God rest her soul - should you vent your anger on an innocent young girl? She has not been at fault, so why torture her? Give her a chance; I dare say she deserves it.”

“Right, okay! So you have now had your say, finish your tea and then I would appreciate if you left.”

Kanika went to the woodpile at the back of the house; she picked up the axe and ran a finger over the blade: it was sharp enough - it would have to do. *Punditji* was here to help her; she must do it now.

She had heard that in the ‘*Hindu Tantrik*’ way when a woman was to take the life of her husband she would loosen her hair, bare her chest, and apply mustard oil over her upper body and breasts. Kanika did that now and holding the axe *aloft* entered the room where her husband was conversing

with the *pundit*. Both men looked up, their mouths fell open: Kanika was panting with excitement; her bare *oiled* breasts heaved rhythmically and her eyes stared out demonically.

“Hold his arms,” she shouted to the *pundit*.

But both men were too shocked to react. Kanika, with raised axe moved towards her husband. The men jumped up: Panak grabbed her arms and twisted her around whilst the *pundit* removed the axe from her grip.

“Kill him!” she screamed.

Panak turned her around and slapped her hard twice on the face. Kanika collapsed on the carpet in a heap, her nose bleeding.

That was three days ago. Panak had kept her sedated and she had slept all day. Panak assumed she *must* have suffered a trauma, possibly because he had not touched her sexually for years now – not since their wedding five years ago, and she was a young healthy girl! He would compensate her before he killed her: let her die *sexually contented*.

Next day Panak gave her a lethal dose of sedatives. He had packed the powerful sedatives in ten capsules that would

dissolve in her stomach in twenty minutes – time enough to make love to her for the last time and to give the final touches to the coffin; time too to place the ground squirrel in a sequestered corner in the coffin.

Panak disrobed and walked naked to his wife's bed and undressed her. She looked at him with big eyes, but didn't say anything. He stroked her breasts: she did have a very lovely body he saw, and then he entered her. When he climaxed he heard a little involuntary moan from her – that touched him. He too had enjoyed it very much and had sweated freely during the embrace. He got off her gently and went to the room where the coffin lay.

He sat by the coffin thinking: perhaps, he should give her a *chance*; she had really done nothing to displease him. If, when the sedative began to work, he were to exercise her, forcing her to walk and induce vomiting she would recover from the effects of the sedative. Of course, if he put her into the ice filled coffin she would die. He wondered which option to take.

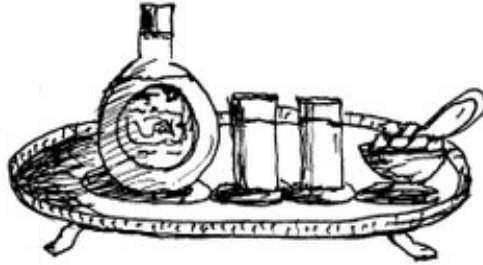
This was a whole new development: for the first time in his married life he was thinking of her and of her feelings.

The *pundit* was right, it was no *fault* of hers that she was struck by cerebral malaria as a child and had suffered brain damage; perhaps a neurosurgeon would be able to do something with her... he would have to investigate that line.

But what of his experiment... he would have to put it ‘*on hold*’ until he could get around to it. It really needed to be re-thought; he would take one thing at a time. First he would see if his wife could be helped; it would probably cost a heap, but he now felt he owed it to her.

Kanika crept up very quietly behind him, axe ‘*on the ready*’. She could feel the sedative taking hold - she must hurry. He was crouched over the ice filled coffin and did not hear her. She lifted the axe and brought it down hard on Panak’s head: splitting it open and *killing* him instantly. The momentum of the downswing threw her off balance; she tottered and fell headlong into the ice filled coffin jolting the lid *shut*. She struggled feebly, but the sedative had now taken hold.

She relaxed and let the soothing waves overwhelm her.



## A Mindset

There weren't many left now!

Girdhari Singh leaned his angular, bony body across the wooden fence and surveyed his stock. The horse had been killed two nights ago - his frill top Tonga would be useless without a horse. He never liked bicycles and had never learnt to ride one – learning at his age would be ridiculous. He would just have to walk.

He looked at the forest scrub twenty yards away – that was the distance that separated his stockyard from the forest

...*twenty yards!* He sighed. How could he protect his stock from marauders?

His wife was too frail to walk any distance; perhaps he would sell the buffalo to buy a horse. There would be no milk to sell and his already strained resources would be stretched still further. If he didn't take his wife out every once in a while, she would just sit in a corner and let her sorrow *overwhelm* her, she could again fall into a comatose state, to rouse her from which would be a difficult task.

A tiger had killed their only son, eleven year old Tinku, three months ago, as he grazed the family cattle and goats in the forest scrub. They had been losing an animal every now and then to visiting tigers. On that unfortunate occasion Tinku had been over enthusiastic in his efforts to chase a large old tiger away. He had got too close to the tiger that was very hungry and angry - one swipe from his massive paw and Tinku had almost been decapitated.

Girdhari Singh and the Village Headman along with some friends trekked the dusty track to the Forest Department's office in the small adjoining town to report the



case and to persuade the Officer to declare the tiger a man-eater. But the unsympathetic Officer had shaken his head, *no!*

“How can I declare the tiger a man-eater when it didn’t eat anybody?” he leaned back in his chair, his ample stomach making a little mound behind the desk. “The tiger swiped at Tinku as he got too close. Obviously, it felt threatened and took action to protect its self. Don’t you all agree?”

The villagers, who were kept standing in the sparse office, nodded their heads in understanding, but Girdhari was furious – the large turban on his head shook with fury, “How can you say it is not a killer and a potential man-eater?” Girdhari’s chin jutted out from his creased face in impotent rage. “It has been systematically decimating my stock and getting more and more daring! You want it to kill and *eat* a person before you declare it a menace?” his index finger waved in the air above his head with impotent anger. “Is that what you are waiting for? I don’t think you will have long to wait!” he stared belligerently at the Officer.

“I feel for you, Girdhari,” said the Officer patronizingly. “You are a father and you have lost your only

son. Believe me, I am *really sorry* and sad that this should have happened, but the tiger can only be declared a man-eater when it kills and *eats* a person. Not otherwise.” He looked at their faces with smug superiority. “Like one cannot hang a person on the assumption that he is a potential murderer. I similarly, can not declare the tiger a man-eater unless it is one!” With finality in his voice, and an open handed thump on the desk, he ended the meeting.

Girdhari secretly swore revenge. He told his wife he would avenge their son’s death. She only looked at him blankly, not much was registering with her he saw with apprehension. She was closing her mind from the world, retreating into herself. She had shed a lot of weight. Her sorrow was progressively overwhelming her. ‘Please, God! Don’t let her fall into a coma again, for I don’t think, in her weakened state, she will survive it,’ prayed Girdhari silently.

Girdhari set to studying the tiger’s habits and would follow it for miles – birds and other animals gave out signals to indicate the tiger's presence and so Girdhari had no need to

keep the animal in sight. Every tiger behaves a little *differently* and Girdhari kept a mental note of how this one was different. Eventually the tiger would complete his circuit and return to the village with Girdhari in tow.

The villagers noticed Girdhari's abnormal behavior. The Headman broached the subject advising him to move his stock from the forest fringe to a place closer to the village so his stock wouldn't get taken.

"If I move my hut and stock to the other side of the field, my crop will get eaten." Girdhari loved where he lived: the forest sounds, the morning mist, the oxygen laden air – he would miss it all if he moved further away.

."But they are getting eaten, anyway!" pointed out the Headman. "You have taken to roaming senselessly around the forest. You go absent for days. What's with you? Are you losing your mind? Tell us, for we can collectively help you." He looked compassionately at Girdhari.

Girdhari smiled; they would soon see how he, the fearless Rajput, avenges any wrong done to him. "No," he said. "I am okay!"

“No, you are not!” said the Headman. “We take food for your wife when you are absent; do you know that? She forgets to cook for herself. And you go on a ‘*walk-about*’ through the forest? Now if that isn’t peculiar and dumb behavior, then what is? Pull your self together, Girdhari, we are here to help you!” said the Headman consolingly.

“I suppose you are right.” Girdhari nodded looking outwardly contrite. “I will have to take more care of my wife. Just give me a few days; I am getting over my grief. Roaming in the forest takes my mind away from that terrible memory.”

The Headman understood. Tears came to his eyes in sympathy for Girdhari’s shattering loss. He hugged Girdhari and held him close: “We all understand, my brother, we will continue to look after your wife as best we can; after all, what is *village brotherhood* if we don’t have empathy for our own brothers?”

Girdhari would have to be more circumspect. He would have to be seen to have taken heed to the advice of the village *Panchiat* (court). He thought of a plan: he couldn’t poison the

watering holes as that would also kill other innocent animals and, who knows, a human might drink from it too. Girdhari himself had drunk from these water sources on occasion. He took to poisoning the kills. He had studied the tiger's eating habits and only poisoned those parts of the kill that he was fairly certain the tiger would eat during his next meal. Over poisoning or using strong poisons ran the risk of infecting other scavengers that would also partake of the kill when the tiger was not around. He used Echinacea seed, finely ground, which he sprinkled on the raw meat. Echinacea would be a mild poison, which would weaken the tiger with continuous diarrhea and stomach cramps.

Very soon, he noticed the tiger weakening. But strangely enough, so was his rage and *resolve*. He wanted the tiger to suffer and die slowly; for, after all, it had killed his son who was only doing his duty by ensuring safety of the herd. Girdhari pictured in his mind, again and again, how he would do a victory dance around the dying tiger so that the tiger would know why he was being killed.

Girdhari couldn't follow the tiger all the time; these long marches were sapping his strength. One day it dawned on him that the weakening strength of the tiger would render it unable to kill game... 'My God!' he thought aloud. 'Am I creating a potential Man-eater?' He must immediately terminate this madness. What was he doing? He was torturing a poor animal... 'poor', did I say 'poor'? Girdhari was bewildered. He was beginning to feel sorry for the animal he was pursuing and slowly poisoning. I suppose the Forest Officer is right, he conceded grudgingly, the tiger, could have felt threatened and reacted instinctively.

Girdhari sat down to think. As *'Forest People'* it was a moral duty of his clan to look after the well-being of the animals and birds of the forest, instead he was letting his personal misfortune consume his mind with hatred and revenge. His responsibility now should be to look after his dear wife and nurse and nurture her back to health. Not neglect her to satisfy a personal and self-constructed *revenge* that would not bring back his son, anyway.

He went back home. He needed more time to think this through. What if the now weakened tiger was to turn man eater? He shivered involuntarily; the blame would be fully *his*. ‘Hey, Ram! What am I doing?’

In time the inevitable happened: news filtered through that in a neighboring village a tiger had killed a young widow who had gone into the forest to collect firewood.

Girdhari was stunned. He realized there was no other way, he was morally bound to go there and *own up* to what he had been doing. The fate of the tiger was in the hands of the Forest Department, he no longer could determine the tiger’s destiny. His own future could not be predicted: he may be sent to *jail*.

Girdhari approached his brother’s hut a few fields away. He told his brother of all his misdemeanors and begged him to *look after* his sorrowing wife until he was back...whenever that may be. His brother – naked bodied, wearing a loincloth - argued the point and asked if Girdhari thought his wife could survive alone if he was put in jail for any length of time? “And what,” he asked, “makes you think

that you are responsible for that widow's death? Sure you weakened the tiger, but that does not mean that it becomes a man-eater. There have been many weak tigers that have died of starvation because they could not hunt. Just because they were weak does not mean they become man-eaters.”

This tiger, obviously, had a tendency towards taking *human life*. “I say go there, by all means,” said his brother, “and see the situation. Don’t try to be a bloody martyr! You put yourself in jail, and you will have your wife’s death *on your head*! If you have some misbegotten glorious idea of giving yourself up to the authorities and bask in some very dubious martyrdom, you may as well, before you go, strangle your wife! It would be a far kinder death than what you are planning for her.”

Girdhari stood aghast. What his brother said was correct; why hadn’t he thought of it? Had he become so ‘self centered’ that he could only think of himself? He would do as his brother suggested: he would go there, but only as a neighborly gesture of concern.



The village Headman heard that Girdhary was going to the ill-fated village to offer condolences from this village and was very grateful and effusive in his thanks. He gushed with praises for Girdhary: “Even though he is not on the village committee,” the Headman said. “He is still conscious of his ethical duty, and has taken it upon himself to do this onerous task on our behalf. I *salute* him for his humanity!” Girdhari was sent off with handclasps and kind words from all his kinsfolk.

“Hai, bechari.” said the villagers of the stricken village when Girdhari reached there. “She was a young widow who has left behind a *crippled child*. Who will look after this child? The in-laws considered both mother and child unlucky and turned them out of the house, blaming them for the death of their son who was killed in a bus accident.”

Girdhari trembled with excitement “I... I will look after the child with all my heart!” he exclaimed.

Girdhari ran all the way to his village with the child in his arms. He placed the child in his wife’s lap. “Here’s a son

for you that the good *Lord* has seen fit to bestow upon us!” he said with a happy catch in his voice.

“Lord be blessed,” she exclaimed rising with wonder in her eyes and a beautiful vibrant smile on her face. “He has heard my prayers and returned *my son to me!*”



## **Postprandial Peg**

*~A story based on the life of tea planters in the verdant sub-Himalayan region of West Bengal (India) circa 1960*

Before the mid 1970s, there were no TVs on tea plantations. Reading of club library books or listening to the radio were the normal leisure pursuits after a hard day in the field.

The filching of their treasured Dry Sack Sherry was of immediate concern; for it was imported, expensive, and of infrequent availability. Purloining of their Indian whiskey, in comparison, would tantamount to a minor irritation.

Ajit and Pratap were young Assistant Managers working on neighboring tea plantations. Each worked on a thousand acre ‘Garden’ (as planters referred to the plantations), which were owned by British overseas companies. A thousand acres was considered a viable size, anything larger was unwieldy and had to be split into two ‘Divisions’; whereas smaller plantations suffered cash-flow problems when the ‘Tea Market’ was low.

The young men were lean and athletic and scraped the 5 feet 11 inches bar in stockinged feet. They were lightly muscled and wore their hair, in what was considered the ‘in-look’: shoulder length and loose. Both were popular in the community and exhibited a simple sense of *fun and humour*.

Being bachelors left them with not much to do at the close of day. Their options for the evening were limited: they could drive to the nearest suburban town and watch an outdated *Indian movie* (and consequently get bitten raw by bugs – not an appealing prospect), or visit other bachelors and down some pegs of their favourite libation. Their cherished scenario was *to be invited* to drinks and dinner by a

young married couple. With a lady around, the two friends were at their charming best; the evenings were pleasant, the food delightful, and the atmosphere homely and cheerful.

However, those invitations were sadly like the proverbial blue moon. Weekends were fine, for one usually took part in sports at the Planters Club, got slurring drunk at the bar, danced like leering wolves, and flirted *outrageously* with the wives of the 'senior' planters who enjoyed the young company.

The evenings after work on weekdays were like being marooned on a lonely island. From the options available to bachelors, Ajit and Pratap chose to add company to the '*lonely island*' by visiting each other every second day. The evenings were then pleasurable. Ajit had a radiogram: a sleek highly polished wooden cabinet with shelves on the left for long playing records and a Philips record player on the right – this made a compelling reason to meet at his bungalow. Pratap drove across in the Company jeep in the graying dusk with his bottle of Red Knight Indian whisky; they would drink and argue until dinnertime. Dinner was unerringly *western fare*: steaming soup followed by a meat roast,

battered mashed potatoes, and thick brown sauce to top it all. The meal ended usually with a not too firm caramel custard for desert. A *bottle of sherry* would then be fished out of the glass fronted cabinet to end the evening with their usual postprandial peg and cigars from South India.

Saturdays were movie nights at the Planters Club where one saw an outdated English film (black & white usually) and afterwards gathered at the bar to discuss and argue on any subject at hand.

When married planters left with their memsahibs, conversation turned more colourful: talents of bachelor friends and their prowesses with the opposite sex were roundly debated, derided or ridiculed; swear words became more the norm than the exception.

Later, much later, in the wee hours, when only a drunk could understand the drooling slur of another drunk, they left, staggering to their jeeps or Ambassador cars, slumped into the driver's seat and drunkenly lurched away – only Managers had personal chauffeurs.

Sundays were recuperating and nursing-hangover mornings. Aspirins, Paracetamols and eggnog concoctions were consumed to salve a throbbing head. By lunchtime, there was a gathering at the club to down that *hair-of-the-dog* peg, usually pink gins or beer. The vigorous types sweated it out on the tennis court or the golf course and quaffed bottles of beer afterwards. But soon one felt the weekend slip away and it was back home to face the grind at the crack of dawn the next morning.

This pleasant way of meeting and enjoying long (otherwise lonely) weekday evenings that the friends devised became a routine treasured by both; if one friend postponed these evening get-togethers, the other would banteringly ask whether the errant partner was finding the present company boring or had found solace in the arms of the local *bazaar* women: big bosomed, garlic breath, mustard oil on the skin, and strong aromatic oil on the head.

The planting community looks forward to the onset of ‘*cold weather*’. The climate is pleasant, work’s at a minimum, and club activities at their peak. All picking of tea leaves is over

and the factories are dismantled for the yearly overhaul. This is the *festive season*: a season of parties, fêtes and club sport championships (tennis, golf and some indoor games). It is a season when planters travel far and wide to other districts to join in the revelries offered in those clubs. A club-hosted dinner is part of the function. Each club also has its yearly *do* replete with a live string band from Darjeeling to enliven the occasion.

Ajit and Pratap awaited this season of festivities like parched amphibians to the onset of the monsoons. Teenage daughters of planters: fresh faced, fun loving, and chaperoned by their proud parent's would be back on cold-weather vacations from school and college vitalizing club evenings. Bachelor planters would have '*fling*' affairs with the pretty young things that would last the length of the college vocation – for who knew by the time the next college break comes, the enamoured planter could be hundreds of miles *away*, transferred to another plantation.



The mood change in the friends was discernable. Their banter was easier, lighter, and drinking heavier. Their prized bottle of sherry too appeared to take on a joviality of its own, for it emptied itself faster and quicker. This concerned the two friends for the sherry was imported and considerably more expensive than the local whisky.

They questioned the bungalow night watchman as to how the level of their favourite tippie was dwindling so alarmingly? He scratched his head then his crotch and straight-facedly claimed to be a teetotaler. The house bearer too looked shiftily around, and claimed ignorance though admitting that when he did have an occasional drink, it was always *haria / lau pani* – the local plantation brewed hooch.

The young executives were not happy with the excuses they were being offered and so, over the following weeks, hatched a plan to expose the culprit. They conspired to almost finish the sherry that night and fill it up to the half way mark with

their own urine. They rubbed their hands in glee in anticipation, for this would surely expose the secret toper.

When next they met they eagerly checked the adulterated bottle of sherry: the level had gone down by a good peg and a half.

The friends were stunned. Let's not say anything yet, they decided; let us see what happens tomorrow. The following night the bottle was a further large peg down.

“Impossible!” said Ajit. “Do you mean some idiot can't tell the difference between *Old Sack* Sherry and our piss?”

This called for a thorough investigation.

The servants were summoned to the sitting room. They stood in a scraggly line – all six of them, some in Company Uniform and others in shorts, all were apprehensive and fidgety. This was a serious matter – to be summoned together

like this augured a grave situation. They looked at each other...there was some talk of the sahibs' whisky missing. They glanced suspiciously at the house bearer – he was known to drink *every day* after work.

Ajit questioned them repeatedly as to how his cherished sherry was dwindling, but received no answers or admissions.

“Come on,” bellowed Ajit. “Own up or the lot of you will be sacked from bungalow work and relegated to field work.”

The servants were shaken and nonplussed; they shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other accusingly. The young kitchen help (gangly and skinny) quaveringly piped up in a small voice, “Sahib, I... I have seen the cook opening the drink cabinet. Perhaps he should be questioned.”

The cook waddled in; fat, greasy with the Hindu holy mark smeared on his forehead. But like the others, he claimed he did not drink. “I’m a holy man, Sir, it is forbidden to me.”

“Who then has been drinking our sherry?” Ajit flashed the bottle for all to see, “we haven’t had a drink from this bottle in the last two nights and yet it is short by two or three large pegs?”

He glared at them fiercely to hide a chuckle that was rising in his throat; for who ever admitted to this dastardly felony would soon be throwing up on the lawn outside when he learned he had been drinking his and Pratap’s urine.

The gathered employees looked goggle-eyed at the offending bottle.

“But, Sir,” stammered the cook looking, bewildered. “I... I mean that is the sherry drink, Sir, a peg of which I put in your honours’ soup every night!”



## Angry Innocence

Young Sandeep crouched hidden above the narrow game trail and watched two brightly colored jungle fowl fight. The combat had continued, off and on, for twenty minutes and both were *bloody*. He looked down the trail – there was no other movement, the fluttering of the conflict filled the air with sound and fine dust.

Sandeep: sixteen, sprightly, quick witted, and bright, loved visiting his uncle Hameer and aunt Simi on holidays from school. Uncle Hameer was a quiet person, good with his hands: he had designed and innovated most of the implements on the farm. His aunt Simi (bird like, large round

glasses, did all the household work unobtrusively and efficiently). Both uncle and aunt understood each other without many words. They lived in a rambling farmhouse at the bottom of a lightly wooded hill. Animal pens occupied a large area at the back of the homestead: chicken runs with clucking and scratching birds looked over by proud, suspicious cockerels; pens that housed grunting pigs, and enclosures that had docile cud chewing Jersey cows.

Sandeep observed one of the fighting birds was weakened with injury and was unable to defend itself. He couldn't bear the pain it must be suffering and hurled a stone towards the antagonists. They broke off at once and strutted, somewhat shakily, into deeper brush.

The late afternoon shadows were stretching; Sandeep shouldered his uncle's .22 bore *BSA*, fifteen-shot *long rifle* and headed for home. Among the attractions on the farm was permission to use the .22 rifle. His uncle had trained him in the use of it and Sandeep was very careful and aware of safety procedures.

He saw his uncle at the irrigation well standing draped with a light shawl over his shirt – the air was getting nippy. A Persian wheel – turned by two bullocks - was drawing water from deep within the earth’s bowels; clear water rippled along shallow drains to potato patches and earthen enclosures huddling lettuce, spinach, spring onions, etc. Overhead, crows were flying in ragged formations towards the hill to roost for the night. The sky was turning red – a sign that the morrow would be another clear day.

Sandeep accompanied his uncle along a raised path to the homestead. Outside, on a cemented apron, a farmhand was filling lamps with kerosene - a lamp would be placed in each room where it would create a warm diffused light. The smell of kerosene was laced with cooking smells; aunt Simi looked out the kitchen window, “Did you see the jackal that has been taking our chicken?” she asked.

“No, Aunt, other than two jungle fowl fighting, I saw nothing.”

He glimpsed a movement from the corner of his eye: a teenaged girl, tall, fresh faced, hair pulled back in a loose bun stood smiling at him.

“Hello Arti, how have you been?” asked Sandeep, happy to see her – a little flush crept to his cheeks.

“Namaste!” she greeted. “With your blessings, I am well.”

Arti lived in a nearby village and visited to help with the household work and cleaning. She was given meals and at the end of the month, a sum of money to help her family with expenses.

Sandeep and Arti were of about the same age and were ‘*soul mates*’. During his last school break, they had roamed the nearby hills *hand-in-hand*; climbed trees, experimented with eating wild berries, and chewed leaves that made them violently sick! On the last day of that visit both felt the pangs of parting. Sandeep was to travel by rail back to school - a day and a nights’ journey away.

In a moment of tenderness he cupped Arti's face fondly in his hands and kissed her lips. She clasped his body and looked up into his face –tears forming at the corners of her eyes. They kissed again long and tenderly; their hearts thudded in their chests, a flush bathed their cheeks. He felt a sharp stirring in his loins...she was the *first* girl he had



kissed! He would keep the heady memory close in his heart through the long school term.

When Arti got home that evening she was severely reprimanded by both parents. She was no longer a little girl, and should not be roaming the hills with a boy. “What will people say?” She could ruin her marriage prospects with such behavior.

Arti would normally have argued against the supposed impropriety of going out with Sandeep – but now they had *kissed* and their relationship had changed; she could not pretend aggrieved innocence.

Arti sat on her haunches and helped the farmhand fill the oil lamps.

“Come inside,” said Hameer to his nephew. “Clean the gun and put it away. If you want to wash up, there is hot water in the kitchen.”

Sandeep did as he was told. He wondered if Arti would come inside...they could play carom. His uncle would probably start the generator to catch the news on TV and

later, Sandeep hoped, he could watch ‘*Hindi soap*’ with Arti – grasping her fingers tight and, maybe, stealing a kiss.

Arti came in later and went to the kitchen to help with the dinner. Sandeep waited then casually strolled in. The kitchen was awash with amber light from a kerosene lamp and both his aunt and Arti were engaged in cooking.

“What would you like?” his aunt Simi asked. “Are you hungry?”

“Just a little bit.” he said watching Arti kneading dough.

“Make yourself a sandwich – there is some cold meat and cucumber in the cooler. Or would you like some eggs?”

“Meat is fine, Aunt.” he was happy to be near Arti.

Arti had grown and put on curves he noticed. She was bent over the dough and her long hair had come undone and hid her face. Passing her he stroked her arm; Arti looked up, a smile brightening her eyes.

“Your uncle has gone to put on the generator,” his aunt continued, “You can watch the news with him.”

Soon the neon tubes flashed their white light chasing the soft shadows out of the kitchen. Sandeep sat with his

uncle in a deep armchair to watch the evening news. He watched distractedly and hoped it would be over soon for he wanted to be with Arti. But by the time the news was over, Arti was leaving.

“Namaste,” she said. “I am going home now.” she slipped out the door into the darkness beyond.

Watching her retreating back Sandeep's plans crashed around him...he must meet her, he was seeing her after such a long time.

“Excuse me a moment, Uncle,” he said jumping up and running out.

Arti stopped when she heard him coming. He grabbed her and without preamble kissed her long and hard *on the lips*. Hearts raced, breaths mingled. She held him close and felt his young libido straining through his trousers. She released him quickly and ran down the barely visible path; leaving him tingling and panting.

Arti did not visit for two days – two days that stretched out interminably. Sandeep was desolate; he decided he would

stroll casually to the village and find out why Arti had not come. Had he been too *pushy* the other night?

In the village square, he did not know which turn to take; all the low roofed houses looked alike, a few were built with stones and all had small vegetable patches around the house. He stood hesitantly on the dusty path. A passerby told him the family had gone to a village twelve kilometers away to attend the marriage of a relative.

“When will they come back?” he asked and made it sound like it didn’t really matter.

“Difficult to say,” said the bare bodied man; he had dried mud splattered on his upper body and his legs were encased with dry and flaking mud – obviously returning from work in the field. “It’s not just the marriage; they are also negotiating a *match* for Arti.”

Sandeep felt his innards twisting, he gaped at the man. “When is she to be married?” he heard himself say still staring at the man. Blood was draining from his face and his heart thumped in his chest.

“Soon, I’d say. She is all grown up and ready for marriage now.”

“But...but she is only fifteen or sixteen – not really of marriageable age... it’s against the law,” his voice trailed away; he swallowed a few times.

“It’s our custom, Sir. Nobody can change our Traditions!” said the man with finality and walked away.

Sandeep walked back, stunned and devastated. What could he do? There was nothing he could really do, could he?

His rational self told him to forget her – there would be many girls in his life - his sentimental side said he would never forget her; he would have to find a way...perhaps her parents wouldn’t find a suitable match. Or maybe, she will refuse the match. Please God, let her *refuse*!

Sandeep was listless and preoccupied all next day. His uncle asked him if he were feeling unwell.

“Nope, Uncle, I am fine.”

“You certainly don’t look fine – you may be *coming down* with something.”

Sandeep made an effort to look cheerful after that. His uncle and aunt took pains to keep him entertained and

occupied. They wanted him to enjoy his holidays – he was such a sweet boy...and they were so fond of him.

Simi thought she would check out a suspicion forming in her mind: could it be the girl Arti he was missing? She would put it to a test.

Next morning, sitting on cane chairs on the front verandah scanning news papers, Simi announced in a clear voice whilst surreptitiously looking at Sandeep:

“I believe Arti is getting married!”

There was no reaction from Sandeep – he continued reading a book he had in his hands. Hameer lowered the newspaper and peered over it:

“How do you know?”

“Oh, I sent the farmhand to see why Arti was not coming and he was told the family had gone to some village to arrange a *match* for her.”

Sandeep looked up from his book: “Someone ought to stop Child Marriages! It’s illegal and odious! Arti is no older than I. How dare they force her into a marriage not of her choice? By the time she is twenty she will look forty and have half a dozen kids trailing after her. *Poor girl!*”

Hameer and Simi exchanged glances. They were surprised at the vehemence of Sandeep's reaction. So that's where the problem lay thought Simi – her hunch was right! She wondered how deep their feelings went.

“How do you know it's against her wish? All marriages here take place with the parents arranging a suitable match. Why should her case be different?”

He had no answer and went back to his book. He moped around all day pulling out old moth-eaten books from the glass-fronted cabinet in the sitting room and putting them back unread. He waited – *a forlorn lover waiting his beloveds' return.*

His '*beloved*' eventually arrived ten days later - a day before his leave was to end. She was hollow eyed and wan – a wreck of her former self. “What happened?” was on everyone's lips. At first Arti would not answer and when pressed burst out crying – she had been raped!

A shocked silence, then the usual questions: where, when, how, and by whom?

At that far off village - during her cousin's wedding - when left alone - by three young men - it had been reported to the Police and all three were in Police custody.

Sandeep was crazed with red hot anger and frustration. How dare they! How dare they revile this *angel* of innocence and purity! – What could he do? Had the rapists been roaming free he would, single handedly, hunt them down and shoot them; not caring what happened to him. But they were in Police custody – unapproachable! What should he do? His chaste and pure Arti had been defiled by filthy *village hoodlums*.

He found a moment free with Arti, and held her hands: “You are blameless and innocent, my darling! To me you will remain spotless and pure – will you wait for me and *marry me?*”

Arti bit her lip, her mouth quivered; tears flowed freely down her cheeks. She looked into his eyes and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

“*Why not?*” he asked incredulously. “*Why won't you marry me?*”



Her body shook and she did not say anything for a while: "I am *pregnant*," she whispered. "I know I am!"

Arti visualized that night many times over; she lived in obsessed memory of it. Three young men had come in; she could smell liquor on their breaths though they didn't appear drunk. They were well built and muscular from physical work in the fields. She had innocently told them the truth: she did not expect her parents back for at least another two hours, so they'd better come back later.

The three had a huddled discussion and then approached and roughly pulled her down. Arti looked wide eyed at them from the floor, terror engulfed her. Whilst two held her, the third ripped off her clothes and stopped to gape at her voluptuous body...there was a collective gasp from the three. The tall one, in a delirium of frenzy, entered her roughly and was done quickly. The other two were no better, climaxing almost immediately.

She did not struggle or resist; just lay there: *stark naked*, eyes clamped shut; inert, her bare breasts heaving – the pain of the rapture consumed her.

Watching her lying naked, they were aroused again and went on a second round; they now had longer *staying* powers and were gentler and almost compassionate, kissing and fondling before entering her. She felt a *twinge* of pleasure: they were good looking boys, strong and virile. Her young body was prodded into *arousal*; she couldn't help her biological reaction. By the time they finished she was *aroused*, responding, and groaning.

*That had decided her!*

She would now wait with the child in her womb. Wait until they were released from prison. She hoped one of them would marry her and help look after the child.



## **Fingers of Fear**

*~A train journey set in rural India*

He wore an earring in his left ear, a heavy gold ring on his third finger, and a roughly tied large – *once white* – turban on his head. He sat hunched staring out the third class train compartment window at the rapidly changing scenes outside.

In typically village fashion, he commented loudly on scenes that went past the window. He would look around at his co-passengers seeking approval, looking from face to face until they nodded agreement. A creased smile revealed tobacco stained long teeth. Obviously the *neem stick* he used to scrub his teeth with had lost the battle.

“What do you say, *Babuji*?” He asked in his gruff voice, nodding his head, seeking confirmation, “Should the railways not stop the farmers from bringing their cattle so close to the railway line...? That is how accidents happen...no? And then they will stone the next train that goes past, venting their fury on the *Sarkar*.”

Rashid paid no attention to this village prattle; he knew these village types: they spoke non-stop about *nothing*. If a tree went past the window, he would say, “A tree...we have passed a big tree with spreading branches.” After such an inane comment the villager would gapingly look around for approval of a wise observation.

I mean...what the hell! Thought Rashid with some annoyance; why is that country bumpkin trying to draw me into his circle of appreciative onlookers? He pointedly turned his back and ignored him...Gawddd...!

Rashid was casually dressed in dark jeans and a tea shirt with ‘*Jack Daniels*’ emblazoned across the front. He looked around him with cynical disapproval; he wished his monetary status allowed him to secure a seat in the second class sleeping berths.

Though he himself had roots in a village, he now worked in town and considered himself an urban socialite. He was visiting his in-laws and looked forward to meeting them in *Burpur* – a small industrial town from where his wife hailed.

The train was slowing down; the sound of track changes came from under the coach – a station was coming. The man, with the gruff voice, rose and went to the door; he was tall and wore characteristically village clothes: a whitish, rough hewn kurta and pajama and, of course, the untidy looking large turban on his head. He fiddled with the latch and swung the door open inwards and stood holding on to the two outside vertical handrails, his body blocking the doorway completely. The train slowed to a crawl; the man still stood blocking the door looking forward and aft. Rashid stood impatiently behind him. The train was moving slowly and Rashid could easily jump off and meet his brother-in-law at the station entrance who would have a message for him to take on to Burpur.

“Please give me way,” said Rashid elbowing his way through.

“What is it, what?” said the tall man. “No one *gets off* whilst the train is still in motion – that’s how accidents happen.”

Rashid shoved past him pushing him aside. By the time the tall man recovered Rashid was off dodging travelers on the platform and rushing towards the entrance, “Bloody domineering ass!” he said through clamped teeth. “He would benefit from a tight kick to his nuts. Idiot!”

At the entrance Rashid met his brother-in-law who proffered a letter, “Give this to Gulam Rasool, the headman, when you get to Burpur. It is very important!” he slipped it into Rashid’s hand. “Now *go*. The train only stops here for a very short halt. All are well here. Give my *salaams* to all at Burpur.”

When Rashid swung back onto the train, the tall man was sitting on his bunk rubbing and mixing tobacco and lime in the palm of his hand prior to putting it into his mouth. He gave Rashid a *dangerous* look.

“You push me again and it will be the last time you ever push anyone!” he said in a menacing voice. “Be grateful

I haven't *slit* your scrawny throat...give me an occasion again and I will slit it from ear-to-ear."

Rashid was stunned. He looked around, the other passengers had all heard the threat, but were pretending to have not heard. A little *ball* of fear was forming; it hung in the air. Who was this tall man, Rashid thought, he could be a gangster: his pocket had a bulge – who knows what's concealed in it!

The turbaned man was no longer jovial and lighthearted. He sat looking out of the window, his expression severe and grim. Track changes were loud as the diesel engine accelerated gathering speed. Dusk was darkening the sky; what had the night in store for him? There were eight men in the compartment, would some of them *band* together, if the occasion arose, against the turbaned one? Could he be a gangster in disguise, pretending to be a villager?

The turbaned man looked up at a man in an upper bunk; a veiled sign passed between them. Rashid's heart skipped a beat: how *many were they*? The silence became sinister. Rashid glanced at his companion, a fat man who

looked away immediately, but Rashid saw the *fear* in his eyes and realized there would be no help there. Rashid felt alarmed and all alone. He was a Muslim in a carriage where, he supposed, all others were Hindus.

The train would arrive at Burpur at eleven p.m.; Rashid would have to remain awake and vigilant until that time. The train slowed again - another station was coming up; the train halted with a jerk. Hawkers passed the window shouting their wares. No one moved in the compartment. The fans hummed stirring the now stilled air.

Rashid would have liked to go out to smoke, but he felt a reluctance to do so. All his possessions were in a *small Rexene covered box* that he was using as a pillow; he wouldn't like to take it out with him and show distrust of his fellow passengers, and yet he was reluctant to leave it behind; so he sat, head bent, staring at his hands until he heard the whistle and the train started again.

The Ticket Examiner came in through the swaying vestibule connecting the bogies.



He wore the official dark jacket and white trousers which was short and exposed his sagging socks. He surveyed the section and immediately saw that there were two extra passengers.

He harrumphed and sat on the berth nearest the vestibule.

“Tickets!” he said in a surly voice.

The occupants handed him their tickets one by one. He examined them closely. The two extra persons had valid tickets for the next station and so were allowed to stay. The tall villager with the large turban was the last to submit his ticket. The Examiner looked at it distractedly and asked:

“How old are you?”

“Look for yourself, or can’t you read?”

“I have the right to ask you questions to establish you are the same person in whose name this ticket is issued,” retorted the Railway official, “Either you satisfy me or I will *summon* the Railway Police.”

“Please don’t hassle us,” said a man who was watching from an adjoining upper bunk. “He is 55 years old as that ticket says.”

The Ticket Examiner reluctantly handed back the ticket and moved on to the next compartment.

So, now there are three of them, Rashid noted with alarm. Should he go and ask the Ticket Collector to move him to another compartment, but the train was full; why would anyone want to change births with him when all were making themselves comfortable for the night? And what could he tell the Ticket Examiner? That he suspected the man was a ruthless gangster, with his gang around him?

Rashid had no peace of mind. He had been sitting for the last hour without moving for fear of attracting the turbaned one's attention. He sat huddled in a corner and was careful to not let his actions appear provoking.

He sneaked a look at his watch, 10:45! His heart leapt. He had only fifteen minutes to endure this torture and then he would jump off the train and head for his in-laws' small town. *Yippee!*

The train began to lose speed. He got up and made for the toilet. The turbaned man looked steadily at him and sat up. Rashid's heart jumped into his mouth. Was the man suspecting that Rashid would get off at the next stop? Would

he and his cronies then follow him? A little plan formed in his mind.

Coming out of the toilet, he announced in a loud voice, “A station is coming and I am going to get off here to smoke a cigarette. I haven’t had one the whole day and I am *dying* for a puff!”

He went to the door and yanked it open and looked out. The platform was coming up. He looked back inside and his heart *froze*: four men including the turbaned man had got off their bunks and stood up. They seemed to be staring at him. Rashid would have to spring a surprise.

The platform was underneath now and the train was decelerating rapidly. Rashid stretched sideways, grabbed his suitcase, and leapt off the train running with it to keep his balance. *But* he fell and somersaulted: his elbow and knees were scraped, he was sound otherwise. He got up and headed off towards the fields, jumping a crude, sagging, barbed-wire fence.

He looked back when he heard the screech of the train brakes and saw the thugs craning their necks looking backwards into the *darkness* to where Rashid had jumped off.

He also saw one of them alighting from a now distant compartment.

Rashid was not going to risk hiring transport for fear of being followed; he would make his way through the fields *sprint-walking* along the raised bunds that separated each small plot from the other. The moon would give him ample light.

He reached his in-laws' place, disheveled, aching, and panting, but immensely relieved: he had outsmarted the gang of thugs!

Once bathed and medicated, Rashid was asked to relate the incident in detail. Of late undesirables had terrorized the small town and as this was a 'Muslim village', a special vigilante squad had been delegated to look after it.

Rashid's story caused a stir in the neighborhood, especially the possibility that the terrorists may have *de-trained* at Burpur to avenge a slight Rashid had caused to their proud leader. All were advised to be vigilant and to secure all doors through the night.

Two days elapsed and the incident of the train became a dim memory. Rashid was fêted and looked after by his in-

laws. It was two years since he had last visited; on that occasion he had brought his wife along, now he was questioned repeatedly as to why he had not brought her. Rashid's explanation that she had not been feeling too well lately was not accepted: "Do you mean she is too unwell to meet her parents? If she is that unwell, *have* you taken her to a doctor?"

Rashid stated that she was being treated for weakness and the doctor had prescribed tonics for her. Rashid did not want her to undertake a journey that would exhaust her. But he promised to bring her soon – when she felt stronger.

"Also," Rashid pointed out, "had she been with me, I don't know how I would have *got away* from those goons. She would not have been able to jump off the train like I did."

News one morning that terrorists had raided an adjacent town at night demanding food and money shocked all. Rashid was summoned to appear before the village headman to describe what had taken place on the train.

The family, along with neighbors, trooped to Gulam Rasool's headquarters later that day. This was a serious development that needed to be *nipped in the bud*. The headman had authority to request more police patrolling in incidents such as these, where life to the Muslims was at threat.

They were kept waiting for a long time before Gulam Rasool walked out, "*Salaam alaikum.*" he greeted the gathering in his gruff voice. He was tall, wore an earring in his left ear, and his head was covered with a large untidy turban. He smiled showing long tobacco stained teeth.



## **A Secret Seduction**

*~A story of a young maid sexually exploited at her workplace in suburban India*

“Oh my God!” she groaned. “It’s happening again!” She felt a tingling and stiffening down her spine and her toes started to bend downwards. She was grateful it was night time and that she was in the privacy of her cubicle.

Bitu (a congenitally deformed house help) slept in the corridor a few feet away from the six foot wooden partitioned cubicle that the maid, Lakhi, was allotted. He was awakened by the guttural sounds emanating from Lakhi’s cubicle. His

heart pounded and his excitement heightened, for he knew what the sounds signified. He picked up a chair and placed it next to the half partition. He climbed with difficulty and peered over. In the dim light he made out Lakhi's stiff form lying on the cot. He climbed over the partition and lowering himself on top of a chest-of drawers inside the barrier, and carefully stepped down. He was aroused and hard already. He fondled Lakhi's breasts. With shaking hands he undressed her fully, while he too shed his clothes. He'd better hurry, he thought, lest he *comes* before he enters her.

The last time Lakhi had had an apoplectic seizure was over six months ago. Bitu had heard her guttural sounds and was frightened. He had knocked repeatedly on her door and had then gone to his master's bedroom and knocked, but the *Sahib* and *Memsahib* were asleep and could not hear his hesitant knocking over the sound of the air conditioner. He did *not* know what to do...was she dying? That first time too he pulled up a chair and clambered up and looked over the partition: Lakhi lay on the floor... *stark naked!* Bitu was



embarrassed and quickly climbed down. He tried to erase the picture of her from his mind: they were bad thoughts; devil induced thoughts. He had to help Lakhi...perhaps he should cover her body before waking her...that way she would not be embarrassed. He clambered up the partition again and tried to not look at Lakhi. He pulled a sheet and covered her. He was trembling and his manhood was embarrassing him. He tried seriously to wake Lakhi, but with no success. He decided he would lift her back onto the bed. He bent down, put his arms around her and tried to lift and drag at the same time. The sheet, caught under his foot, was ripped off her and he was left clutching a naked figure whose ripe right breast was in his face. Bitu *gasp*ed and started to cry: Lord he had tried to be decent but the *devil* had won. He sank to the floor, kissing and caressing her.

It was a night of many *firsts*: it was the first time he had touched a woman's naked body; the first time he had fondled and kissed a woman's breast; it was also the first time he had had *sex*.

When Lakhi awoke in the morning she remembered she had suffered a seizure; she had been prone to seizures from the age of seven - ten years now. People in her village had said she would get over her malaise at puberty. Well, it had not happened. Obviously, the attacks were becoming more severe she concluded, for after the last seizure she had a liquid discharge and bleeding from the vagina which felt sore and sensitive and the orifice seemed larger; her nipples looked red and felt tender; all of which she could not understand.

She had kept her seizures a close secret, so far, but now thought she would confide in and tell all to Panchu, her *sahib* (boss). He was reasonable and kind and would surely sympathize and take her to a doctor. *Memsahib*, though, was an enigma: she may or may not empathize and could very well dismiss her. Her family in her village depended heavily on the meager amounts she sent them each month; she was too poor to risk losing her job.

Lakhi was the same age as Sunny, Panchu's son. Every time she went to clean his room, Sunny's eyes would follow her and he would order her to do jobs that would make her

*bend over* so he could look at her breasts. She, however, had eyes only for Panchu – whom she secretly loved and who would tip her well after parties when she had an extra burden of cleaning up the after-party-mess.

Early mornings she would tiptoe into Panchu's bedroom with his tea, collect his underclothes off the floor, for the wash, and ease out silently. On occasions she had glimpsed his early morning erection under the bed sheet which produced a catch in her throat and sent her pulse racing – she daydreamed of amorous contacts with him. She had once sidled up against him purposely, letting her breasts firmly brush his arm. He had looked hard at her and his gaze had registered some annoyance. She would have to be very careful; she didn't want the *Memsahib* to throw her out. She had already been warned to not go into the bedroom without knocking, but Lakhi had a ready excuse: she did not want to wake the *Memsahib* who usually slept till midday.

And then, one day, Lakhi threw up on the carpet!

The family sat in the lounge reading and chatting; Lakhi was dusting in one corner when she suddenly jerked around and clamped her hand to her mouth. She staggered forward with deep retching sounds and vomited. She ran to the pantry. The family was shocked and sat in stunned silence. “What happened to her?” Mrs. Madhup (Panchu’s wife) lifted her ample self off the sofa and waddled in pursuit of the maid.

“Well, to me it looks suspiciously like the nausea of early pregnancy,” she announced on returning.

“Pregnant?” repeated Panchu incredulously. “How can she be pregnant? Did you ask her who the father is?”

“Of course I did.” stated Mrs. M. “Do you think she would tell? I can’t imagine how that halfwit, Bitu, could possibly enamor such a pretty girl. But then who else is there?” Every eye turned to Sunny who flushed red and spilt some tea from his cup onto his trousers. All had noticed how Sunny’s eyes would follow Lakhi every time she came into the room. Sunny was spared an answer when Panchu rose and announced that he would take Lakhi to a doctor right away.

Bitu cowered in a corner in the kitchen. His mind was still that of a twelve year old. What had happened? Could it possibly *involve* him? Could he have possibly made her pregnant? There was no way anyone could get him to admit that. And if, God forbid, Lakhi was to know what he had done...? No! No! It was too horrible to contemplate. As it was, every time he let his body brush against hers she turned around and spat in his face. She loathed him!

What was to become of him? Would they thrash him? He put his thumb in his mouth - peace came flooding into him - he curled up in a corner and put his other hand between his thighs cupping his genitals.

Panchu brought Lakhi back from the doctor. "I'm afraid she *is* pregnant. And she won't tell who the father is. We have questioned her repeatedly and I get the feeling that she doesn't know either? Anyway, the Police will be here to question us all, I suppose."

"Bloody bitch!" spat Mrs. M. "I knew I should never have employed her - a pretty girl is bound to tempt all you males." she looked directly at her husband. "Don't think you

are above suspicion. With all your kindness and tipping and all...”

“Mom, please!” interjected the son. “Don’t be crude. Let’s find out before we start pointing fingers.”

And so a household gathering was arranged in the lounge. But *nothing* came of it. Mrs. M was, by now, extremely angry. “Look here”, she said loudly, “Did he do it?” she asked Lakhi pointing at her son. Sunny was standing there thinking - which lucky son-of-a bitch got into her pants, when the questioning finger hit his direction. He gasped turning red. “Was it my husband then?” she screamed. Panchu looked annoyed and Lakhi looked at him and sighed, wish it was. “Well, can it be that oaf, Bitu, then?” she yelled pointing at him. Bitu jerked, convulsed and nearly fell, but held the door for support. Could they have found out he panicked. He felt he was going to die, but the wrath of Mrs. M had already turned to Lakhi. “Tell me you bitch, before I slap the shit out of you!” Panchu restrained his wife and the meeting was over.

The Police came a little later, rummaged around and searched each room, confiscating certain articles. In Sunny's room they discovered a *cache* of condoms that embarrassed him in front of all.

All three males of the household were taken into custody and driven to the forensic laboratory for body samples for DNA testing. Lakhi was also taken. All males were later released, but Lakhi was kept at the Police reform institution. She still looked stunned and bewildered.

Lakhi lay on the cot allotted to her in her new surroundings. She tried to figure out what happened. Everything was normal this morning. She had quietly slipped into the master bedroom with the tea tray, collected the strewn underclothing and departed. All was well until she got sick on the carpet earlier this morning. Hell, was it such a sin? And what was all this carrying on about her being pregnant? How could she be pregnant...surely lascivious thoughts couldn't make one pregnant, could they? She recalled her daydreams involving Panchu.

The Police jeep arrived some weeks later when things had settled down.

“Is the family in?” asked the rotund Inspector, of Bitu.

“Yes” taking a step back in fright.

“Please call them out.”

“Hello, Inspector,” said Panchu. “So have you found the culprit?”

“Yes, Sir, we have”, in a steely voice.

“Would the culprit be from this household?”

“Yes, I am afraid so.”

“Good heavens, Inspector, I...I...hope it is not Sunny?”

“No, Sir, it is not.” and the family breathed a sigh of relief.

“It is you, Sir,” mouth compressed in a straight line.

“No, seriously, who is the suspect?” asked Panchu.

“I do not joke in such matters, Sir. I shall have to handcuff you.” Panchu’s eyes popped out in disbelief.

“I’m afraid, Sir, you have been visiting Lakhi. Your semen was detected on the girl’s underclothing. As she is underage, the charge is serious”



“That’s preposterous!” bellowed Panchu. Sunny looked at his father with mouth agape. Mrs. M looked at her husband contemptuously and sneered, “So that’s why the heavy sedatives. I said I didn’t need them *anymore*, but you insisted. You bloody womanizing rapist.”

Sunny couldn’t believe his ears. How could Dad be like that? *How* would he meet his neighborhood and school friends? What would they say? How bloody crummy! Shit!

Mr. Panchu Madhup was remanded to judicial custody until the DNA test results became available.

Panchu was shocked and horrified at the *attitude* of his family. So easily had they accepted an untruth and condemned him. His honour was defiled and his life lay in shambles. How had his semen been found on the girls underclothing? How, *how*?

On 15<sup>th</sup> December, Lakhi gave birth to a deformed male child. DNA testing later showed that the child matched the DNA of the household male help, Bitu. In her childbirth dying declaration Lakhi admitted that on the day of her medical examination, she was wearing Panchu’s underwear -

which early that morning she had picked up still wet with his semen - from his bedroom floor.

*Before* the birth of Lakhi's child, Panchu, desolate and disillusioned, forsaken by his family and friends, had taken his life.



## **Bhalwa**

~A private forest reserve in eastern India

The stately house that my great grandfather built in the early 1800s stood on a hundred and fifteen acres of prime land surrounded with forests on all sides. The holding embraced orchards of mango that produced the choicest succulent fruit; an area of guava - trees that we, as kids, would climb playing 'catch', and a mixed stand of various fruit, plum, and lemon. The aura, the calm serenity, and the enchantment of the

Private resort drew the family, every cold season, to its portals.

Hunting in the forests at Bhalwa was a favorite sport with the family and game was plentiful in the extensive private forest. Usually after the mid day meal and a rest, the family would gather for an *outing* in a jeep to shoot jungle fowl, partridge, or other game birds for sport and pot. We, the younger ones, used 16 bore shotguns, .410s, or .22 rifles and were encouraged to take first shot at game or bird, as training in marksmanship was highly desired in scions of landed gentry.

After four to five hours of a thrilling hunting trip in the forest, we returned home. Game, that was bagged, was unloaded from the jeep and could comprise of jungle fowl, partridge, green pigeon, a hare or two, and sometimes a muntjac (chink). Whilst we unlimbered (and got our circulation going, after a bone chilling trip in the cold air of an open jeep) the cook would be summoned and instructed how the game was to be prepared: roasted, curried, or hung from the rafters to attain that most desirable 'gamey' smell.

During the day we took exploratory hikes around the compound or swam in the river or (my favorite) lay in easy chairs in the sun reading Mickey Spillane or Agatha Christi thrillers. I would be lulled into drowsiness by the many birdcalls and the soothing sight of bees and butterflies making their way amongst the flowers. The garden covered a large area and was terraced in places. Intricate cement drains carried water to every corner. On a walk through the garden, the gentle aroma of roses would give way to the sweetish smell of sweet peas growing through bamboo trellises and further on, past tall molded iron storks decorating a fountained pool, to a large jujube tree from the branches of which, on thick ropes, hung a swing.

The monotonous call of the ‘brain-fever’ bird or the raucous squabbling of jungle babblers disturbed my catnap and dragged me back from dreamland. I then continue reading from where I had nodded off.

But we were unaware of the danger that lay in wait!

During a winter leave at Bhalwa, an incident comes clearly to mind: my brother, cousin, and I had enjoyed the

hunt and after dinner, which comprised the game we had bagged, we prepared for bed. There was no electricity in the house so we brushed our teeth by the light of a hurricane oil lamp and raced each other to bed. The last person in would have to put out the lamp. My brother was slower than we and would often have the losers' task of lowering the lamp wick for the night.

That particular night whilst my cousin and myself huddled under coverings with our knees pulled up to our chest to fight the icy cold of the sheets, my brother decided to take the lamp to his bedside table to enable him to douse the flame by extending his arm from under the coverings. As I recall, instead of diving under the blankets, as was our custom, he did an unusual thing: prior to diving under the *covers*, he first turned down the eiderdown of his bed and gasped. Coiled neatly in the warmest place, was a *banded krait* - one of the deadliest snakes of India.

My grandfather believed: “When a person’s time is not up, God, in his mysterious ways, exposes the danger.” The truth of this realism will stay with me forever.



## **Spirits of the Lake**

*~A story based on folklore, common in forest villages of northern India*

This place is evil, said Talsar Singh

He lived in official Forest Accommodation built on a prominence overlooking a large scenic lake some 300 feet below. A village of some thirty odd indiscriminate houses straddled the northern end of the lake whilst wild migrating mallards, orange Brahmin's, and storks dotted the lake waters in the winter.



Conversation at the village square invariably oppressed and filled him with foreboding. The men spoke of ghosts and *churails* (spirits) that lived in the lake and assumed varied forms – especially of young beautiful women - that could, and often did, lure unmarried men and overcome them. The men in a state of ecstasy followed them into the water and were sucked under. It was believed that if a person *spoke* (even once) to these *churails* or acknowledged their greetings they would be hypnotically attracted and have no power against their bewitchment.

The story had an electric affect on Talsar: a man with a vivid imagination - he was thoroughly rattled, and showed it - much to the amusement of the village folk.

“Look at their feet,” Talsar was told, “if they are *Churails* their feet will point backwards, that’s how you can tell.”

Talsar would surreptitiously look at the feet of the village girls when he ‘*made eyes*’ at them or engaged them in conversation. The girls caught on to this and would wear long skirts that hid their feet, leaving Talsar floundering in confusion.

Talsar made certain he was home *well* before dark. He cooked his meals over a kerosene stove and locked himself securely in his room. No amount of knocking or calling out his name induced him to open the door; he had heard *churails* could speak in the voice of acquaintances and friends.

Village youngsters occasionally trekked up to Talsar's cabin at night and threw stones on the galvanized tin roof to frighten him. They would call out his name and threaten him with dire consequences if he did not open the door. Next morning Talsar told the village elders of the episode and how the *churails* had tried to get him to open the door.

Talsar became the butt of all jokes and an object of fun and entertainment. Of course, Talsar had no idea that his '*leg was being pulled*' and defended himself with indignation.

Innocence has its own attraction, and so innocent love visited his lonely and disturbed life.

She was the daughter of a woodcutter who drank too much and was often in fights. He had no permanent work and depended on Talsar to pick him to the '*weekly work gang*' for odd jobs in the forest. He was paid at the end of the week and

future work depended on whether he was picked the following Monday.

Gauri, a young, nubile, elf-like girl was this wood cutters daughter who helped at home, working on their small plot of land behind the house, and looked after the livestock. She was pretty, quick-witted, and full of fun and laughter. It was her last year at school after which the family would look for a suitable boy for her to wed.

Talsar noticed her when he first came to the village. She teased him about the *churails* and was the one to wear long dresses that covered her feet. To tease him she would look at him with a strange fixed stare that left Talsar completely nonplussed and scared. The small hairs on the back of his neck rose and he got very agitated. Gauri would burst out laughing and raise her skirt to show him her feet. In time she felt sorry for him and realized that his plight was real - he *really* was petrified of ghosts and spirits.

A bond grew between the two young people; she saw how gullible and simple he was and sided and protected him when she felt the *churail* stories were frightening him. She

did her best to assure him that these were only stories and that no one in the village had seen any *churails*, but Talsar was cynical, “No one has seen God, that doesn’t mean he is not there!”

The festival season was a difficult time for him. Small theatrical groups (*nautanki’s*) arrived at the village and put on shows that lasted well past midnight. Only if someone offered a bed to Talsar for the night, would he stay back and enjoy the dancing and singing. The lack of such an offer would see him make his way back to his ‘*quarters*’ before dark. The disappointed look in Gauri’s eyes squeezed his heart, but no one knew the terror *churails* held for him.

At times when he did attend these festivities, he would sit so he could glance casually at the ‘*women’s section*’ to espy Gauri and watch the light in her eyes that always brought a catch to his throat. Their glances locked and held for lingering stolen moments.

Talsar was not aware that his surreptitious peeks had been noticed by the gathering. They smiled behind their hands and jostled to give Talsar a seat that gave him a clear

view of Gauri. Talsar thanked fate for this consideration, unaware that his friends engineered his good luck.

He considered approaching Gauri's father by yearend to ask for her hand. That would save the father from having to look for a suitable boy and Talsar, on his part, would promise to do his best to enroll him in the forest rolls as a permanent worker – thus ensuring for him a regular assured income.

The day Talsar was fished out of the lake started as any ordinary day. Talsar cooked an early breakfast and walked down the path skirting the lake heading to the village and then on to the forest - his work place. Talsar spent all day at work there, supervising road repairs and '*fire line*' cutting. He usually had a snack lunch in the late afternoons and continued work until 5 pm. That day he had not carried his lunch with him. This was not unusual as often when work was close to the village he preferred to walk back to his billet for a short lunch. That day too, he took the road skirting the lake, but on his way he saw Gauri collecting firewood in the green belt between the road and the lake. His heart leaped

with pleasure; he would steal a moment to chat with her before proceeding further. He scrambled down the slope to meet her. She smiled bewitchingly and backed off.

She is playing games with me thought Talsar and lengthened his stride.

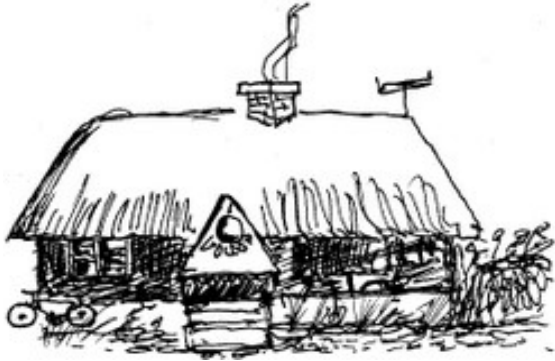
Villagers grazing their cattle saw Talsar scramble down the slope and wondered at it. Perhaps he had gone to relieve himself – but they had glimpsed his face and he was grinning broadly. Now why should he be grinning so, they wondered, ambling towards the spot. On reaching the area they could not see him, it was only a narrow piece of land between the lake and the road and yet he was nowhere to be seen. They put it out of their minds thinking he must be behind a bush until one of them pointed to *ripples* in the lake.

Realization hit them then and they rushed down into the lake waters. A short search and the body was found and dragged out. They laid the body on the damp ground and pumped his chest in a form of resuscitation. Fortunately Talsar regained consciousness and looked around incomprehensibly. He was lifted and with two men supporting him taken to the village dispensary.

There he lay in a cot with two men rubbing hot oil into the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands. He slowly lost his stricken look and a warm glass of milk brought color back to his cheeks.

A small crowd, gathered outside, was eager to hear Talsar's story and strained their necks through the open window to hear every word he said. After a lot of prodding and persuading by the local doctor, Talsar, in a slow wavering voice told them how Gauri had lured him into the lake. She had smiled at him whilst all the time beckoning him to come to her.

“But, didn’t you see her feet?” someone asked  
“I did,” said Talsar in a weak voice. “They were normal, the *right way round!*”



## **The Morning After**

Sam had lost his job as a fruit sorter at the wholesale fruit market.

He wasn't paid a duchess' dowry, but enough to fetch him two square meals, a twist of tobacco, and a bottle of the local hooch every day

He shared his digs with two other mates; they too did off-line sub minimal jobs. But, sheez! They still had their jobs, didn't they? And it put food in their stomachs. Sam didn't give up his bunk; his mates had chipped in to keep the



rental on his billet valid. Sam was grateful- flee ridden it might be, but it was still '*home sweet home*'!

He was procuring the odd few jobs: cleaning out the trashcan containing rotting fish entrails (pew!), swabbing down trawler decks... any thing that paid money was welcome. Sam was under forty with a body that was lean wiry and strong; he could '*work a horse off its hind legs*' they said.

These days he couldn't afford a drink (*bloody disaster!*) so the evenings stretched out long and slow. He got to thinking – he had plenty of time to do that now – he'd have to get his life back on track, enough of wallowing in this '*self-pity*' stuff. He thought of his better days: his courtship and marriage, the days he held down a good job (*those were the days*, huh?). He was loath to think of the break up of his marriage and his slow spiral into drunken squalor.

Denise was sweet and innocent - they *all were* that way in the beginning- her good looks *turned* many a head and that was his undoing. Her dazzling smile charmed all; he would walk down the street proudly with her on his arm and all would tip their hats to her. He loved her, man, honest he did!

Frank, his immediate boss, suave, slick talking, and well turned-out, took a g'dam *hankering* after them, always around he was, feeding them at expensive joints, entertaining them, giving them gifts, and taking them out for spins in his sports coupe (Sam would have to squeeze and huddle into the space behind the two seats – damned uncomfortable it was). Sam could not understand why Frank was being so ‘*goody, goody*’ to them. Not until one rainy afternoon when he caught Frank and Denise in his *own* bloody bed! Then he understood. Yeah, he did too! And his temper exploded. He kicked Frank’s *bare ass* out the front door into the pelting rain.

“Please, Sam, give me my clothes,” Frank begged. “Don’t throw me out stark naked on the street; think of your job, Sam.”

But Sam had laughed and slammed the door in his face, “suffer, you f-----g cur!” he yelled through the door.

Sam swung around his anger assuaged. His wife, his sweet darling wife, got out from under the blanket: *slim and lovely, stark nude, her breasts firm*; she stood with arms akimbo in front of him. “You want to throw me out too?” she

jeered, facing him defiantly. And then he saw her eyes, the look pierced his heart: the loathing and contempt were smoldering there. He gulped, stumbled, and shot through into the rain himself, desperate to get away.

Them were far off days, man; dimmed in memory with alcohol that had softened and driven away the pain. Now with his mind clearing, the memory was stark again, and he felt a stab of despair at having let his life slide into such intoxicated insouciance. She hadn't done it; he had done it to himself. He determined to set his life back in order again. And with that decision he felt his resolve beginning to assert itself. He was working night shifts too now and was able to save a little something every day. He'd have to get out of this rut; do something dignified, and he did: with sheer guts and determination.

#### HOEST SAM – BOOKIE

Proclaimed the billboard nailed up against a wooden shack. Sam would give odds against *almost* anything. One could lay bets with Honest Sam and rest assured of a fair return. Sam was meticulously honest and forthright. He had nearly gone under a few times, but the mathematically proven odds

favouring the bookie let him survive and prosper. In time his business grew and Sam moved into better accommodation.

Sam's social acceptance arrived quite swiftly. His growing wealth suffused an acceptable stature to his position and insured a place for him in the social hierarchy. He dressed well and spoke well. He was invited to most functions in town and was generally seen to hobnob with the 'well to do' genre.

Sam contemplated marriage again; he was lonely, marriage would help him put Denise *firmly* out of his mind once and for all. He would be careful not to make the same mistake again. He would choose a woman for her integrity and stability; he would never fall for good looks ever again... *she stepped out from under the blanket: slim and lovely, stark nude her breasts firm ...* Sam put his palms over his eyes. God! Would he ever be able to put her loveliness out of his mind? "Please, Lord, let me get over her; she is evil!" he prayed.

Shelly was a widow with a small child: a little boy. (Ideal, thought Sam). She came from a *good* though not rich family;

she was finding it a struggle to make ‘*ends meet*’. At the close of the month, the pay of a schoolteacher was exhausted. A deep scar across her face sadly marred her beautiful bright eyes and pleasant smile. A scar she had received in an accident in which her husband had died. She was quiet and even-tempered. *Exactly*, thought Sam, the kind of woman he was looking for.

Sam took to courting her. She was reluctant at first and was always very proper. Oh, excellent! Sam thought. He worked hard at charming her and slowly she relaxed in his company and began to trust him. He had, after all, got over his blind drinking sprees, hadn’t he? It showed great *strength* of character.

The town readied for the popular wedding. “So decent of Sam to give the poor woman a second chance,” they said. “Sam is a gem! Look how he has turned out.”

Sam prepared his house to receive Shelly. It was apparent he had finally made it. He went to bed with a smile on his face.

Sam surfaced from a deep alcoholic daze. Where was he? He looked up; the sky was light. Was it dawn or sunset? He raised himself and leaned against the wall. It slowly came back to him: the wedding preparations; arranging a priest who would come to the house to perform the nuptials; the catering and food, beverage and grog - everything was in place. He had retired to bed '*dog-tired*' and happy.

Sometime at night a little sound awakened him and he switched on the bedside lamp. *She stepped out from under the blanket: slim and lovely, stark nude, her breasts firm ...* Sam gasped and rubbed his eyes. Denise was back!

She slipped under the covers; her sinuous body wrapped itself around his and inflamed his awakening libido. She rubbed and manipulated him until his body was taut as a violin string, she then thrust him into herself, and Sam was *blown away!*

She kept him in the bedroom for four whole days. Feeding him copious amounts of alcohol and coaxing him to feats of repeated sex. Sam remained in a daze. He was either 'passed out' or in the throes of an orgasm.

On the fifth day he came out of his stupor, and looked around for Denise; he went looking for her, swaying down the hallway. There was a sound from the spare room. He opened the door and stood gaping: Denise was straddling Frank, her old lover, both were moaning in ecstasy ‘bare arsed naked’ and heaving.

The old anger came exploding back. She had completely ruined him once and now she was doing it again. All his days of struggle and desolation engulfed his senses. She is evil, flashed through his mind, she has returned to ruin him and grab his wealth.

He went back to his room, pulled out a handgun from a drawer, and tiptoed back. He shot them both as they reached their groaning climax.

As the thunder of the twin explosions died, he pulled a bottle of whisky from a crate and slobbered it neat down his throat. He sat there drinking steadily watching their blood slowly coagulate. Flies found their eyes and open mouths. Strangely, he felt nothing: no remorse, no regret, just a numbness that engulfed him. As dusk gathered, he lurched

off through back lanes, bottle in hand, going who know where.

He tried to take stock of himself. He retched in the gutter and noticed he had finished the bottle. He heard a police siren and pushed himself off the wall. He crossed the street and started to climb some wide stairs.

“Halt!” the voice came from below. “Halt or we shoot.” Sam was beyond caring. The police gave chase and had no difficulty catching him.

It was two days before Sam was sober enough to be produced before a magistrate. The charges were read out and Sam pleaded ‘*not guilty*’ to murder and to a second charge of culpable homicide. Sam was remanded to judicial custody.

The extreme mental provocation that was thrust upon Sam and the Machiavellian manipulations that he had been subjected to were points of debate and speculation by the towns’ folk. The general consensus was that though Sam was weak and manipulative, especially in the hands of someone



as beguiling and malevolent as Denise, a murderer he was *not!*

The verdict of the court, when it came, reflected the popular opinion and Sam was set free on a suspended sentence.

Sam rang the doorbell repeatedly, but Shelly would not answer. He could hear the prater of her child, but she would not respond. Sam's excitement slowly died and a sense of hopelessness suffused his mind. He realized Shelly would not forgive him - if only she would let him explain things to her. But how could he explain what he had *allowed* Denise to do to him? How ever would he explain the sexual power Denise wielded...he was a puppet in her hands. But now it was finally over. She would never haunt his mind. How could he explain that to her?

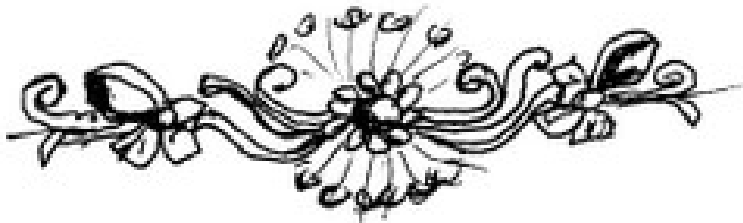
Sam realized that even in death Denise was once again destroying his life. He saw the hopelessness of it all: how could he expect Shelly to understand? He slumped down on the steps in despair and buried his head in his hands.

He didn't know how long he was on the steps. A sound made him look up. He saw Shelly standing there, a few feet from him. She was looking at him and she didn't look angry. Sam jumped up and Shelly moved forward and embraced him.

“You don't have to say anything, I have spent the last hour trying to understand the situation and I think I now understand it in my own way. So don't say anything. Let's *bury* it. All I know is that I love you very much and if you'll have me I am willing to marry you.”

Sam shut his eyes tight, but tears squeezed past and wet his face. His body shook with emotion as he thanked the Lord for his mercy.

Sam had finally kicked out the odious trappings of Denise's memory!



## **Final Analysis**

Madan was in love! This had to be love: he satisfied all the requirements of someone in love; let's see: he thought constantly about her (Bina), he rang her umpteen times a day; their conversations were long and, to an outsider, nonsensical (an important requirement), he liked the way she looked and loved her little ways; he loved all her facial expressions: her eyes, yes, her eyes he simply adored; her body was great and he just couldn't stop kissing her. What more was required? "Sure," he assured himself, he was in love.

They were both working people and *flat broke*. Well, if that wasn't a level playing field...? He had asked her to marry him and she had said, "Later, after we have saved some money." she always said these very wise things. That's why he loved her, no?

"December," he decided. "Yes, December would be a nice time to get married." That would give them...let's see, eleven months to collect some money. "That should be OK huh, Honey?" She looked at him and smiled indulgently. How does it matter, she thought, December or March or whenever, when they had enough money they'd get married and that was that.

Bina met Madan on a bus to Simla. Madan and his friend, Lalit, were on the bus taking a short holiday to get away from the heat of the plains. Boy and girl sat across the aisle and smiled when ever the bus lurched and their eyes met...which was very often. In Simla all three had constantly run into each other; there is only the one main street and so one is bound to meet often. Madan and Bina were attracted to each other and by the time the holiday was over, *love* had

visited them. Lalit was completely ‘cheesed off’ with Madan’s constant mooning over Bina. They had come to enjoy the sights of Simla, but Madan enjoyed only the sight of Bina. Lalit was, therefore, forced to take walks alone.

All three returned by bus after the short refreshing holiday. This time Madan and Bina sat together and Lalit sat across the aisle –there was no need for surreptitious eye contacts across the aisle.

Madan sought out Lalit one evening to give him the good news. “Hey, buddy of mine, where have you been?”

Lalit smiled crookedly, “I’ve been here... all along I’ve been here! Since our return from Simla you have not found time to ‘*get together*’”.

“That will all change, Pal, all will change. We’ve decided to *tie the knot*, Bina and I, and I want you to be the first person to know. A small affair... we want it to be a small affair, you know, just close friends, her parents and mine. Hey, what do you say, ol’ Buddy.”

“Great, man! Wow! When does all this happen?”

“Probably December, Jan., Feb., you know, sometime then. We are saving money like ‘*absolutely*’. Should have enough by then...what about you, matey? When will you get married? Look for a dame, man, and we could get married together. Wouldn’t that be absolutely fantastic or what?”

Lalit could see his friend’s enthusiasm gushing out of control. He put up his hand to slow him down and then looking him in the eye said somberly, “I am getting married in February!”

Madan was stunned, “What do you mean? What are you saying, man? What do you mean getting married... to bloody whom? I haven’t seen you around with any girl... come on, man, out with it.”

“You haven’t seen me around with any girl because I haven’t been going around with any girl.”

“Then...? Then what?”

“Then, my friend, my parents have arranged for me to wed the daughter of a very respectable family in February next year. My Dad knows them well and they have inter-

business connections. Mum says Meera, that's her name, is very *lovely*."

Madan had his mouth open and shook his head in disbelief, looking boggle eyed at his friend, "What the *hell* are you saying, don't talk crap, man! Are you telling me that you are having an *arranged* marriage, are you off your nut? And we are supposed to be emancipated young men! What's wrong with you... are you completely bonkers or what? How can you share the rest of your life with someone you've *never* met?"

In February of the following year there was a joint marriage – if one can call it that. Apart from the fact that the two events took place on the same day, there was almost nothing else in common - even the venues were widely apart.

Madan and Bina's wedding was registered at the local Registrar's office. A small reception was held on the lawns of a hotel where they were booked to spend the following two nights. It was a close and intimate affair where both families and their close friends intermingled freely and enjoyed the wedding. The newly weds honeymooned at a beach resort

where their intimacy *grew*, and their bank balance *dwindled*. Nevertheless, they were ‘*heady*’ with happiness and ‘*moon-eyed*’ in love: they knew well enough to avoid areas of friction and to steer a cheerful course. Each had a deep respect for the other and their interactions were on equal levels.

Lalit and Meera’s wedding was a fairly elaborate affair that stretched into the third day. Friends, relatives and other invitees kept coming and going. Presents were piled high on a corner table and the family, by the third day, was in a tired daze. It was a relief to pack the wedded pair off to honeymoon at the same beach resort where they would meet Madan and his bride, Bina.

The girls took to each other from the very first day. “But why won’t you work anymore after marriage?” asked Bina a few days later. “Don’t you want to be independent and a co-earner? Your husband isn’t exactly rolling in wealth, is he?”



Meera felt some awkwardness in answering, “I don’t know; maybe sometime in the future. At present my husband doesn’t want me to work.”

“What does he want then? Does he want you to wait on him ‘*hand and foot*’?”

“Again, I don’t know, Bina...those are my wifely duties anyway. It’s too early to say anything; we are still working out our attitudes. He is a good man...he is not arrogant or demanding, he does not put me down as I have seen some husbands in arranged marriages do.”

“My God, Meera you amaze me! You are well educated and were the head of your department at work. How can you even talk this way? Do you feel anything for each other? I don’t know if there can be any love; you both hardly know each other. You must have loved somebody in the past - you know... had an affair?”

“No, Bina, I don’t know. I have not had an affair. The usual dating, kissing and the occasional groping in the back seat, but no affair! Regarding my husband, I feel a very strong attraction to him: I want to be near him all the time.

This feeling is stronger than any so called ‘love’ I have felt for another man.”

Their honeymoon over, the couples settled down in their respective homes and turned to running their individual lives. ‘*Nine-to-five*’ jobs usually turn out to be ‘eight-to-seven jobs’...counting travel time. This does not leave much time for entertainment and so, perforce, the two friends and their wives saw each other infrequently. Each wondered how the ‘*married life*’ of the other was turning out. Meera had again started to work and both she and her husband were now living in rented accommodation.

Madan’s and Bina’s exuberant love settled to a steady and deep affection. “This is what I call love,” Madan would tell his friends. “What we had in our early days, and what we swore was infinite and dying-for-each-other love, I now realize, was just exuberant passion. After a big fight, in those early days, we could easily have gone our separate ways and have never seen each other again. It would be terrible for some time, but we would get over it; our egos would never allow us the magnanimity of ‘*eating humble pie*’ and making

up. Now, our relationship has matured: we would never accept separation whatever be the cause. Our love supersedes any cause. This is truly ‘Love’: as solid as an oak; as great and flowing as the mighty *Ganga!*”

Over time, Lalit and Meera underwent a similar metamorphosis: they fell hungrily in love, but very quickly settled down to a steady and deep relationship. Their state of being wedded pre-formed a foundation for this. A child came in their second year of marriage, which bolstered and sealed their conjugation. Friends adjudged them very mature, levelheaded, and happily settled.

\*

In Indian society, not all young males are facile or comfortable in female company. These young men rely *heavily* on their parents to arrange a liaison for them. Love marriages work, but there are failures too. Arranged marriages have their failures, but a larger percentage is successful. ‘*Indian Tradition*’ behoves a tendency to stability, permanence, and mutual sacrifice.

Almost a hundred percent of all Indian film stories revolve around the ‘*love*’ theme. When arranged marriages are shown they are very often depicted in bad light. This has advanced the ‘*Love Marriage*’ custom. However, today if arranged marriages were banned in India (for some reason), a large majority of young men and women would remain unmarried. Indian culture does not promote intimacy between adult unmarried young men and women - though this is happily changing. Encounters remain on a light semi-formal footing. Those that venture beyond this to dating and trysts opt for love marriages.

**MORAL:** The moral of the two instances of marriage is that it is not the system one adopts (‘*Love Marriage*’ or ‘*Arranged Marriage*’), but rather the respect that the partners bring to bear in the liaison that ensures happiness and continuity.



## **Babu Chandra Prasad**

Babu Chandra Prasad could now eventually plan the *Yatra* he had been tentatively mulling for three decades.

Initially his marriage – eleven years ago...his second one, to a saucy girl twenty years his junior – had interrupted his plans; her uninhibited sexuality amazed his straight laced middle-class sensibilities and kept him enraptured; all thoughts of the *yatra* were driven from his mind. He was ecstatically happy, and the perpetual struggle to get ahead in his job assumed insignificance in his mind.

But not in his wife's mind!

Seven years later when age doused the fire in his loins, thoughts of the *yatra* replaced his flaccid sexuality. His Company, which was supposedly on the verge of a crisis, and which he knew was not, would not grant the senior-most accounting ‘Chota Babu’ a short extension to his leave period – without pay, of course - to plan a fifteen-day pilgrimage. The only leave he was allowed spanned ten days with sustenance pay: one third of his wages.

Whenever he requested an extension to his annual leave by a few days, it was disallowed, citing pressure of work and the Company’s dependence on his valuable output

New recruits, with fancy college certificates, joined the Company *ladder* two rungs above him and rapidly increased the ‘rungs’ between him and themselves. Babu Chandra Prasad ploughed on relentlessly; firmly attached to the rung he had been placed upon twenty years ago (and that too after ten years of apprenticeship), and which rung now appeared to represent the zenith of his upward progress. The lack of a college degree in accounting apparently put him at a disadvantage.

He had retired seven days ago. He would love to work a few years more and had asked for an extension. But it was turned down. An irony of fate...for now that he was voluntarily offering his services they were no longer required. The ‘pressure of work’ appeared to have magically vanished; and what of his ‘valuable output’? He shook his head in despair.

Babu Chandra approached his young, and lately, short tempered wife gingerly. His wispy white hair blew under the waft from the ceiling fan and his left hand constantly settled his thinning hair into place. “Why do you keep *salaaming* with your left hand?” she would say in annoyance.

“I do not.”

“Then keep your hands by your side.”

“Listen, Megha,” he started hesitantly, unsure of how to proceed. She looked up from the *sag* she was cleaning for lunch.

“What?”

He swallowed a few times. Over the last few years he had lost weight, looked frail, and walked with a shuffle. He was no longer as tall as he used to be and the top of his wife’s

head was only two inches below his. He hadn't shaved, she noticed, and hoped he wasn't planning on sporting a scruffy 'salt and pepper' beard; his pyjama, she saw, was one he wore yesterday. She was used to seeing him in crisp starched white pyjama, black waist-coat, and a black cap covering his thinning pate as he left for work every morning.

He shuffled forward, "Listen, Megha," he said again, "now that I am retired and have free time, let's go on that *yatra* I've wanted for years to go on."

She looked him in the eye, her expression betrayed patient forbearance, "Chandra ji, you are retired; your Pension cheque is taking its own time to evolve; your Provident Fund pay-out will be sometime in the future – hopefully in the near future. You want to dip into your, not too substantial, savings to go on some hair brained *yatra*? Why, may I enquire, why would you like to do that?"

"Well, before one departs this world...you know...?"

"No I don't! You have repeatedly expounded that God is everywhere and that we should not try to confine him to designated worship places or build monuments and claim he



now only resides within the walls of those edifices. What has changed all that?”

Chandra fidgeted and cleared his throat, “Well, those radical views have sobered over the years. I still hold that god does not only grace those ‘holy’ places and that he is everywhere. I want to visit these holy places to view their historical architecture and to experience the peaceful ambience and see the joy in people’s faces.”

\*

Chandra recalled the time his father had dragged him off on a pilgrimage to Vaishnu Devi during the school break. School breaks always seemed so short and Sudhir, Bishen and he had planned picnics and other exiting joint activities that would keep them together and, especially, away from ‘parental supervision’. Now, *per force*, his freedom had been snatched away: he would be ‘told’ what to do, through the day, each day, for the entire trip. Yuk!!

He was resentful on the trip and had closed his mind to the beauty of the scenic mountains and the joy of inhaling the clear, crisp, mountain air. His parents appeared ecstatic though, and extolled the beauty of the mountains at almost

every step of the climb. Most climbers used some form of walking aid: long bamboo poles were most popular and his mother used one to ease the load on her straining muscles.

Years later, when Chandra in his early twenties was forced to abandon his degree course in accountancy for lack of funds, he questioned his parents as to the wisdom of spending all their hard earned savings to fund trips to various temples around India. His father, who only wore saffron now, appeared quite startled by the question and looked at his son in amazement:

“Beta, would you deny us our salvation?”

“But Father, I have been forced to leave Presidency College in the final year as you can no longer afford the monthly fees.”

“I think, beta, you are quite adequately educated to find a job. More educated than I ever was. With your present level of knowledge you will find a suitable job that will look after your wants adequately. You want to chase degrees for a better future. I want to chase God to find ‘Mukti’, salvation; and thereby a better future.”

“Fine, Father, but I can’t understand why everybody expends so much time and money to secure their future life. What about this life? Is this life inconsequential? If people spent the same time on *this* life in *this* world, our world would be paradise.”

“This life is transitional; we are here for a short period. Our soul is indestructible and will return to this earth over and over again in different forms until we have done enough good deeds to be released from rebirth and attain true salvation when we will exist under the holy aura of the Lord.”

“What about animals Father, how do they pray and how do they do good deeds?”

“Animals do not have intellect and can not do wrong. God’s ‘will’ in the form of instinct guides them through life.”

“Then, I suppose Father, it would be best to be reborn an animal, for then one could do no wrong and thus could attain *Mukti*.”

Chandra’s father’s expression assumed that especial look which indicated that discussion on the present subject was over.

“Just one thing, Father, and I shall say no more on this topic. From my reading and instructions in college it appears very likely that we humans evolved from some other life form. For billions of years Earth must have been a wonderful and pristine place for no living thing did anything wrong for they had no intelligence of their own but were guided by God’s *will*. When Early Man appeared, 5 to 10 million years ago, he could have not done anything wrong for he *lived* by instinct and for millions of years later with very basic intellect, for example the Neanderthal Man that appeared a mere 200, 000 years ago. It is only three or four thousand years ago that man acquired intelligence and later still, the ability to hear the voice of god through his emissaries.

In other words, it’s just since we learnt to follow our different religious paths that the Human race started to do *wrong* or imagined it could wrong god and so pollute the Earth with sin. But very soon, Father, we will physically and chemically so pollute the Planet that Human existence will become impossible. The trees and greenery will start to disappear and with it the larger animals, followed closely by us human and so the race will perish and with humans

exiting, all *wrong doings* will cease. The Earth will again become pure, pristine and sinless. *Life* that will survive us will do no wrong for it will not have ‘intelligence’.

“In years to follow, some *life form* will again gain ascendancy and intelligence. But I hope it will not find *Religion*. The future ascendant living beings will, I am sure, also pollute the environment to an extent that will annihilate them. But at least they would have lived without the stranglehold of a debasing and coercive religious order that has taken more lives and perpetrated more cruelty than all the wars put together.”

His father stood up – his face was severe. “You are a fool! Without studying the scriptures you have formed opinions. What do you know about God? He obviously instructed evolution to bring *man* to a certain level of maturity – a level where *man* could make a decision without god’s intervention, a level where humans could differentiate between right and wrong.

Chandra did not want to further aggravate his father...he kept quiet. He desisted pointing out that if God was ‘all knowing’ he would already know what decision each

person would make and it would make no difference to God, for *good* or *bad* is created by Mankind to serve its own purpose in life. Religions contradict themselves: they project God as 'all knowing' then turn around and preach that God does *not know* what decision *Man* will make; thus demoting God to one who *does not know!*

Megha had heard Chandra repeat this exchange several times, but had only paid passing attention to it. In time she admitted the clarity and force of his thinking, but her strict religious upbringing precluded her acceptance of it.

\*

Deep in his heart Chandra felt his wife would avoid going on a *yatra*. His suspicion of her infidelity had painfully come true. His jealousy was sharp as a freshly honed dagger...for he had espied her insouciance; her flagrant flouncing of their solemn marital vows; he had witnessed her intimacy with Jabbar - the rich married son of the sugar mill owner. Chandra had seen Jabbar in her company when he had surreptitiously followed her on her prolonged trips, bag in

hand, to the vegetable market. In the last few days he had followed her almost every day and burned with agony at the sight of their intimacy. He noticed they could hardly keep their hands off each other. Judging from the level of their easy bonhomie he assumed they had already consummated their sexual fervour. And he surmised with deep pain that the release of their passion must have taken place on his marital bed when he was at work - *his* bed, where he had experienced years of nuptial bliss.

He would confront her with the evidence he had gathered. Accuse her of infidelity and adultery. Confront them both and drag Jabbar's wife into the fracas too....

But he was afraid. Scared that she would up and leave him without any remorse... and this petrified him. His marriage at the moment was hanging by a tenuous thread; he was *bending over backwards* to keep it from falling apart; any upheavals now could rent the fabric asunder, tare his marriage from him. And yet his hurt was terrible, and deep, and mortifying.

“When do you want to go on this *yatra*?” she asked.

He looked up from the cup of tea he was making for her – his heart gave a leap and a small pinpoint of hope flared in his eyes. He would play it cool.

“Anytime...what does next week sound like?” he held his breath.

“Okay, you get the train tickets and I’ll do the packing.”

Chandra mulled this over and over and looked at it from all angles. He decided finally that his wife, Megha, must have had a squabble with Jabbar and probably wished to teach him a lesson by going away on a ten day *yatra*.

Chandra busied himself with arranging of rail tickets and finalizing an itinerary for the journey. She would be with him for ten days; he would have to win back her love in those ten days; enchant and mesmerize her; charm and enthrall her...or...or...he could not think beyond that...beyond that was darkness, pain and death.

She sat next to him through the journey letting her body touch his in an intimate caress. Stations came and went;



passengers in the third class compartment shifted and changed, alighted and departed. Chandra and Megha leaned on each other for support and nodded in sleep through the long night for they had only secured seating accommodation.

Morning brought them to their destination – a quiet station at the foothills of the Himalayas. A long empty unpaved platform confronted them with a few pilgrims huddled in scattered groups. Megha and Chandra alighted rubbing sleep from their eyes. Washing in the cool chilling water from a hand pump revived them and they shouldered their meagre belongings and approach a tea stall to procure two small earthen cups of sweetened tea.

This was the base to the start of the climb to the Devi's mandir some eight kilometers away. They ate a breakfast of *puree* and potato curry served on moulded leaf plates and washed it down with another terracotta cup of steaming tea. This was the only meal they would have until they reached the mandir where they could have a meal of chapatti and *subjee* before their descent after the *darshan*.

They were travelling light – they each carried a light shoulder cloth bag which contained a change of clothing and

toiletries. Megha struck forth striding towards the mountain trail that would lead to the temple whilst Chandra, with shuffling steps followed behind.

It was a cool morning with a gentle breeze stirring the leaves of the small tree shrubs along the path. Megha gave Chandra her hand and aided him along the gentle climb. After two hours of climbing, the path turned rocky and Chandra, who was panting heavily, started to fall behind.

“Wait up,” he said to Megha between panting breaths.

“Nah,” said Megha. “You climb at your pace. I will wait for you further up.”

After another half hour Chandra saw two pilgrims approaching going downhill. “How far away up the track is my wife?” he asked “she’s wearing a yellow sari?”

“Oh, I’d say about ten or fifteen minutes away.” One of them answered.

Chandra plodded on, feeling very tired, and then he suffered difficulty in breathing. An asthma attack was coming on because of his exertions. He stopped and looked for the inhaler in his bag. *It was not there.*

Panic gripped him. He could be in very bad trouble without the inhaler. It must be in his wife's bag. Matter-of-fact he was sure it was in his wife's bag. He had left it on the bench with some change when he went to pay for the tea and Megha had picked up the change and the inhaler and put them in her bag. He would have to make an extra effort to catch up with her and retrieve the inhaler.

The extra effort only worsened the attack. He knew now he was in serious danger of losing his life, He staggered around, mouth wide open, chest heaving to get air into his lungs. He bent over and straightened again nothing helped. He was losing consciousness. His staggering gait took him to the precipice. He never saw the edge.

Megha looked down the track. She had been sitting in the sun daydreaming about Jabbar. There was no sign of Chandra. She had waited for over an hour. She sighed. She knew now he would never come. She fished in her bag and located the Inhaler. She shook her head sadly as she threw it deep into the valley.

A tear rolled down her cheek.