1

Silence of the Valley

Gulab Devi was already a widow when I saw her for the first time. I vaguely remember her features except that she had big melancholy eyes. She looked sad most of the time; nonetheless her face was very expressive. I felt extremely shy in facing her because most men thought Gulab Devi was a flirt. There were rumors about her easy virtues, although no one had ever caught her indulging in any such activities. I had just turned thirteen with much curiosity and vague ideas about physical relationships between men and women. I didn't know that this could lead to conception. Our family was Gulab Devi's only emotional outlet. Gulab Devi was a social worker in a remote tribal area called Bishunpur. My father was the chief administrator of that region.

Bishunpur was connected to the rest of the world by a steep dirt road, which ran down the hill through dense forest to Ranchi (a big town with a population of 100,000). The world definitely ended at Bishunpur because nothing went beyond there except the sun which would set every evening behind the crest of a low hill. The predators had free reign after sundown. The tribal men and women drank *hadiya* (a homemade drink similar to moonshine*)* and danced all night to the beat of drums around a circle of fire. The jungle fire on hills created a spectacle that only nature could display. The fire and the loud noise of drums kept the predators at bay. In addition to the aboriginals, about thirty government employees, who worked under my father, inhabited Bishunpur. A daily bus service used to bring newspapers, mail, and kerosene for the residents. Bishunpur didn't have electricity or any phones. Battery operated radios were the only link to the outside world.

The aboriginals living around Bishunpur were known as the *Birhors*. They lived in huts of leaves and survived by hunting monkeys and selling ropes in the local bazaars. The men and women used to wander almost naked. They were believed to have magical powers and were believed to trap monkeys by simply bewitching them. When my father first established his office there, the men and women of the tribe flocked around us and tried to be as

hospitable as anyone could be. They were very honest. I found the following passage in one of my father's memoirs:

> One day when I was camping in the Raj Dak Bungalow at Bishunpur, a very handsome, well-built, young tribal suddenly appeared with a basket covered with a piece of cloth. He put the basket on the verandah very close to me and uncovered it. To my utter horror and dismay I found two chopped off heads in the basket. The

young man made a clean confession to say that he found his wife and his younger brother in a compromising posture as he returned home. He couldn't bear the sight so he chopped off the heads of both which he had brought.

Looking back I realize that Bishunpur was not a place for a young widow like Gulab Devi. Since self-immolation on a husband's funeral pyre was outlawed in India, it was not uncommon for young widows to commit suicide. Those who didn't, mostly led a sheltered, dependent life in joint families. What Gulab Devi chose to do was daring and exceptional for her time. She pretended not to pay attention to suggestive gestures and deliberately ignored sexual remarks passed by fellow employees.

Banwari was something else. He was our chauffeur and had made quite a name for himself with his driving skills. He used to address me as *Chhote Saab* meaning the little boss. It was always fun to go on ride with Banwari. He would hand me the searchlight and ask me to shine it at small animals. He would then direct the wheels precisely over them. I attended middle school in Ranchi where I lived in a dorm. Though Bishunpur was quite removed from the rest of the world, I looked forward to going there during my school breaks. In addition to being with my siblings, I enjoyed going to the waterfalls for picnics (my feelings changed after my dear brother drowned in one of those waterfalls). Banwari always impressed us by jumping his jeep over the creeks along those hilly trails. Our family always invited Gulab Devi to tag along with us on those fun trips.

There was something about Banwari that I didn't like. He always seemed to notice Gulab Devi with an eerie shine in his eyes—a glow resembling the predators. On one of the trips to the falls, Gulab Devi had to get something from the jeep. For some reason I followed her to the slope. I couldn't believe what I saw. Banwari had his arms around Gulab Devi and was trying to press himself against her. She was very frightened but managed to push him away. On seeing me Banwari hesitated for a moment then said, "*Chhote Saab!* You shouldn't

have come here by yourself. The predators might attack you." Gulab Devi had regained her composure by now and returned to the picnic spot with me and joined the family. I don't think that Gulab Devi ever mentioned the incident to anyone. She probably let it go lest this should drag her further into controversy and defame her name. I didn't mention this to anybody either because talking about such things to our parents was a taboo in those days. I felt even more uncomfortable in her presence. Gulab Devi seemed equally ill at ease with me from that day onward. I started disliking Banwari for his disdain for a helpless woman. For me he was ferocious like other animals with a notable difference—the latter were inculpable.

I gathered some tidbits about Gulab Devi's life from overhearing conversations about her. She was once happily married to a handsome young man. Her husband was an engineer on a large project. His life was dedicated to his work. Since he didn't involve himself in bribes, impropriety and political favors, he made a lot of enemies. He was eventually gotten rid of by some hired hands. Gulab Devi came from a family of rich landlords in a prosperous town of India. Her parents were not living and her brothers advised her to go and live with her in-laws. Although the in-laws gave her shelter, she was deemed as someone inauspicious

who had brought bad luck to their family. She was constantly reminded of the futility and impurity of her life as a widow. Gulab Devi was indirectly made to choose between committing suicide and daring to lead her own independent life. For whatever reason, she chose the latter. She became a social worker and grabbed the first opportunity that came her way to earn a living. So here she was—off the frying pan into the fire.

On one of my visits to Bishunpur, I found special preparations going on at our home. An international delegation from UNO was about to visit Bishunpur to gain a first hand knowledge of the *Birhors* and their rehabilitation project. Since ours was the only modern accommodation, the delegates would stay with us. Finally, they arrived with much fanfare. In the daytime they reviewed the project with my father. In the nighttime, they were planning to go on safari to see wild animals. My father allowed me to go with the visitors. A caravan of five jeeps started out after dark. Gulab Devi was asked to accompany the team as a hostess. Banwari, Gulab Devi, and I were in one jeep. I sat in the front seat, Gulab Devi in the back. After we entered into the thick of the jungle, Banwari asked Gulab Devi to come to the front and requested me to go in the back. I complied. He started touching Gulab Devi and made advances to her. She resisted his advances and held herself stiff. Finally, she

threatened to jump out of the jeep because she couldn't stand it. Banwari stopped the jeep in embarrassment. Gulab Devi ran out into the jungle. There was no moon as she ran through the trees down into the dense forest. When she didn't return for some time, Banwari got worried and went out to look for her with his flashlight. Suddenly I heard Banwari shout, "Chhote Saab! Don't come here, it's a bear. A bear confronted Gulab Devi. She passed out in fear and hit her head on a rock. If you don't know about bears, they seldom attack someone who is unconscious. Banwari returned in about fifteen minutes carrying Gulab Devi in his arms. She had started to regain consciousness. In the meantime, other jeeps joined us, as they were worried about us. It was decided that Banwari would take Gulab Devi back to Bishunpur. Although I didn't like the idea of her going alone with Banwari, I kept mum. As her jeep accelerated a burst of exhaust engulfed the woods.

When I returned to Bishunpur during the winter break, I heard that Gulab Devi had committed suicide by hanging herself because she was carrying a child. I didn't ask many questions. I was told that she was a characterless lady and deserved to die. Banwari had left the area for good. No one knew his whereabouts. I didn't quite understand the relationship between being characterless and getting pregnant. However, now

when I look back, the pieces seem to fall in place. My father later moved to another assignment. I've never been to Bishunpur since then, but I want to go there some day and tell the folks that Gulab Devi was innocent.

2

Ragho's Wife

I vividly remember that arid and hot summer afternoon in the eastern part of India. I was running with a soccer ball on the dusty village trail. A bunch of village boys were chasing me to tackle the ball away from me. Suddenly I saw the mailman rushing on his bike with a telegram in his hand. He almost bumped into us, but managed to steer his bike away to safety. He hurled a profane remark at us for getting in his way and then made a sharp turn towards Ragho's house. I knew, at once, there was something wrong with Ragho.

Suddenly I heard Ragho's mother crying at the top of her voice, "My son is dead! Now who will take care of me? How am I going to survive in my old days? O God of sustenance! Why did I worship you? O God of death! Take me to my son!"

I ran to her house. She was frantically beating her chest. She threw herself on the ground in front of her house and started rolling around hysterically. Soon the neighbors gathered at her house. The women surrounded her. Men stood at a distance talking about Ragho's sudden demise. Ragho's wife, who was not permitted to come out of the house, sensed the situation and started wailing loudly. That infuriated Ragho's mother. She ran towards her house with an intention of nabbing Ragho's wife, but the neighbors controlled her.

"Tell that rundy (prostitute) to stop shrieking. She has brought bad luck to our family. If she had any shame, she'd have killed herself by now. That disastrous rogue never brought enough dowry with her. How am I supposed to feed her for the rest of her life now? O Goddess of wealth! Help me now!" Ragho's mother was not bashful about her feelings.

"God will take care of you. Time will heal you. We don't have control over our destiny," A neighbor tried to console her.

Ragho's mother picked up Ragho's four month old son, who was crying unattended. She pressed him against her chest and started talking to him while wailing aloud, "Who'll take care of you and me? Who will feed us? You are too small to earn a living. O Goddess of power! Make him big and strong soon!"

No one was worried about Ragho's wife, who had just become a widow only sixteen months after her marriage. Her husband died of Cholera in a slum of Calcutta.

I remembered the day when Ragho brought her to our village for the first time after their marriage. She became the proud possession of Ragho's mother the moment she entered the house. She would sit on the cot with her legs folded and her face down. Her face was always covered in a veil. Ragho's mother would lift the veil slowly for the visitors to peep in her face. Everyone thought that Ragho's wife was too beautiful to belong to this family, but she got what her parents' dowry could afford. Ragho left for Calcutta after a few days.

Soon the novelty wore off and Ragho's wife started doing what she was brought home for. She would cook, clean and do all household chores. She was not allowed to have any time to herself. What was perceived to be a marriage was a life imprisonment with a chance of parole only when her mother-in-law passed away. Ragho's mother, on the other hand, was enjoying her new status as a proud mother in law. She had paid her dues. Now it was her turn to enjoy. She was in no hurry to die.

Ragho used to visit his wife two or three times a year. Both Ragho and his wife were very nice to me. Ragho's mother never gave him a chance to be alone with his wife until nightfall. I was their only go-between during the day. Ragho would give me messages for his wife and I would faithfully deliver them to her.

"Ragho wants to know if you have any problems here," I asked his wife.

By nature I used to be in a hurry. Ragho's wife always insisted that I should sit by her side and tell her the stories about Ragho and his friends. She used to grip me by my hand and say," Why are you always in a hurry? Why don't you sit by me?"

I sat by her side.

"Tell him that I am alright, but he should come a little early tonight," she requested. I went outside and conveyed the message to Ragho. Ragho smiled shyly.

In a few days Ragho packed and went back to Calcutta. He sent letters and money orders regularly. The last message that came from him was the message of his death.

Soon I left my village for, supposedly, a modern upbringing, but Ragho's wife left a deep impact on my mind. I read about ancient slaves in social studies and thought about the plight of Ragho's wife. Hers was worse than those slaves because the slaves could, at least, go outside and see the daylight.

I returned to my village a year later during the summer vacation. I visited Ragho's house. Ragho's wife looked very sick and ill fed. She was sweeping the floor at the time. She smiled to see me. Her smile formed dimples on her cheeks. Dimples were her trademark. But I also noticed a burn scar on her left cheek. She asked me to sit by her side again.

"How are you doing? You city boy!" She asked teasingly.

"I am fine. How about you?"

"Me? She laughed. I am just a maid. All I get in return is some food to eat. I am nothing more than a domestic animal," she continued, "I couldn't go to Calcutta with my husband. I wouldn't have let him die, if I were with him." She started to sob.

"Why didn't you go to Calcutta with Ragho?"

"You wouldn't understand. You are lucky. You are a man. We women are born to be slaves. First we live under our parents' control and later it is the in-laws. Moreover, Ragho didn't earn enough to keep me in Calcutta."

"How did you get this burn mark on your cheek?"

"Ragho's mother did that to me. One day I had an argument with her. She threatened to burn me alive," she answered with disgust.

I went back to school again, not returning to my village for a few years. I visited Ragho's house again. Ragho's mother was sitting with Ragho's son in her lap.

"Where is Ragho's wife?' I asked

"She is dead," she answered angrily.

"Really? Tell me what happened?'

"That rundy was a burden. I didn't have money to feed her! So I asked her to go."

"But where did she go?"

"I sent her to her parents' home. But those misers couldn't keep her. Last I heard, she eloped with the neighbor's son and went to Calcutta with him."

"I see." I didn't know how else to react**.**

Seven years later I went to Calcutta on a school trip. Calcutta's railway station is a world in itself. A multitude of humanity comes through there every day as passengers, onlookers, vendors, thieves and beggars. I was late to the station. My train was about to leave. As I was running towards my coach, I bumped against a beggar in rags. I didn't have time to say sorry to her. No sooner did I enter the train than it started to pull out. I noticed the beggar in rags looking towards me. She resembled Ragho's wife. I also noticed a burn mark on her left cheek. As she smiled at me, dimples formed on her cheeks. It could have been her or someone else who resembled her. No matter what, how does *it* matter, anyway?

3

Love Ran Like A River

Zafar Ali Siddiqui was a modest man with modest means. His wife, Nuzhat (Nuzy) was a happy and devoted woman. They lived like ordinary folks with extraordinary blessing from God. They were simple, content and loving. Zafar Ali often recalled how he couldn't keep his eyes off Nuzy when he first saw her. Nuzy would respond by stretching her nasal voice, "And you fooled me with your deceitful innocent looks!"

Zafar Ali and Nuzy named their daughter Shakeela because she was extremely beautiful like the liquid sky soon after the sunset. Shakeela had taken after her parents—she was comely like her mother and had inherited the unique naiveté of her father. She had a divine smile that money could never buy—a kind of smile that only comes from listening to fairy tales or a song of innocence. Obviously, Zafar Ali and Nuzy never had a tired heart when it came to satisfying Shakeela's need for love. They made sure that she never had a lonely dream. Love always ran in their lives like a river because they perceived and dreamed the same dream.

Zafar Ali was not wealthy, but he enjoyed life's riches by sharing his abundant and endless love with everyone. He always offered roasted grams sprinkled with crystal sugar to his visitors because that's what he could easily afford. Nuzy would prepare tea and shout, "Shakeela! Come and take tea for our *mehmaans* (guests). Shakeela would run and fetch tea for the guests. Zafar Ali would say nice things such as, "Man's paradise is on earth. The living world is the blessed place of all because it has the blessing of *kudarat's* (nature's) bounties. We all felt happy and blessed in his company—liberated from the clutches of the material world.

Zafar Ali had only two vices, smoking and chewing *paan* (a kind of tropical leaf). He followed a clock-like routine every day. He would go to his office at nine in the morning and be back exactly at five. In their fourteen years of marriage, he had never been late once. Both Nuzy and Shakeela used to count the seconds when it neared five in the afternoon. Shakeela would run to the door to hug her father. Zafar Ali would carry Shakeela in his lap and sink in his favorite chair and shout, "Bay-gum (Dear wife)! Get me tea and *paan.* He would then take a cigarette from his pocket and light it. Nuzy would soon join them with a cup of tea and they would talk and laugh for hours. It seemed like they almost lived for this moment.

Nothing lasts forever not even eternal bliss. Though we may not like it, intermittent happiness and sadness are gifts of nature like the change of seasons. This hide and seek keeps life interesting and makes us appreciate God's blessings. I'd rather have that than endless ecstasy because nothing comes without a price. The greater or longer the pleasure, heavier the price we pay. That's the law of nature. Zafar Ali and Nuzhat were not ready for it, but something terrible happened soon after Shakeela's twelfth birthday. One day, she felt dizzy while playing outside. Zafar Ali and Nuzy first blamed

this on summer heat and asked Shakeela not to go outside to play for a few days. The next day she felt dizzy again. They took her to the doctor. Shakeela was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The happiness from Zafar Ali and Nuzy's lives started to disappear like a short winter day as Shakeela's condition took turn for the worse. Nuzy made sure to read passages from the *Koran* (the Muslim holy book) five times a day. Zafar Ali prayed, "*Khuda* (God)! O Merciful! Save our child!" But nothing happened. Shakeela left for her heavenly abode before witnessing the next Id.

Zafar Ali was a different man now. He stopped laughing, smoking and chewing *paan.* Nuzy even started doubting the intentions and existence of God. She never read the *Koran* after that incident. Their minds were always occupied with the memory of Shakeela. "Why us God? Why us?" They used to cry in the middle of the night.

"We must have sinned somewhere," Nuzy uttered in frustration.

"Don't say 'we.' I didn't sin," Zafar Ali shouted in anger.

Zafar Ali didn't realize that his sorrow was casting a dark shadow in Nuzy's life who had already lost her beloved child. But Zafar Ali was helpless. Though his anguish had been affecting Nuzhat, his own sorrow was too deep to realize Nuzhat's baffled state. They had shunned all pleasures from their lives. Time passed. One day Zafar Ali decided to read a passage from the Koran for solace. As he picked the Koran from the shelf, he found a note inside. It was in Shakeela's handwriting. Zafar Ali started reading the note on the piece of paper. It read,

"O Merciful Allah!
It's not about my illness. It's about my father. I certainly would not want to be unreasonable in my demand and would not interfere in your matters that do not concern my father. Nonetheless, because I care a great deal about my parents' happiness, I would implore you to give them back their smile, if not the full amount, then some appreciable part of it.
O Merciful Khuda! They have great fondness for you. Can you at least make my father love my mother again? Ever since my illness, he has stopped coming home on time. He doesn't ask for tea nor does he indulge in little pleasures of life. I have no worries

about myself because I know I'll be coming to your safe abode soon, but I'll be deeply indebted to you if you give the happiness back to my dearest father so that he can share that with my noble mother.

Your Faithful Servant,

Shakeela

That afternoon Zafar Ali came home exactly at five and shouted, "Bay-gum! Get me a cup of tea and *paan.*" He sat in his favorite chair and lighted a cigarette. Nuzhat brought tea for him and stood silently by his side. Zafar Ali looked at her with a smile; took tea aside from her and pulled her in the chair with him. Nuzhat embraced Zafar Ali and started crying. Zafar Ali wiped the tears from her eyes and wondered whether they were tears of sorrow or joy.

4

Heart's Denial

Only two kinds of people ever visit Lakhangunj–those who live there and the postman. It won't be an exaggeration to say that people living in Lakhangunj, a dusty and backward village in Darbhanga District of India, are almost dead by fate. Kamali lived there all her life. About five dozen families mostly belonging to the lower caste still live in Lakhangunj. Although their standard of living has been creeping up since late eighties, it's comparable to a monkey climbing a greased pole. While they take one step up, the rest of the world makes a quantum jump leaving them far behind. The fate of four upper caste families still living in Lakhangunj is even worse. In contrast to the rest of the civilization, they have been regressing on the rung of life. Most of their folks left Lakhangunj a long time ago for betterment in life. Those left behind lead a miserable and neglected life like abandoned remorse of a villain. Ramesh, an upper caste Brahmin can't feed and clothe his wife and six children. They live in a one-bedroom hut constructed of mud and straw. In the daytime Ramesh goes to Darbhanga, the nearest big city, to look for handouts and free food. Some days he returns late in night totally drunk. His wife and children sleep hungry on those nights like a fledgling bird fallen from its nest. Jhabbo runs a small grocery store. Most of his time is spent bickering with his customers who don't pay him on time. His customers, mostly belonging to the lower caste, treat this as a revenge–a wild justice for the atrocities done by his ancestors. Then there is Jitu Babu, the retired head clerk. He can be found lying on a cot in his courtyard waiting for an imaginary wagon to land and take him to another world. Jogi runs a small phone booth for people of the village to make phone calls. He spends his time gossiping about his neighbors, as there is hardly any need for anyone to call outside the village. Things were quite different until early sixties. Lakhangunj used to be a stronghold of upper caste landlords. The lower caste peasants worked as farm laborers and were dependent on the mercy of the upper caste families for life's necessities. Kamali and her husband, Siddhu belonged to the lower caste.

The landlords and their families were treated like royalties in the heydays of their opulence. Mohan Singh, born in 1912, was certainly the most unforgettable of all the landlords of the time. He was rugged and had remarkable looks. I remember he used to wax his mustache every morning. Unfortunately, he lost his wife to tuberculosis in 1953. I was only seven then. Despite his jagged exterior, Mohan Singh was a kind man at heart. He was very affectionate to me and always used to say nice things about me like, "Someday you're going to make us proud. You're the future of

independent India" I liked him too, but there was something uncomforting about him and Kamali that made me uneasy about him.

Kamali had fairer skin compared to other women of the lower caste. She had a buxom but proportionate body and sensuous looks. She fetched water from the village well carrying two or three brass pitchers at one time–two or three on her head and one under her arm. She walked with great poise like a model. As customary among the women of the lower caste, she didn't care to cover her body completely. That's all I remember about her. She was at her prime–a perfect bait for Mohan Singh, a lurking lion.

While Siddhu worked on the farm, Kamali took care of chores at Mohan Singh's home as his maid. In the beginning Kamali used to go home at the sunset to attend to Siddhu's needs. But as the intimacy between Mohan Singh and Kamali grew, her loyalty to Siddhu diminished. Kamali started spending late evenings with Mohan Singh pouring drinks for him while he listened to the evening radio program. Not finding her at home, Siddhu would go to Mohan Singh's place to bring her home.

"Hey Siddhu, why don't you eat here while Kamali is serving me drinks," asked Mohan Singh one day. Siddhu reluctantly complied. Beggars can't be choosers! As time went by, Kamali started spending nights with Mohan Singh.

"Go home after eating dinner. I'll stay here tonight," said Kamali while pressing Mohan Singh's aching back.

"Alright," complied Siddhu avoiding eye contact with her.

Soon Kamali and Mohan Singh's adulterous relationship became the talk of the village. I grew disdain for both Mohan Singh and Kamali.

I moved out of the village in 1954. Like Mohan Singh, Kamali also held me in high regards. She always made sure to call on me whenever I visited Lakhangnj. She enquired about my school and took a keen interest in my studies. She seemed very impressed with my academic achievements and never seemed bashful or tired of praising me. The irony was that I had a deep hatred for her in my heart, but I never openly expressed that to her. I just used to remain stoic to her remarks.

After a few years Siddhu mysteriously disappeared from the village and Kamali's life. People say that Siddhu left Lakhangunj in shame. The rumor has that Mohan Singh paid him a good sum of money to leave Kamali at his disposal. After the death of Mohan Singh in 1979, Kamali inherited his house and property since he had no heirs.

I visited Lakhangunj again in 1982. As usual, Kamali came to see me again. To my relief, she looked old and unappealing. It may sound strange, but I always had repulsion for her exquisiteness and vivacity.

“See, you have obligation to this village. You are educated now and have a good life, but you shouldn’t forget your roots,” preached Kamali to me. “Why don’t you open a small elementary school for the children of this village. You should try to provide education to the underprivileged children who want to be like you,” she continued.

I had developed aversion for Lakhangunj, though I visited the place once in a while to take care of whatever was left of my ancestral property there. As a matter of fact, I felt lucky and relieved that I moved out of that ill-fated place early in my childhood.

“See, it takes a lot of money, time and effort to start and run a school. Moreover, I don’t live here so how do you expect me to do this?” I answered with resentment in my voice

“Who gave her the right to tell me what I should be doing?” I brooded, “After all, she was a low class mistress. That’s all she was.”

She took my hand in hers and said,” I know what you are thinking, but both Mohan Singh and I had a lot of expectations from you. You are the hope of this village. I am pretty sure you can do something to give precious gift of education to the children of this village. Don’t you want them to be like you?”

“No, I am not that great that anyone should be emulating me,” I replied rather rudely.

A few years later I returned to the village again. I came to know about Kamali’s death with mixed emotions. Once again I got reminded of Mohan Singh and his adulterous relationship with her. I felt very sad to think about the torment and shame poor Siddhu had to go through. More I thought about those characters more aggravated I felt.

“So, who lives in Mohan Singh’s house now?” I asked Ramesh who was begging me to dole out money for his daughter’s marriage.

“No one. It was converted in an elementary school for the children of the village by Kamali before she died,.” Answered Ramesh.

After much pondering, I decided to visit the school. As I reached the premises I noticed a large signboard in front of the building. It read, “Mohan Singh Elementary School.” I entered the library. That used to be Mohan Singh’s bedroom where he spent countless sinful moments with Kamali. I saw one small plaque by the door. It had my name on it. Obviously, Kamali had decided to dedicate the library in my honor. There was no mention of Kamali anywhere on the school building. I came out of the school with a sense of frustration and remorse for not doing anything for the children of Lakhangunj. The children were chanting their lessons loudly. As I started walking away from the school building, the noise of children followed me as if they were chanting, “Thank you Kamali.! Thank you Kamali!! Thank you Kamali!!!” The sound kept on ringing loud in my ears. I started to run away from the school and kept on going as fast as I could until the

noise completely faded. I was in denial and was not ready for a chage of heart at any cost.

5

The Perpetual Cycle

Saloni was a pretty and charming girl born in poverty. Her father squandered all his money on booze. Her mother ran away from home due to unbearable conditions and losing any hope of Saloni ever being wedded to a man of means and education. I met Saloni on three occasions during our visits to a remote village in India where people still live in a primeval setting.

The first time I met her, Saloni was only fifteen. She came to our host's house to tend to our needs which included washing our clothes by hand, preparing and serving breakfast, lunch and dinner and making our bed. She very gracefully accepted used clothes and sundry items of makeup from my wife. She flung herself into my wife's arms, embraced her frantically, and went away with those small gifts. The next day she arrived wearing a dress and makeup given to her by my wife. She was the prettiest girl present, elegant, graceful, smiling, and quite above herself with happiness. She talked about hope, happiness and the desire to be emancipated from the status of a slum girl and achieve, one day, the level in society that she rightly deserved.

Five years later, we visited the village again. Saloni was twenty. She was elated to see us, but she was very unhappy beneath the surface. After all, she was a woman who had no education or status in life. Beauty, grace and natural delicacy were her only ornaments. She was utterly frustrated. It was obvious to us that she suffered endlessly from the conditions she lived in, from the mean walls of her father's house, worn chairs, and ugly curtains. Girls less worthy than her were married in rich families. The tales of happiness narrated to her by her friends had created envious longings in her. This injustice tormented and insulted her.

My wife and I decided to meet her father to find out what he was planning about her marriage. He was half drunk during our meeting. His conversation with us was almost incoherent. It took us two hours to understand that a widower more than twice her age was ready to marry Saloni, if his dowry demands were met. The widower demanded the equivalent of $2,500 in cash and another $2,500 worth of jewelry. Although it was a lot of money to be paid for someone whom we had met only twice, we committed to pay $2,500 in cash and asked Saloni's father to arrange for the rest. We also met other members of the community the next evening and got a collective commitment for a portion of $2,500 for buying jewelry.

When we gave the news to Saloni, she couldn't stop smiling from ear to ear. She was obviously imagining herself as a bride in a wedding dress and jewelry. She had never possessed attractive clothes or jewels in her life, but these were the things she loved. She felt that she was made for them. She had longed so eagerly to charm, to be desired, to be wildly attractive and sought after. We were happy for her happiness.

On our return from the village, we got this letter from Saloni:

> Dear Uncle and Aunt,
>
> Thanks for caring for me. With God's mercy and your blessing, my father has arranged jewelry for my marriage as demanded by my fiancé. My marriage will take place on the sixteenth of January. I offer endless thanks to both of you for all the favors you have granted me. My only request to you is that please come and attend my wedding, if possible. Kindest regards!
>
> Respectfully yours,
> Saloni

Time passed and we forgot about the entire incident. Saloni rarely entered our conversation or imagination until we returned to the village once again after ten years. A little nine-year-old girl in rags was appointed to take care of us this time. She looked as innocent and beautiful as Saloni. We were shocked to know that she was Saloni's daughter.

"Where is your mother?" I asked.

"With my father in town," she replied.

"Why do you work here?"

"My mother says she doesn't have money to feed me."

"Why not?"

"Because my father wastes all his money on booze."

I decided to visit Saloni in town. I went to her house and knocked on the door. It was a winter evening and her whole house was cloaked in darkness. A middle-aged, sickly woman opened the door.

"I'd like to see Saloni," I said to her.

"I am Saloni." Then she uttered a cry after recognizing me.

"Oh! Poor Saloni, how you have changed!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, I've had some hard times since I saw you last, and many sorrows …."

Saloni looked old now. She had become like all the other hard, coarse women of poor households. Her hair was badly tangled, her dress was dirty, her hands were wrinkled from washing dishes in cold water.

I came to know the ghastly life of abject poverty she had to endure again. Her husband had a daughter her age from his previous marriage. He married Saloni only to get the money and jewelry to satisfy the demands of his would-be son-in-law. From the very first day, Saloni was stripped of all her jewelry and nice clothes.

Saloni came to know the gruesome chores of the house and the hateful duties of the kitchen. She washed the plates, wearing out her pink nails on the coarse pottery and the bottoms of pans. She washed the dirty undergarments, the shirts and bed sheets, and hung them out to dry on a string. Every morning she took the dustbin down to the street and then carried up the water, stopping on each step to get her breath. And, clad like a poor woman, she went to the grocer with a basket on her arm, then haggling, insulted, fighting for every wretched penny of her money. Her husband spent his time and remaining money on drinks. He used her only to satisfy his animalistic passion.

“My mother did the right thing by leaving my father. I am also planning to either kill myself or go somewhere.” Saloni uttered these words after a long silence.

What will happen to your daughter?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone generous like you will help her find a living hell and this perpetual cycle will go on.”

Saloni started laughing uncontrollably and then broke down crying on my shoulder. I had no words left to console her. I left her not knowing what to say or what to do.

6

Dummies R Us

(The year is 1957 and the place is Bihar in India).

All of Mr. Sahay's daughters had college education and her youngest one was the only girl to have a master's degree in the entire district (a district is larger than a county and smaller than a state) Mr. Sahay, a retired civil servant lived with his son, a doctor in an affluent neighborhood. According to the Indian custom, Mr. Sahay called all the shots, not his son. So, when it came time for Mr. Sahay's younger son— also a civil servant like Mr. Sahay— to be married, one of the conditions of Mr. Sahay was that the girl must have a college degree. After much ado, Mr. Sahay fixed his son's marriage with Kiran, daughter of another civil servant from a different district.

Kiran's arrival at Mr. Sahay's house was celebrated for days with much fanfare. There were people lined up all evening to meet Mr. Sahay's new acquisition. Mrs. Sahay would remind every visitor that not only her daughters but her daughter-in-law was also college educated. She would request the visitors to converse with Kiran in English. Kiran looked very nervous and worried all the time. Her expression was like a goat being readied for slaughter. I was eleven years old then. On the third day of her arrival Kiran called me to her room and asked me to teach her how to read.

"Why would you like to learn how to read?" I asked.
"Because papa (she addressed Mr. Sahay as papa) wants me to read him books and I don't know how to read. Please don't tell this to anyone. My parents lied to papa's family. I never went to school. But you're a smart kid. You can quickly teach me how to read. Can't you?"

"I'll try," I answered in bewilderment.

"But how are you going to face Mr. Sahay in the meantime?"

"Well, I've told everybody that I am not feeling well. Maybe, That will give me some time away from him."

I ran to my room and found a basic reading book. I returned to Kiran's room and asked her to read. Kiran looked at the top word on the page and uttered, "L-O-T-U-S"

“Yes, the word is Lotus,” I instructed.

“Lotus,” she repeated after me.

Mrs. Sahay entered the room unannounced and asked me to leave Kiran alone.

“It’s alright. I want him to stay here with me,” Kiran intervened.

“But you need rest so that you can get better soon. He is naughty. He’ll make you worse.”

I left the room at Mrs. Sahay’s insistence wondering how Kiran was going to learn to read.

For a few more days Kiran went through hiding her secret. Somehow she concealed her inability to read even from her husband by glancing at newspapers pretending to read. I used to sneak in her room with the picture book for pre-school-aged children. On the pages of the book were simple, colorful pictures of flowers, cars and houses, followed by the proper word for each picture. She looked at the pages and tried to teach herself. She couldn’t. She didn’t have enough time left to pretend.

Ultimately, Kiran confided in her husband and told him the truth. At first, her husband got mad at her, but cooled down due to pity on her. One day he gathered enough courage to break this news to Mrs. And Mr. Sahay.

“Papa and Mama, Kiran never went to college. As a matter of fact, she never went to any school in her life. She has no education, She can’t even read.”
Mrs. Sahay and Mr. Sahay were in shock. They felt cheated. They were obviously delivered a flawed product in Kiran.

“Take her to her parents’ house. We can find another girl for you,” commanded Mr. Sahay.

“No papa! She is not going anywhere. She’ll stay with me as my wedded wife,” responded Kiran’s husband mustering all the courage in the world.

Kiran felt very obliged to her husband for saving her honor. She looked like a scared rabbit under the headlight. Days passed and Kiran decided to learn to read and write. Her husband cooperated and arranged for her home schooling.

Years later, Kiran appeared in High School Competency test and got her diploma. She decided to join college. I had already left the country by that time. I didn’t have much connection with Kiran or the rest of the Sahays. The only thing I knew was that Mrs. And Mr. Sahay were deceased and Kiran had finished her PhD.

In 1994, during my visit to India, I decided to visit Kiran. She was in her early sixtees then. Her two sons were already settled in life. Her husband had retired and Kiran had started a school for “Adults Literacy” in a portion of her house.

She was teaching basic words to a woman who was fired at her last job because she couldn’t read. She had found a new job. Her new employers didn’t know that she couldn’t read. And she was deathly afraid that they will find out she was a dummy and that she will be fired again.

“I never liked to hear anyone called a dummy,” said Kiran, “I was a dummy once and I beat my odds. I’ll make sure that you can read. This is the mission of my life. There won’t be any dummies left in my district.”

“Read the first word on this page,” asked Kiran.

“*The*, “ read the woman.

“Good,” read the next word.”

“*cow*.”

“Next word?”

“*is*,” read the woman.

“Next?”

“*brown*”

“Very good; now finish the sentence”

“*The cow is brown*”

“Very good,” concluded Kiran

Kiran looked proudly in my eyes. I returned her glance with equal pride and some additional joy.

7

How Her Story Came To Be

A long time ago—seventeen years before the first man walked on the lunar surface—I used to gaze at the moon on clear nights. If you are like me, you may have noticed a long scar on its face. In reality that's an old lady who sits there and looks down at us. This is what I know because this is what I was told by Sodha Vali, whom I addressed as 'Chachi' (aunt). I am still not very clear on how she was related to me. We used to live in a joint family down on the farm. Sodha Vali (I'll call her Chachi) was related to us in some way. She was the widow of my father's second cousin. Her husband died for some unknown reason during their first year of marriage. She never remarried in accordance with the age-old Hindu tradition. She denounced all her possessions and devoted most of her time performing religious rituals all day. After dark she would take me and the other children of the family out in the courtyard and tell us the stories of her life and of the time gone by. I was four years old then, going on five. My guess is that Chachi was in her late fifties at the time.

Thanks to Chachi, I have a wealth of stories stored up in my memory to tell you. The most interesting is one that happened to her in real life. Once her married sister visited her along with her mother-in-law. Three of them were eating supper together just after nightfall. As soon as they were seated at the table, a gust of wind blew out the lamp and they were left in darkness. Chachi said, "Sit still both of you, I'll go light the lamp." But while she was speaking her sister took the lamp and went away to light it.

The mother-in-law, supposing that Chachi had gone, and that her daughter-in-law sat beside her in the dark, started talking to her. She said, "A widow's company should be avoided at any cost because they are supposed to be inauspicious. A widow should die with her husband on his funeral pyre." She had hardly uttered these words when the light reappeared, and she discovered that she had been talking to her daughter-in-law's sister and not to her daughter-in law.

The mother-in-law horrified by her mistake, said, "I have a curious peculiarity which has afflicted me all my life. If, at any time, the light suddenly goes out, and I am left in the dark, my mind wanders and I talk without purpose till the light reappears.

"Ah," responded Chachi, "I wholly understand a peculiarity of that sort, for I myself have a somewhat similar one. Whenever the lamp goes out in the evening, I at once become stone-deaf, and only recover my hearing after the lamp is again lighted."

Chachi was no social reformer, but she was the only one in the village from the upper caste who used to visit the homes of farm workers, who were considered lowly in the

social hierarchy. I vividly remember how she helped Bela, an untouchable girl. Bela was married when she was only four years old. She never saw her husband after the marriage who lived with his parents in a different village. Bela's husband died of cholera at the age of seven. Bela became a widow and was supposed to lead a life of celibacy for as long as she lived. When Bela turned sixteen she started seeing a young man secretly. One day Bela's father caught her embracing the young man. He was so mad at her that he threatened to kill her. When Chachi got the news, she rushed to Bela's house and helped her elope with the young man by giving them some money for their immediate subsistence. The news spread like wildfire in the village. There was a demonstration by the villagers in front of our house. They demanded that Chachi should be burnt alive because her actions had brought shame to their family. Then Chachi was escorted out the backdoor and was sent to a different village to live with her mother who was still alive at that time.

If you knew my life story, you'd know I soon left the village. No one talked to me about Chachi anymore, but I always remembered her stories and her gritty countenance. Time passed, I grew up, got married and moved to America. During one of my visits to India, I decided to visit Chachi in her village. It was a painstaking task to go there, but I did it anyway. Her dilapidated house was located a mile from the main road. It looked like an extremely ancient place, crumbling and unkempt. There was no one living there except an old homeless man. I introduced myself to him and asked about Chachi. He laughed uncontrollably and said that they (Chachi and her mother) had died many years ago. I asked him if he knew the details of their death.

"Yes," he replied, "it so happened that her mother living in this house fell desperately ill, and while Chachi was watching her anxiously by the bedside. She asked for water. It was just about the time of the night when a ghost was returning home. As Chachi went to fetch water from the pump outside, the ghost started following her and put his hand on her shoulder. She turned around in terror and saw the ghost close behind her. She asked the ghost to leave her alone. The ghost told her that he was there to take away her mother and that she too would follow her soon. Chachi pleaded with the ghost and the ghost allowed her to take fresh water to her sick mother. Her mother died at once after swallowing a few sips of water. As for Chachi, she died soon after that and went up to relieve the old woman on the moon. She always wanted to do that so she could look at all the children from the heavens above."

Whenever I look at the moon on a clear night, I see Chachi sitting there and looking at us. Oh! I forgot to describe what Chachi looked like. Never mind! You can always find out for yourself by looking at the moon on a clear night.

8

Soul Mates – A Love story

There comes a moment every day when I know I can fly. Then, effortlessly, I am away, light as a feather, on the early afternoon breeze. Soaring in an instant over rolling fields of my childhood places, I fly over hills and mysterious valleys then swoop up to dally in the evening shadows beneath my favorite hilltop trees.

One particular place draws me back again and again. There is a feeling of sadness within me as I sweep towards it along the winding road, between tall trees lined up on all sides with the mysterious sound of water falling from a big height on the stone below. As I speed up the hill, tall trees fold over me and embrace me in huge welcoming arches. In abundance all around, there is the earthly scent of leaves making a soft bed for newly sown seeds and for the wandering souls of innocent children who once drowned in that foreboding Dassam Falls.

My little brother was one of them who drowned there in an attempt to save five other friends – all thirteen years of age. He rests on those beds of leaves with his friends as darkness draws near. Seeing them rested, I soon emerge out of the dense tree shade. Winding paths, vines and looming branches sweep by until the short smooth green grass is under me. I can again feel the pressure of air pushing me upwards and outwards into the open countryside. After I resist this flow I stop for a while by an eucalyptus tree with the inscription "In Memory of Akhil Srivastava." No one seems to pay much attention to this anymore. It's a thirty-eight year old tale now. I stayed awhile at the spot and as time passed, I became aware of two beady eyes, partly hidden in the bushes. It was a cat looking after her kittens. I watched as they ventured out into the evening sun, rolling over and over in the dark tall grass. Yes, that was Akhil's favorite cat. He always wanted to get one of those kittens as a pet. Then something startled them and they ran for cover.

I turned and saw a couple walking up to the eucalyptus tree. The couple was deep in conversation. Smiles flew from face to face. Heads tilted towards each other. Hand in hand, they sat under the eucalyptus tree. They didn't seem to notice the objects around them. With eyes locked increasingly into each other's, they seemed drawn together by an invisible force. There was an invisible chord

of tension between them. Those first moments together were an adventure; neither seemed to know how much the other wanted. But little by little, gesture by gesture, with small shifts of position - a knee pointed, a hand touching an elbow lightly then finally resting on a shoulder - they drew closer, always talking, smiling, laughing. Each eventually recognized the signs and was reassured, their desire for personal space passed and soon words were not needed as they became locked into each other's arms.

I watched them carefully for a moment. Yes, they were Mohan and Maya. 'What are they doing here?' I thought. They both had committed suicide in 1957 when I was ten years old. Boys meeting girls was a taboo then. They were caught meeting secretly bringing shame to their families. They were separated for months under the watchful eyes of their parents before they ended their lives. But their happiness unsettled me. "How is it possible?" I thought. Moreover, this eucalyptus tree was planted in my brother's memory. What are they doing around it? I turned sadly away, feeling a sense of envy.

Much later, as I rested on a nearby grassy mound, their images melted in the patterns of evening clouds., Drained of the energy to fly on and dejected, I could only return home. For a time I did not go back to that place - my envy was strong. I remembered too well Mohan and Maya's smiles, their loving gestures for each other and their childlike exuberance But when I did go back, I saw them again around the Eucalyptus tree. Maya's moon-shaped face had a tendency to a double chin as she pressed her head happily into Mohan's shoulder, toying all the time with his fingers and chattering on. Their happiness visibly grew. It mingled with the flowers near the corner of the woods. The birds sang harder when that couple was there and the wild flowers were brighter. Sometimes they would lie on the grass together looking up at the soft clouds drifting above, enjoying the last sunlight filtering through the dense wood..

Then one day it was all over. This time Maya arrived alone in a white sari. I saw a tear trickle down her cheek and fall to the ground. Then she continued. Walking and staring - quietly remembering. Again and again she came, seemingly to relive her memories. Sometimes she sat near the eucalyptus tree and stared into space. Sometimes she would sit on the grass, draw her knees to her chin and bury her face in her arms. At these moments the shade seemed dark and full of pain. The birds fell silent and the colors of flowers dimmed.

She was sad because Mohan was reborn and she was still waiting for her rebirth. 'Even souls don't know their destiny,' I thought sharing her grief and her pain for the first time ever.

9

Dreamland

Prabha Devi sat motionless and unattended in a corner of the family room. The room was crowded with Kiran and Vijay's friends. She wondered why people were consoling Kiran And Vijay instead of her when, as a matter of fact, it was her husband who had passed away. Kiran was her daughter and Vijay, her son-in-law.

"Bring some water! Kiran is fainting," shouted one of her friends.

Prabha Devi gathered her old weakened body and proceeded to fetch a glass of water for Kiran. She was numb and just moved involuntarily to do what she had been doing for so long, that is attend to Kiran and Vijay's needs.

Prabha Devi was 65, a small framed woman who left her native India a year ago, not long enough to erase the memories to which she had clung all this time—memories that became a dream of past happiness that was no more, or so it seemed to the old lady who preserved her memories as her only treasure.

Golmundi in India, where Prabha Devi's family had lived was not a rich place by American standards, but it was her own place where she had lived with her husband happily and freely. That was the place where Kiran, their only child was born and raised. She lived like a queen in her home. Her husband was a shopkeeper who always remained occupied with his business. It was Prabha Devi who took care of matters at home. She remembered how her husband used to tease her by saying, "You're the Indira Gandhi of our house. I am a mere member of the opposition bench."

Prabha Devi and her husband satisfied all the needs and demands of Kiran. Kiran always remained the focus of their attention since her birth. Kiran got married to Vijay, an IT (Information Technology) professional and when the chance came and it seemed like a big chance, Kiran and her husband migrated to the U.S. Although Prabha Devi felt sad that her only child had moved oceans away, she was happy for herdaughter's good fortune and delight. Kiran called her parents regularly and told them about their affluent lifestyle in the new land. Prabha Devi proudly narrated those stories to her neighbors and friends at great length. Prabha Devi and her husband waited for Kiran's phone call every Sunday morning.

It was Sunday morning in India. Prabha Devi was waiting in anticipation. Finally, the phone rang. Yes, it was Kiran at the other end.

"Ma, I have to give you a very special news. We went to the doctor yesterday and he confirmed that I am in the family way."

"God bless you my child. I am delighted. Take care of yourself and eat well."

“But Ma, I need you. I am not able to take care of my job, health and Vijay all at the same time. Ma, can you come to us please?”

“Listen Kiran, I’ve to take care of your father. He has a heart condition. Moreover, it costs a lot of money to travel to America. You know that we live here comfortably within our means but we don’t have the resources to travel abroad.”

“Ma, come for my sake, please! Why don’t you take some time to think about it. I’ll call you again next Sunday.”

Next Sunday morning, the phone rang again. This time it was Vijay on the line. “Ma! We want you to come and bless us. Don’t you worry about the expenses! After all, Kiran and I earn more than the prime minister and the president of India combined. We’ll send you the ticket. You’ll enjoy staying with us. Moreover, this will break your monotony also.”

There was no mention or concern shown for the health of her husband. Prabha Devi couldn’t snub Vijay’s request so she came to America to stay with them for six months. She didn’t cook the first day. On the second day, Kiran wanted her to cook her favorite dish. Prabha Devi gladly obliged. Kiran and Vijay liked her cooking. She cooked again the next day. On the fourth day she took it easy. When Kiran returned from work, she asked for dinner. Her mom looked astonished and said,” Kiran, aren’t you going to cook anymore?”

“Ma! You know my condition. Do you expect me to cook? One thing led to another and Prabha Devi soon became their housemaid. She cooked, cleaned the house and washed dishes. Prabha Devi shouldered all the household chores that were thrust upon her and nobody thought that she was not only too old to take on such a burden, she had a sick husband living alone in India. Whenever Prabha Devi raised the topic of returning to India, Kiran made her feel guilty by whining about her condition, “How could you think of that? Look at my condition! Ma! I need you.” Prbha Devi thought about Kiran’s plea and her husband’s condition at the same time. Her heart was flooded with contradictory emotions.

Six months passed. Prabha Devi’s ticket had expired. Soon it was time for the childbirth. Prabha Devi felt happy for the first time in months to see her grandson. After the birth of her grandson, Prabha Devi begged and pleaded to be sent home. She struggled to describe her inner tug-of-war but all in vain. Now she had one more chore added to her list—taking care of the infant. She was virtually a prisoner in a foreign land. Every plane she noticed in the sky, she thought it was going in her direction, but she was helpless and penniless.

Prabha Devi remembered all that with tears in her eyes. She looked around and glanced at Kiran’s friends. There was something common among them. Most of them had called their parents from India to work as house servants for them. One of Vijay’s friends was different. His name was Bihari. Bihari noticed Prabha Devi’s predicament and went up to her to console her. He was moved by the old lady’s tears and noticed scars on her thin malnourished body and recognized that they were recent. Bihari immediately approached Vijay and threatened to report him to the authorities. It was a obvious case of abuse, exploitation and emotional torture. Prabha Devi’s expressions betrayed an untold story.

Vijay got scared and put Prabha Devi on a plane to India the next day. When she arrived in Golmundi, two of her nephews came to the railway station to pick her up. The nephews were beaming with joy.

"Welcome back to India," they shouted. Prabha Devi was astonished at their inappropriate exuberance.

"How did he die?" Prabha Devi asked in a sorrowful but controlled tone.

"Wait till you reach home," answered her nephews.

On reaching home, Prabha Devi saw her husband standing in front of their house with a garland in his hand. Prabha Devi fainted with shock. When she regained consciousness her husband explained to her, "This was the only way to get you out of America."

The reunion was joyful. She embraced both her nephews and asked her husband, "*Baaki, howz zindagi*? (Nevertheless, how's life?)," the American English came tumbling to her lips mixed with Hindusthani.

"Get your aunt something to eat," shouted her husband.

"Don't bother, let me do it. This is my house and I am the Indira Gandhi here. I'll do here what I want!"

Everyone cheered and smiled. Prabha Devi looked at her husband and uttered, "*Apna ghar phir apna ghar hai,* na? (There is no place like home, isn't?)." She was finally re-living her dream away from the dreamland.