THE CO-WIVES

A tale of love..?..Credence and existence

PREETY SANTOSH

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For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication, please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

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Dedicated

To all the **Women** struggling hard to find their ground

To all the **Men** who make women feel safe in their presence

To all the **People** who are working consistently to make this world a better place to be in.....

Preface

I used to visit my friend shruti's house every now and then, for two obvious reasons. One, she was my best friend. Second, her family was very hospitable and compassionate towards me. During my regular visits to her abode, I got to know a lot about her family members, especially her grandmother. She was in her late eighties and walked with a cane. She was a very endearing lady. I have not seen many people with such spark at this age. Most of the elderly people I knew were very strict in their mannerism and sulked for no reasons. But she was quite the opposite. She had a great sense of humour and was so full of life. She was a short-statured lady and a great admirer of her own beauty. She would often look at the mirror and say " see what i look like now with so much wrinkles on my face and how I used to look in my olden days. And then she would giggle like a child. She was full of sarcasm and wittiness at the same time. One thing that surprised me about her was that she had grown fondness for alcohol which was quite unusual for a lady of her age especially in the community we lived in. Once shruti told me that her father gave her grandma a measurable quantity of alcohol, in the form of medicine, when she caught cold and cough a few years ago. Since then, she started having it on a regular basis. If shruti's father would deny, she would bribe her grandchildren to bring her a bottle or two and hide it in her closet so as to consume later in the evening. Everyone in the family and neighbourhood was very

fond of her. Her son, daughter- in- law and grandchildren loved her immensely.

For me, she was a mischievous, fun- loving , affectionate and full of life old lady with the soul of a child. Little did i know about her past at that time.

05 December 2008. It was a Sunday morning and the winter season was starting to peak. I have not met Shruti for a long time because i had recently joined a job in a different city and we both were busy with our own lives. We were in college together and became best of friends there only. So, I decided to pay her a visit just to catch up with her. When I reached, her mother met me at the door. After exchanging greetings, she told me that Shruti was in her grandma's room. I had been to Shruti's house a number of times before also, but I had never been to her grandma's room, though I knew where it was. The door was wide open. So I entered without knocking. Shruti was lying on her grandma's bed, busy with her phone. Grandma was sitting in front of a small wooden temple, which was kept on a wooden table beside the cupboard, with her hands folded and eyes closed. When I passed her to reach up to Shruti, I noticed something unusual. A framed picture of an old lady was there in the temple along with the idols of Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesha, Goddesses Durga and Parvati.

Shruti was so lost in her phone that she became conscious of my presence only when I tapped her at the back. She whispered "Hi" to me and we both went outside so as not to disturb the grandma.

"Why there is a picture of an old lady in your grandma's pooja ghar"? I asked Shruti while settling on the sofa in the drawing

room, even without asking her how she was in the first place as we were meeting after a long gap.

“That must be her mother, I guess. It was so touching, I have never seen someone praying to their heavenly parents along with the deity.” I answered my own question without waiting for her reply. “That’s not her mother,” stated Shruti.

“Then who she is?” I got curious.

“That’s her sister-in-law,” she replied.

“Whaaattt,” I almost exclaimed.

I was shocked for the revelation.

“Yes, you heard it right. I had two grandmas. She was the elder one.” Shruti shrugged.

But, I got confused.

“Will you please elucidate? And why is she praying to her sister- in- law as if she is a goddess? I don’t know anyone who does so. In fact, most of the women nowadays have a very sour relationship with their sister-in-laws. Why has she kept her photo along with the deity’s?” I bombarded her with innumerable questions.

“Why don’t you go and ask her yourself,” said Shruti.

“Wouldn’t she mind?” She wouldn’t mind as far as I knew her. I almost talked to myself.

Later that day, when grandma had had her lunch, I went to her room and after touching her feet and asking about her well-being, I threw the same question at her.

What unfolded that day shook me to the core. I got goosebumps and was completely taken aback. Tears rolled down my cheeks the entire time she narrated her story to me. I had never known this side of hers before.

Though I was a scribe since childhood, i had never thought of writing a book or a biography for that matter. But that day I decided that I would write down her story to the world. So, here is an extraordinary tale of two ordinary women for all of you to cherish, celebrate and ruminate.

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1
Strings Attached

1922, Lajwanti was born to Sumitra and Raichand in the remote village of Kamalpura, Haryana (INDIA), then part of the Punjab province. Her mother was a very clever, self- indulgent woman while her father was a submissive, reticent man. The birth of a girl child was not much celebrated in that part of the country in those times. Lajwanti grew up to be a very beautiful and charming teenager. She had a fairy whitish complexion, sea-deep dark black eyes, long lustrous hair and a sculpted feminine physique. She was reserved but affectionate towards everyone around her. People in the neighbourhood fondly used to call her Lajjo (short name for Lajwanti).

Like most other girls of her age, Lajjo never attended school as it was not the norm to send the girls to school in their community. People used to believe a woman's primary duty was household work, making education unimportant and a distraction from domestic responsibilities. It was believed that education would corrupt their minds, making them less desirable for marriage. Girls were considered Paraya Dhan (belonging to others) and temporary members of the family. And that spending on their education would benefit the other family only.

Lajjo was very efficient in household chores and had great human values.

As soon as she turned 16, her father started to look for a match. In those times, in local community, village Barbers used to bring boy's family's proposal to the girl's elders. If they agreed, to which they most commonly did, the match was fixed. Neither the meeting of the boy and girl was arranged nor they were asked for their consent. Only the elders of the family were accountable for match-making with the Barber's proposals.

Lajjo's father, Raichand, was an introvert man with only little income. He had five children and Lajjo was the eldest. The remaining four children were all male. Prabhu, Kailash, Dharam and Gopi: In the chronological order of their birth. They used to live in a Kutcha house which consisted of only two rooms, like most other families in their locality. The walls made up of mud and clay, sloping roof of thatch and the floor daubed with mud. The entire family used to live in one room and the other one was used as kitchen and for storing grains at the time crops were harvested. Though they were not very poor, Sumitra always used to taunt Raichand for their low standard of living as she was very ambitious and dominating woman. He never paid heed to her never ending complains.

Sumitra enrolled all the four boys in school and taught Lajjo how to excel in household chores. The children obeyed and feared their mother while the father was merely present for them.

* * *

One fine morning in the month of kartika, Shambhu Dayal, the family barber, came to their house and announced to Raichand who was sitting on a charpai in the Aangan "I have found a very good match for your daughter, Lajjo. After you hear it out, you will not be able to say no to me."

Sumitra was busy brooming the courtyard when Shambhu came. On seeing him, she pulled Purdah (veil) over her head and covered her face as was the custom.

"The boy is from a very prosperous family and inherits acres of lands. They are the jameendaars of the village. His parents passed away when he was quite young. Now it's just him and his brother who got married a few years back and is blessed with two lovely girls." Said Shambhu out of excitement.

"It's nice of you to bring such a good proposal to me. I will have a word with my wife and convey our decision to you in a day or two." Raichand seemed indifferent.

"I will take your leave now as I am in a bit of hurry, will wait for your response." Shambhu said and left.

As soon as Shambhu exited the compound, Sumitra approached her husband and started scolding him, "What is there to think about? You must have straightly said yes to him. So what if we are miserable, at least we will have some relatives who are well-off and may turn a helping hand in our hard times." She kept shouting at him.

Raichand being his usual self, kept quite and didn't bother to reply to her endless gabbling.

The very next day Raichand sent his affirmation to Shambhu.

“We have found a very good match for you. The boy is quite wealthy and lives in a village only a few miles from ours. His name is Raamkishore. His parents are no more. He only have an elder brother named Raamkartaar (Kartaar).” Announced Sumitra while Lajwanti was washing the utensils.

“You have a very good fortune unlike mine. I got married to a poor man who is good for nothing.” She blabbered cursing her fate.

2
Lajjo

Lajwanti was never loved by her parents. Neither she was close to any of her siblings. At times, she yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. Whenever she would try to get close to her mother, she would get irritated and push her away yelling, "Why don't you make yourself useful, there is so much work to be done." Though she had a few friends in the neighbourhood who were nice to her, she always longed for someone to confide in. On learning about her Rishta from her mother, she got really excited. Mere the thought of having a partner filled her heart with joy. Now she would have someone with whom she could talk about anything and everything. Though Sumitra had not given any physical description of the Boy, Lajwanti started painting a picture of how he would look like in her mind. She always thought of him to be in a white attire, like the princes she had seen in her brother's storybooks.

Lajjo had just turned 16 and like most other girls of her age, she was fascinated about living with a man. She dreamt about Raamkishore's house, the two of them living together, her making delicious food for him, together they making a family.

Even without meeting him, she suddenly started feeling a sense of completeness. As if a long -left void in her heart had been filled. Mere thinking about his name gave her immense pleasure.

Lajjo's parents had planned to get her married after the crops were harvested in the month of Vaisakha. That meant she had to wait nearly half-an-year to unite with the man of her destiny.

Lajwanti was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. She thought of kishore as a boon sent to her by Shiva to fill her life with love and affection. With each passing day, her love for Kishore kept multiplying. She even got his name inked on the right arm when she once went to a fair with her friends, who later used to tease her for the same. Lajjo was very shy by nature but when she saw the tattoo- maker, she was tempted to get Kishore's name scribbled. When the artist asked her to recite the name she wanted to be inked, she was not able to figure out how to convey as women were not supposed to take their husband's name, they would rather use metaphors. Puzzled, she blurted out, "Gopi, my dear little brother". The artist being experienced looked at her blushing face and asked the girl accompanying Lajjo to vocalize the name. When the girl uttered 'Raam kishore', Lajjo's face reddened further. She kept looking at her arm intently with her beloved's name carved over it, repenting not being able to read it herself.

Lajjo was at the peak of her beauty and so were the mustard fields. Winter was very harsh that year but Lajjo was warm from inside. Days passed really quickly for her.

In the month of chaitra, days started getting a bit warmer. Lajjo started taking knitting classes from a kaki in the neighbourhood so that she would be able to knit a sweater herself the next winter, for Kishore.

3
The Traders

There was an extensive empty land on the right side of Lajjo's house. It was used by the villagers for organizing weddings, religious activities and other occasions. A group of traders also used to stay there for a day or two during their voyage in order to take rest, every year before the beginning of summers. A caravan of camels would arrive in the village a few hours before the sunset.

The traders would install their tents on the extensive ground and tie their camels to the pegs. They would then rest at night and restart the journey at dawn, the next day. In case the weather is not favourable, they would postpone the departure till the following day. Over the years, they had become familiar with many of the villagers who would provide them with food, water and fodder for the camels during their stay. Lajjo's mother was neither compassionate nor a helping lady to anyone in the neighbourhood but she was ever ready to serve food to the traders. She would ask her sons to fetch buckets of water from the well which was a bit far from their house and take them to the camel caravan resting in the vast ground. Before leaving, the traders would reward Sumitra with Silver coins for being hospitable to them.

Lajjo was busy chopping the vegetables in the shade of a neem tree in the courtyard. It was past noon. Suddenly, she heard the camel caravan approaching. Sumitra was angry about something as always and was uttering things which no one was paying attention to. On seeing the herd of camels, she simmered down. She started making preparation for the supper and instructed the two of her elder sons to fetch some buckets of water for the camels.

4
The Messenger

The Sun in the distant horizon was turning from yellow to reddish orange. Sumitra was packing the food into utensils, a man riding a camel approached their house, dressed in a white attire. He got down and tied the camel to a peg just outside the boundary wall. Sumitra came out of the kitchen looking confused.

"Ram Ram ji," the man greeted Sumitra as he entered the compound.

Sumitra folded her hands in reciprocation and greeted him back. She looked baffled at the arrival of a stranger at this time of the day.

"I am kartaar Singh. I came from Dhangarh. I am the elder brother of Raamkishore." He said in a monotonous way and cleared the air.

"Please have a seat," Sumitra motioned to her youngest son, Gopi, to bring a moodah (wooden chair) for the guest.

She herself went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water, meanwhile she signaled Lajwanti who was standing behind the half-closed door of the adjacent room to grab a dupatta and pull it over her head.

"I will bring some milk for you," she said while handing the glass of water to the guest.

"Please don't bother yourself. I am not willing to have anything." He said as Sumitra was heading to the kitchen.

She stopped and turned back.

The man was muscular and dressed in a white kurta-pajama. He had grown a long beard and looked visibly tired. He seemed restless and was looking down on the ground since he came.

He turned his gaze towards Sumitra and announced, "I have come here to inform you about something. My younger brother has developed a serious disease in the stomach and has been admitted to a reputed hospital in dilli (delhi) for past one month. The doctors have said that the chances of him leading a healthy life are very poor. But I am hoping and praying for the best and doing every possible thing that I could do." He said without a pause.

"Oh! my poor daughter, only God knows what is written in her stars." Sumitra moaned.

"But since you are a wealthy man unlike us, your brother will be able to cope up with the medical condition sooner. And my daughter will take very good care of her husband till he becomes healthy again." Her voice was firm this time.

Lajwanti was still standing where she was, overhearing everything, she went numb. Her heart ached.

"I have been there in the hospital with Kishore for past one month. Though he was more than willing to marry your daughter before he caught the illness, now that he knows his fate, he does not want her to lead a miserable life ahead. He doesn't want to shatter a young girl's dreams. That being the case, he has sent me to convey that you can marry off your daughter to someone you think is suitable for her since Kishore has decided to stay single till he lives. Please don't take offence." He sighed.

"I suggested my brother that I would send the words through Shambhu but he insisted that I must go myself and apologise to you all on his behalf for all that is happening. My brother is a very affectionate person. He is very concerned for Lajwanti. He was very perturbed, less because of his own health, but more because of Lajjo's future. That is the reason I am sitting here in front of you with his message. I have asked one of my friends to stay there at the hospital and take care of him till I go back.

Sumitra kept quite.

Tears flowed down Lajwanti's cheeks. She was disheartened learning about her beloved's health. Her heart wrenched on the thought of him lying on a hospital bed. She felt miserable about not being able to be by his side at such adversity.

Lajwanti always craved love and affection from her parents. She was astonished at how Kishore was so much anxious about her than himself.

"Lajwanti's father has gone to his sister's village for some work. He will return in a day or two. Lajjo is our only daughter and is very dotted upon by us. Her father will be devastated to learn about this. However, my opinion is that you should persuade your brother to change his mind. In our community it is not easy to find a Rishta for a girl who has already been hitched to someone. Moreover it's her duty to accept her fate and be in the service of her husband." Sumitra said in a convincing tone.

"You better have a word with your daughter as it is her life that is at stake. She may decide whatever she feels is right for her," Kartaar suggested.

"It's getting dark outside, also my camel is not in the best of its health and needs some rest. I will sleep on the charpai outside, under the pipal tree, no need to make any special arrangements for me. I will leave early in the morning. Please send some fodder for the camel if possible." Kartaar added. He then went outside and sat on the charpai.

Sumitra went inside and when she saw Lajjo sobbing behind the door, she whispered sternly, "why are you wailing, in vain. He just got a disease and is still very much alive. You can save your tears for later."

She continued, in a suppressed tone, "Rich people don't die imminently. But what I fear is that if he dies in an year or so without leaving a heir , his brother might not give you a single penny or piece of land. Also, he will not maintain a good relationship with us after his brother passes away.

Lajjo tried hard to suppress her snivelling.

Sumitra arranged a Thaali for Kartaar and signalled her eldest son, Prakash, to go and serve him food. She covered the utensils containing food with lids , in jiffy. She was blurting out something audible only to herself. Meanwhile she asked Lajjo to help her carry the food, with the show of hands.

* * *

The traders were sitting on the carpets outside their tents, smoking hookah. Sumitra greeted them with folded hands and put the food on a fold-able wooden table arranged outside an olive-coloured tent. Lajwanti followed her mother.

A man in off white dhoti-kurta with a considerably prominent nose, wearing a bright red turban over his head, had been staring at Lajwanti for a while. As the mother-daughter duo was about to leave, he approached them and asked Sumitra, "Who is this beautiful girl accompanying you ? Is she your daughter?"

Sumitra examined the man carefully and asked back politely "I have never seen you before. If you don't mind, may I ask you who you are?"

"I am Rashid," the man roared.

"I am a very wealthy man. I used to travel in other parts of the country for my business. It was only last year that I joined this group of traders." He added.

"I am very pleased to meet you. I observed that you were looking at the girl for quite some time. Is there any particular reason? Has she done anything offensive?" Sumitra faltered rolling her eyes at Lajjo.

"Why would not anyone stare at her? She is so alluring, gorgeous is the word. I have never seen a girl as beautiful as hers. I wish to marry her and make her my fourth begum. I will adorn her with jewels like the other three. She deserve to live a queen's life indeed." He said.

"Oh! she is my beloved daughter, eldest of her four siblings. She is the apple of my eyes. We will consider our self very fortunate if you marry her." Sumitra was ecstatic at the unanticipated proposal. The apprehension she had grown after meeting kartaar, vanished swiftly in a moment. She was thrilled to learn how an opulent man was so eager to tie the knots with her daughter whom she had considered futile all this while. She thought of this proposal as an infallible solution to her misery.

Lajwanti was standing behind her mother, dressed in a traditional haryanvi shirt and skirt, her gaze fixed to the ground. Shiver ran down her spine and she felt weak in the knees.

"We will leave tomorrow morning. If you send her with me, I will pay you a hefty amount, enough for you too to live a life of comfort." Rashid added as if he was much aware of Sumitra's greed.

Sumitra took a brief pause as if trying to absorb what she just heard. Sha thought on her feet and then spoke with a pause, "I have few guests at home to attend to. I will be back to you in half an hour." She held Lajwanti's hand firmly and took her along, almost dragging. They hotfooted back home.

* * *

Inside the kitchen Sumitra instructed Lajjo, “Serve food to your brothers quickly and eat yourself too. You need to pack your bag afterwards as you will have to leave in the morning.”

Lajwanti looked at her mother in disdain.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Lajjo exclaimed in disbelief.

“I am already engaged to someone. Why didn’t you tell the truth to the trader,” Lajjo cried.

“Your fiance is in hospital. He may not survive for long. And Rashid is wealthier than him. You should be thankful that I am thinking of your betterment only.”

“I would not marry anyone apart from the man I am hitched to. I have given him a place equivalent to Lord Shiva in my heart. I will do anything it takes to make him live long. And even if he is not destined to survive long, I am determined to serve him till his last breath.” Her throat choked.

“Have you gone insane? Just go and serve food to your brothers. They must be hungry. I am not asking for your opinion. It’s entirely in my discretion to whom you will marry.” Sumitra said, looking fiercely at Lajjo.

“Don’t you fear God? Only an hour ago you were more than willing to marry me to the man who is in poor health. You were even asking his elder brother to convince him for the same. How can you go back on your own words. To which extent can you go for money.” Lajjo whined petulantly.

"It's the money that matters at the end of the day, not the words." Sumitra replied blatantly and started filling a pot from an earthen water tank built adjacent to the kitchen wall.

Lajwanti knew her mother. She was aware that pleading would not move her. She spread a rug on the kitchen floor and called her brothers who were busy in playing with sticks in the courtyard. She served them food and sat at one corner on the floor, glaring at the straws hanging from the thatch above.

"Why are you not eating?" Asked Sumitra when she noticed Lajjo sitting on floor, lost in her thoughts.

"I do not feel like eating," Lajjo retorted.

"That wouldn't make any difference" Remarked Sumitra.

"You better pack your bags then." She continued in a frenzy of bad temper while lifting the pot of water over her head.

Sumitra crossed the courtyard with brief steps. She exited through the main wooden door, leaving it half open. The camel was fast asleep. She checked on to Raamkartaar, through the corner of her eyes, who appeared to be in deep sleep. Tiredness have taken over the two. She then proceeded towards the tents.

5
The Unexpected

Soon after Sumitra left, Lajjo got up. She looked at her brothers who all were busy feasting and chattering among themselves. She crept her way to the pipal tree, sweat exuding her temple region. Her legs moved frantically as she approached the man who was fast asleep. She stopped at the foot side of the charpai and started sobbing silently in despair as she was clueless about how to wake him up.

Kartaar jolted up from the charpai as tears fell on his feet.

He stared at her for a while. Her face barely visible in the dim moonlight.

Lajwanti was hesitant at first, to speak to the man who happened to be her future Brother-in-law. But she put together all the courage she had and whispered, "I beg your pardon to disturb you at this point of time. But I have no one else to turn to for help." She mumbled with folded hands

"Who are you and how can I help you?" He quavered.

"I am Lajwanti, the daughter of Sumitra and Raichand, who has been hitched to your younger brother," She murmured.

"My mother is planning to send me away with a trader, thrice my age, who has already been married to three other women. He has vowed to give a huge amount of money to my mother as a reward." She tried to clear the dust.

"Is your father aware of all this?" Kartaar seemed astounded.

"He has been out of village for few days due to some work. Had he been here, it would have barely made a difference. He has never dared to say a word to my mother. In this predominantly male led society, the scenario at my home is quite the opposite," Lajjo Replied in a choked voice.

"The day my Rishta was arranged, I started worshiping your brother in my heart and soul. I can't even think of myself being with anyone apart from him. I am much aware about his health. I am, in all my senses, ardent to be by his side through all thick and thins. Even if he is not able to make it long in life, I will spend the rest of my life in solitude with his name in my heart forever." Lajjo took a deep breath and continued, "My mother has gone to the traders camp to close the deal. She might be coming back anytime soon. I beg you to take me along to my almighty who is battling for his life, miles away from me. I will be indebted to you forever." Lajjo gasped.

"I understand your situation very well. And I am more than willing to help you out. But what you are suggesting

doesn't seem to be the most appropriate thing to do at the moment. Let me have a word with your mother. I will try to convince her. I am sure she will understand. If needed, I will talk to the elders of your community too." Kartaar suggested.

"She would never listen to anyone. Neither I have the time. I know my mother. She is avaricious and unscrupulous. The traders will leave early in the morning. My mother will go to any extent to send me with the man. Is there not any way I can escape from here?" Her heart pounded.

Silence prevailed for a few seconds. Then Kartaar spoke, "Go back to your normal self. Finish your daily chores. Let everyone fall asleep. Wait for another hour. Then come back to me as still as a mouse. No need to take along anything except yourself."

Lajwanti nodded and left quickly anticipating the return of her mother. She rushed to the kitchen, her brothers had finished their meals and were still busy chattering. She collected the used utensils in a basket and took them near the water tank to do the dishes.

Sumitra came back gently closing the wooden gate behind her. She asked Kailash and Prabhu to spread charpais for everyone in the courtyard. As she approached Lajjo who was still busy doing the dishes, she inquired "Have you packed your bag yet?"

"What is there to pack? I barely have clothes that are decent enough. And since you have found a wealthy man

for me, he will certainly buy me newer ones," Lajjo retorted.

Sumitra did not bother to argue and finished the remaining chores quickly.

Everyone laid down on their respective charpai. Sumitra along with her youngest born being nearest to the entrance, followed by Lajwanti and then the other three siblings. The four lads dozed off as soon as they hit the charpai. Sumitra took a while to fall asleep. Lajwanti was lying still, her eyes closed with effort, trying real hard to calm down her racing heart. The sky was clear with the stars shining bright. Lajwanti partially opened her eyes in between to check the position of stars.

Her mind occupied with presumptions. She envisioned herself in the house she was supposed to descend half an year later, on the auspicious day of her wedding. Kishore's reaction when he would get to know about her arrival. His family's response to her unannounced and unanticipated advent. Her mother being furious back at home. Her father and brothers being yelled at, without any implication of theirs.

She tried hard to cease the thoughts, but couldn't.

Just as soon she realised that almost an hour had passed since Sumitra has slumbered in her charpai, she got up , tip toed to the main door barefooted so as to avoid any kind of noise. Carefully opening the wooden gate, she walked out stealthily.

It was a dimly lit night. Weather was calm. Except for chirping of crickets, there was no noise at all. The wind was still. Sky was bright and clear. The stars seemed like pearls had been spreaded on a canvas sheet.

Kartaar became wary as he heard a feeble sound of the wooden door being gingerly closed by Lajjo. As she came nearer, he went straight to the camel, untied it from the peg and patted its back affectionately but silently.

He climbed onto the camel and motioned Lajjo to follow him, she did so, cautiously. Kartaar moved the halter, the camel got up and started pacing slowly without making a grunt, as it usually did, as if sensing the Lord's mind.[scene end]

Not very far have they gone, they heard camel's groaning in the distant which amplified expeditiously. Lajjo's heart sank.

"They must have found about us. Its the traders I am sure. They are approaching us at the speed of the wind. They have brawny camels, it would not take long for them to nab us. They are huge in numbers and most likely to have swords and other weapons with them, we would not be able to make it very far now." Kartaar gasped as he pulled the camel's halter to make it run faster.

Lajwanti was dumbfounded. She couldn't believe what was happening. She didn't expect them to find out this too early. She cursed her fate.

"My mother wakes up a few times in the night to pee. She must have informed them about my elopement." Lajjo quivered.

The camel was trying to run as fast as it could on the kutcha road. The groaning in the background became louder with each passing moment. Lajwanti clenched on the hump, her hands trembling. There were fields with bajra crops on both the sides.

"The next village in our way is Shaadpur. It belongs to our community. It must be less than a mile from here on. We can ask for help from the villagers, once we reach there." Kartaar panted.

Lajjo had never been out of her village since she was born. The farthest she had made was to the fair which was held every year in the outskirts of her village. She had heard about the nearby villages from her father only. She was lost in a pool of terror-stricken thoughts.

A cloud of dust loomed large in the background with bawling sounds. Lajjo finally conceded what kartaar had foreshadowed. First, she was filled with fear. But soon the feeling of guilt took over. She cursed herself for putting Kartaar's life at risk for the sake of her own liberation.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Kartaar's screaming,

"Help us, please. Help us. We are being followed by the traders. We need the help of our community."

She could spot a few pucca and kutcha houses much like her own village. She followed Kartaar and screamed for help too. Though her voice was not as intense as his.

In no time, men started emerging from the nearby houses, with lanterns and bamboo sticks in their hands. Kartaar pulled the left rein, the camel slowed down and then halted. The groaning of camels in the background fainted and soon disappeared.

He then pulled both the reins and mouthed the word "Jhe Jhe". The camel sat down. Lajjo got down and stood beside the camel.

"I am Kartaar Singh. I am from Dhanbaad village," Kartaar said mellifluously, getting down from the camel, with his hands folded.

"And this is the would-be-wife of my younger brother," He added signalling towards Lajjo.

All the men in the group seemed bewildered while an elderly among them spoke.

"But where are you heading at this point of time?" He asked apprehensively.

Kartaar narrated the entire incident concisely while Lajjo kept standing where she was.

"I am the Mukhiya of this village," the man announced.

"You are from our community so you are like a brother to us. It would not be safe for the two of you to leave now as the traders might come back. I urge you to stay in our

patronage till sunrise and then you can leave." He concluded.

Kartaar nodded.

The Mukhiya turned towards a narrow lane signalling the crowd to disperse. Kartaar and Lajjo followed him tacitly. He led them to a Haveli where his wife was waiting impatiently for him.

"Take the young lady to your room," he instructed his wife and added, "they are our guests for the night."

Lajjo followed the woman like a lamb. The woman led her to an enormous room.

Inside the room, there was nothing much. A kerosene lamp was hanging in one corner, a wooden bed on which two kids were lying fast asleep, and a charpai covered with a neat bed sheet. Alongside the bed, an earthen pot was kept on an iron stand and an aluminium glass over it placed upside down.

"You can use this charpai sister. And please feel free to bother me if you need anything." The woman said to Lajjo and headed to the bed where her kids were sleeping. Her voice felt like she was very tired and drowsy, perhaps because her sleep was disturbed in the middle of the night.

Kartaar and Mukhiya lied down on their respective charpais laid in the courtyard. Kartaar had tied the camel to a peg near the entrance of the Haveli.

The woman was snoring loudly as Lajjo turned and tossed in the charpai, struggling to sleep. Her mind flooded with

thoughts. She had never imagined that she would miss her home ever after leaving. But here she was, only a few miles away, already wistful about what she had left. Memories of childhood, though not very pleasant, flashed through her mind. Exhilarated and anxious about what the future holds for her. Being in a state of quandary, her heart was beating unusually.

It appeared to be an endless night for Lajjo. Every now and then she would get up and peep through the window for any sign of daybreak. She would then come back, lie down and turn sides. It seemed as if time had ceased.

Lajjo rushed to the door when she heard slow murmurs. Kartaar was having a word with the Mukhiya. When she approached them, Kartaar suggested that they must leave now as the dawn was about to break.

The Mukhiya insisted on staying for a few more hours and leave after having a meal. But Kartaar gave reasons and they left. Thanking him abundantly for the courtesy.

"Dhanbaad is only half a mile now," Kartaar announced and Lajjo covered her head and face with a dupatta turning it into a veil.

A small ball of orange light appeared in the sky. It gradually increased in size and the colour changed from orange to bright yellow. Soon the surroundings lit up and everything became clearly visible.

Cattles were grazing in the fields. Birds were chirping. Weather was pleasing and so was Lajjo's heart.

A few passersby greeted Kartaar with "Raam-Raam". He greeted them back with the same.

Lajjo was diligently inspecting the village from behind the veil. It was much like hers. Majority of the houses built with mud and straw and fewer with bricks. She observed a few havelis also, built with black slate stone.

* * *

And finally, here she was, in front of her beloved's house. Not in her wildest of dreams, she had thought of landing here like this. But fate couldn't be changed or reversed.

It was a pucca house with two huge neem trees, one on each side of the entrance. The bulky wooden gate in front had been painted with bright green colour. The chhajja over the entrance was beautifully decorated in orange and white.

Lajjo peeped through the partly opened door. There was a massive courtyard in front, with a plinth in the centre.

A tulsi had been planted in it. Two young girls were playing with pebbles along the left periphery. On the right side Kartaar's wife, Chandro, was trying to lit fire under an earthen pot kept on the chullah. She was continuously blowing air through a small iron pipe. She was so engrossed in the act that she didn't take notice of Lajjo until she came only a few steps away from her.

6
Chandro

Chandro pored over Lajjo for a while and uttered, "I am sorry jiji, I could not recognize you."

She paused for a second and spoke again "Do you live nearby? Do you need anything?" She enquired.

Lajjo kept mum, staring at the orange flame in the chullah.

Kartaar came from behind and mumbled to his wife "She is Lajjo. Give her something to eat. She must be hungry. I will take bath quickly and then leave for hospital after having my meal. I need to rush there."

Chandro was perplexed but he hurried without looking at her. He crossed the dalaan (passageway) swiftly and went inside a massive room which has a beautiful wooden door, painted brown.

Chandro bent down promptly to put some more sticks inside the chullah and blew again with the pipe. She then got up and motioned Lajjo to follow her.

Kartaar came out quickly with white clothes in his hands and proceeded to the outhouse which was adjacent to the boundary wall near the entrance. He looked weary and visibly anxious.

Chandro served food to Lajjo who was sitting on the kitchen floor. She served her Sabji, roti, butter, onions and lassi in a very large glass. For the first time in her life, Lajjo was eating in copper utensils. She observed that the kitchen was huge and well arranged. As she nibbled on her food, Chandro went outside with a big thali arranged for Kartaar who was sitting in varandah on a moodah with a small wooden table in front of it.

Lajjo heard him telling his wife about last night's incident in a nutshell.

By the time Chandro came back to kitchen, Lajjo was done with her meal and was looking unblinkingly at the roshandaan (window near the roof).

Chandro took Lajjo to a room just adjacent to the massive one, which was also considerably big in size.

"This was supposed to be your room. If Kishore would have been here, I would have rather welcomed you to the house with rituals. But fate had planned it the other way," sighed Chandro.

"You look visibly tired. Take some rest. I need to pack few things as your Jetha (Husband's elder brother) is leaving for Aspataal (hospital). I will be back soon," she said and left.

The room was neat and clean and painted in off white colour. There was a taand (shelf), covered with flower printed cloth, on the right wall. A takhat (wooden bed) was lying near a rectangular window, through which the golden coloured mustard fields were visible and cool

breeze was flowing inside. A wooden chair was placed in one corner. Few clothes were hanging on the khoonti (pegs) on the left wall. When she went closer, she could appreciate that there were two kurta pajama sets and a gamcha (cotton towel). She envisioned Kishore wearing them. She took off the gamcha, wrapped it around her arms and dozed off right after she laid down on the bed.

* * *

It was past noon, Lajjo woke up to giggles. One girl was standing near her feet and the other who was younger was trying to hide behind her elder sister.

Lajjo got up and sat on the deewan. “What is your name?” She asked the girl.

“I am Bimla,” replied the elder one. “And she is my younger sister Meena,” she said while trying to pull the little girl in front.

“Our mother told us that you are our Kaki and asked us not to bother you. But we wanted to check on you,” chuckled Bimla.

“You are very beautiful, kaki” said Meena and they started giggling again.

Lajjo kept sitting where she was, lost in her own thoughts, pondering over how things have changed in just a single day.

Chandro entered the room with a bowl of tea in her hand. “I have asked the darzi, he will come to our house in evening,” she announced handing the bowl to Lajjo.

“When you are done with the tea, come to my room and help me take out some pieces of cloth from my sandook

(metal trunk) so that we can get your apparel ready at the earliest.”

Lajjo had never tasted tea before. She had learnt through her father that tea was a popular beverage among urban people. It was never prepared at her home. Back there, all

they had for a drink was chaach (buttermilk) only. When Chandro handed her tea, she was reluctant but could not refuse. She sipped it deliberately. Not liking the taste at first, she grew fondness for it later.

Soon Lajjo started helping Chandro in household chores. She observed that Chandro was a kind and generous woman who spoke very less.

Meena and Bimla were very fascinated towards their kaki and often kept lingering behind her. Lajjo also became affectionate to the two girls. She would often join them in their plays.

Bimla was 9 years old while Meena was 7. They used to go to a school which was in another village, about two miles away from theirs. They went to school in clusters with other girls in the neighbourhood. After they had returned back home, they would just play with their dolls, pebbles and earthen kitchen sets. Following their Kaki while she helped their mother, had become their new routine. One thing that they did everyday without failure was to daub their Takhti (small, flat wooden board) and put them in the Sun to get dry.

Chandro was occupied with work whole day. She had two buffalos and a calf. She would cook twice a day, put fodder to the cattle, milk them, broom the house and courtyard, do the laundry, knitting and sewing.

A man named Biswa, in his mid-thirties used to come to help her with the cattle work. He also worked in the fields

and looked after their land and crops as well. He hailed from a lower caste and lived in the same village.

Chandro would treat him as family and serve him food in the same utensils as theirs, which was not a common practice in those times. When Biswa would come home from the fields in evening, he would bring along a wooden Tokri made of bamboo sticks, full of freshly plucked fruits and vegetables from the farms. Chandro would keep the Tokri under a slab in the kitchen and give a portion of it to Biswa to take home for his own children.

Lajjo was being accustomed to this new routine and trying to assist chandro to her level best. In her heart she would be eagerly waiting and hoping for Kishore to return home soon.

Sometimes female acquaintances from the neighbourhood would come and gush over how beautiful Lajjo was and still was so unfortunate. But Lajjo never paid heed to their talks as she had unwavering faith in Lord Shiva and knew in her heart that Kishore would be fine soon.

Kartaar came back from hospital a week later, with the news that Kishore was getting better and he may get discharged soon. He stayed for the night and left again the following morning.

Lajjo was elated. Her heart somersaulting. Every morning and evening she would pray to Lord Shiva and pour water over the Shivalinga kept under the tulsi plant on the plinth in the courtyard. She started counting the days exuberantly.

Over the time, Lajjo became more of a friend to Bimla and Meena than their kaki. She would often help them knit clothes for their dolls and cook for them. She would watch them intently as they would pour a sachet of black grains in an iron ink pot containing water, thus preparing ink. They would then scribble something, which Lajjo was not able to read, on their wooden boards and keep them aside to show it to their father when he would return from the fields in evening.

* * *

Lajjo revered Chandro for her good spirit. She was amazed at how different Chandro was than her own mother. She was very affectionate towards her daughters unlike Lajjo's mother. She was concerned about their health and education. She would give them milk and almonds in the morning stating that it was good for their brains. Chandro ensured that everyone in the famiy is fed well and on time. She would feed grains to birds and ants, would keep an earthen pot filled with water, for the birds, under the arjun tree at the entrance to the cattleyard. She had empathy for every living being around.

Lajjo was mesmerized by how calmly she had accepted her peculiar arrival and had made her a part of the family without any hitch. Lajjo considered Meena and Bimla as lucky to have a mother like Chandro. She was completely in awe of her persona.

7
Devotion

Bimla and Meena had been off to school. Chandro was in cattle yard adjacent to their house. Lajjo was churning the curd in an earthen pot to make butter. Her hands moving the ropes in a rhythmic manner and feet resting firmly on the base of wooden churner. The main door opened with a creaking sound. Kartaar entered with a man in beige coloured kurta pajama, who had messy, tousled hair and seemed to be very weak and in discomfort. Kartaar was helping him walk by placing a hand around his waist.

Lajjo's heart skipped a beat. She rushed to spread a charpai in the Dalaan. She then rushed to the kitchen and came back with a jug full of water and two large copper glasses. Kartaar helped Kishore sit on the charpai. Lajjo was standing there with the jug in her hand. Kishore looked at her for a fraction of a second before lying down. It was the first time their eyes met. Her heart crumbled to see him in such pain and discomfort.

"Make some Khichdi for him to eat. He was so excited to come home that he has not had anything since yesterday."

Kartaar instructed Lajjo while sipping on water and went inside the room to change.

Lajjo went to the kitchen with moist eyes. She was feeling ambivalent. She was ecstatic because the moment she had yearned for so long to get a glimpse of her beloved one, has finally arrived. But seeing him in such a pain made her heart ache.

When Chandro returned from the cattle yard, she went straight to the Dalaan where Kishore was lying on the charpai with his eyes partly closed. Her eyes welled up when she went closer. She put her hand over his head and murmured "You will be absolutely healthy soon, Mahadev is with us."

Kishore gave a subtle smile and blinked his eyes in affirmation.

Chandro headed to the kitchen.

When Bimla and Meena returned from school, they were astonished to see their kaka home. Meena dashed to Kishore and wrapped her arms around him, half hugging her Kaka.

Just then Kartaar came from inside, Meena got up to hug him as he commanded, "For few days now, all he need is rest and good food." He said looking at Meena and Bimla reciprocally, "Don't bother him much. And soon he will be able to play around the house with you again." Both the girls nodded their heads in unison.

From this day onwards, Lajjo became an altruist to Kishore. She devoted all her time in his service only. She would make healthy, nutritious, palatable food for him. She would give him medicines without missing on a single dose, wash his clothes, assist him in strolling as advised by the doctor, would worship day and night for his well being and long life. She would be very hospitable to people who came to enquire about Kishore's health. She put in blood, sweat and tears to make him healthier again.

Finally, her persistence and endurance was rewarded, Kishore started performing his daily routine on his own in bits and bytes.

* * *

Kishore was lying on the deewan in his room. Lajjo engrossed in massaging his feet with castor oil, with so much love and devotion. His eyes fixed on the maroon Bindi placed precisely in the centre of her forehead.

“You are beautiful beyond words. You deserve a life more promising and fulfilling than this,” he whispered.

“Apart from Lord Shiva you are the only one I worship and pray for. I was destined to be with you and I will be there by your side till my last breath. I am indebted to the Lord for blessing me with a companion like you. I could not have asked for more, from the mighty,” she retorted back.

Kishore bended a little to grasp her hand and pulled her closer to him. The bowl of castor oil fell down on the floor but none of them cared. She wrapped her arms around him and confided her face in his chest. His heartbeat could be heard miles away. Dim moonlight was coming inside the room through the widely open window.

And that night they became one, like Shiva and Shakti.

INSEPARABLE.

8
Best of Both the Worlds

Lajjo looked radiant. She was cheerful than ever. She would learn how to put kajal, adorn herself and would put on colourful clothes. Her youth was at its peak. She looked divine and surreal. Everyone in the neighbourhood was mesmerized by her beauty. And to her, the most beautiful creature on earth was Kishore.

She observed that Kishore had great affection for his brother and sister-in-law and they reciprocated the same way. Both Kishore and Lajjo loved Meena and Bimla immensely, and the girls were also very fond of their Kaka-Kaki. This was the family she had always dreamed of.

Kishore gradually started going to the fields along with Kartaar while both the women looked after the house and the children. Life was at its beautiful best.

At days, Kishore would sit on a moodah in the courtyard, in evening, and recite some poems and stories to Bimla and Meena. He would tell them the stories of freedom fighters, the different movements held in the country under the leadership of Gandhi Ji to demolish the British rule and what else was going on in the country. The girls listened enthusiastically and would ask questions in

between. Among all 'Jhansi ki Rani' was their favourite. Every single time they would plead their Kaka to deliver 'khoob ladi mardaani woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi' and they would also sing along. Lajjo would find some work nearby during such sessions and would listen diligently.

Lajjo realised how the atmosphere in this house was quite the opposite of that in her paternal home. There was warmth and a strange sense of completeness in this house. Here the green trees appeared greener, the food tastier and the weather felt pleasant than ever. She could feel the love in everything around.

Sometimes a peacock would descend in the courtyard from the sisam tree, with its iridescent blue-green plumage, fanning out the magnificent train of tail-feathers. The eyes on its feathers shining, it will move gracefully with deliberate steps, moving the body along with a gentle rustling of feathers. Lajjo would watch intently, mesmerized, her heart swaying along the charming creature.

Lajjo was a firm devotee of Lord Shiva. Her faith deepened in the almighty with each passing day. She would be grateful to the Lord in her heart for transpiring the life she had always aspired for.

9
Revelation

"You are an erudite. I keep on wondering sometimes, how you know so much about the world around. I wish I was literate enough to fully understand your words of wisdom. You are privileged that you were able to educate yourself so much." Lajjo expressed her amazement.

"I had been able to gain all this knowledge and wisdom because of Chandro Bhabi only. Had she not been there, i would not have carried my studies further beyond primary. Though not a literate herself, she is very particular when it comes to education. She believes that education is a noble thing and one must not lose on the opportunity. Kartaar had to drop off from the school right after grade 3, due to family responsibilities as my father's health was not in a good shape ever since I remember. Being the elder son of the family, he had to bear the load. Years apart, when I had finished my middle school and expressed the desire to give a helping hand to my brother, Chandro Bhabi insisted that I must opt for secondary education rather. She herself laboured hard along with my brother, in house as well as in the fields. I owe a lot to her." Kishore reminisced.

"Chandro jiji is a very noble woman indeed. I have immense respect for her. But I find it strange that she is so quite all the time. Barely does the talking, says only that is needful. I have never seen a woman who talks so little." Lajjo asked Kishore in an inquiring tone.

They were lying on their bed. It was a moonless night, so it was pitch dark inside the room.

"My sister-in-law is a very strong lady who had gone through a lot," Kishore sighed. He took a brief pause and then continued, "My mother passed away when I was quite young. My brother got married to Chandro bhabhi when I was 6. My father was suffering from tuberculosis at that time. She took very good care of my father, became a motherly figure to me and pillar of strength for my brother. She came like a boon to our family in the hardest of times."

"My father couldn't battle the disease and lost his life after two years. The same year, my brother and sister-in -law were blessed with a beautiful boy whom they named as Raam Mehar. The birth of that boy brought Sunshine to our lives. His parents were on cloud nine. His mother was more cheerful than anyone. That boy had an exceptional glow on his face. His childish exploits would surprise everyone and filled our hearts with joy. After two years Bimla was born and Meena, further two years apart. Ours was a happy and blessed family. I would assist Bhabi in looking after the kids while Kartaar looked after the fields and all. The whole house echoed with the children's giggles and chuckles. By the time I had completed my

Grade 8, I believed it was my obligation to join my brother in his work. But Chandro Bhabi was firm that I must carry on my studies. She assured me that she will take up the job in my place or they would appoint an extra man apart from Biswa, if needed, but I must not give up on my education."

"Our fields were yielding gold. Everything was booming and flourishing until one day, when Raam Mehar ,7, collapsed while playing under the neem tree outside the house. I rushed to call the Vaidya (doctor) only to find that he was no more. We could not find the reason. We all were shattered. His father wailed like a child. His mother neither wept nor cried. She just went numb. That was the day she stopped talking much. Meena was too young to understand anything at that time. But Bimla would often inquire her mother about where had her elder brother gone. Chandro Bhabi would hide her pain and dismiss the little girl by saying that he had been to a distant place for his studies."

"Gradually and slowly everyone resumed their lives. Kartaar found solace in the fields, I got engrossed in my studies, Bimla too stopped asking as time lapsed. But one thing that did not come to normalcy even after years is Chandro Bhabi's cheerful smile. Since the tragic incident, she has conceived thrice but suffered two miscarriages and one still birth of a male child. An elderly woman in the village named Champa says that she is doomed not to have any male child alive. Chandro bhabi is a very compassionate lady but there is a deep void in her heart and a longing to have a son." Kishore took a deep breath

and his voice became heavy. There was no light inside the room but Lajjo could sense that his eyes were moist.

She just put her hands over his chest and caressed gently. “God’s ways are so unpredictable. And it’s so painful to see your loved ones to become so lifeless like that.” He continued in a low tone. “No matter what fate have to offer us, I wish you to stay as vivacious and cheerful as you are, always.” He concluded. She hugged him tight, like a child, in affirmation.

10
Hope

Time passed quickly. It had been 7 months since Kishore had returned from hospital. The month of Savana has begun. Fields were green with Jawar and Baajra crops. Days were rainy and there was greenery everywhere. Women and kids in the village started setting up swings on large neem and pipal trees in their vicinity. Bimla and Meena also installed one, on the sisam tree in their courtyard with Lajjo's help. They would often quarrel among themselves on whose turn it was. Then Lajjo would intervene and persuade them with her witty tricks.

It was a sunny afternoon. Lajjo was washing clothes and Chandro was putting oil in Bimla's hair, Meena came running from outside.

"Maa-Kaki, Vidya dadi is calling you both outside," she said panting.

Vidya was an old widow who lived nearby. She was a well-wisher of the family. Both Lajjo and Chandro left their work midway and went outside to check if everything was alright.

* * *

Vidya was sitting under a neem tree outside their house with a Manihaar (bangle seller) beside her.

They both touched her feet.

“Sadaa suhagan raho. Doodho nahao, Pooto phalo,” she gave her blessings. “Wearing green bangles in the month of Savana is considered to be very auspicious,” she said.

“Every year I used to gift these bangles to Chandro only,” she added looking compassionately at Chandro. “But this year I am privileged to gift these to both of you,” Vidya said shifting her gaze to Lajjo.

“We are fortunate enough to receive your blessings,” said Chandro while settling down on the ground besides the Manihaar. Lajjo followed her sister-in-law and sat on the right side.

Chandro leaned her hand forward. The Manihaar put six bangles on each hand, making it a dozen for both. Then he did the same for Lajjo.

“Had your mother-in-law been alive, she would have loved to do the ritual in my place,” Vidya mumbled.

“How much should I give?” Vidya asked the Manihaar.

“Two annas for each,” he said in a firm voice. Vidya took out four annas from under her shirt and handed them to the Manihaar.

The Manihaar left.

Vidya tried to get up from the ground. Chandro helped her in doing so.

"I will also leave now," Vidya announced while getting up.

"Please come inside and have tea with us," Chandro requested and Lajjo also joined in.

"Some other time," she replied. "I was heading to the fields when I saw the Manihar on my way so I brought him here. I must leave now otherwise I will get late," she said while leaving already.

* * *

"You look heavenly with these green bangles on your hands. They have augmented your persona, making you look like the idol of Goddess-Aadi Shakti," Kishore said, sitting across Lajwanti on the Deewan, taking Lajjo's hands in his and cradling them gently, lost completely in her awe.

"Vidya Kaki was saying that wearing green bangles in the month of Savana brings fortune to a woman," Lajjo said with glittering eyes.

"I pray to Shiva to keep you fit as a fiddle and bless Chandro jiji with a lad again," she breathed calmly.

"I am fortunate enough to have a companion like you. You have entered my life like a cool breeze in the scorching heat of summers. Your Punya Karma brought me back from the death bed. Don't ever leave me or this house for that matter," he pressed her fingers between his, closing his eyes partially.

"Only death will take me away from you or this house," she replied tightening the grip.

* * *

A few days passed. Bimla and Meena had been off to school. The men of the house had gone to the fields after having their meals. Lajjo was doing the dishes when her eyes rested on Chandro's belly, who was hanging clothes on a rope tied across from a peg on boundary wall to the sisam tree. It looked a bit swollen. Lajjo folded her hands for a monent and looked towards the sky as if her prayers were being accepted. "Jiji has been looking tired for a few days and her belly is also growing. This seems to be a good omen," Lajjo thought to herself and went into a state of euphoria. Little did she knew what the future holds in for them.

11
Fate

Lajjo was woken up by Kishore's coughing. It was past midnight. She placed her hand over his chest and asked in concern, "Is everything alright?".

"There is some uneasiness in my chest and my stomach is also tightening." He replied, coughing consistently.

Lajjo lit a kerosene lamp and went inside the kitchen to fetch some water. Kishore sipped it gradually. His breath became heavy and audible. The atmosphere inside the room intensified. Lajjo rushed to Chandro's room. Her legs faltering. She thumped on the door.

"Who is there at this time of night?" A feeble voice of Kartaar came from inside. Chandro opened the door. She fazed on seeing Lajjo's face which had turned pale, her hands shaking, lips trembling to speak.

"Maa why is kaki sobbing? And where is Bapu and Kaka?" Meena asked her mother who was giving her a glass of milk.

"Baapu has taken Kaka to hospital. He was unwell last night. You both go and play outside, don't bother your

Kaki. Your kaka would be fine and come home soon." Chandro said in a very low voice.

"Have some morsels at least," Chandro insisted pushing the thali towards Lajjo.

"I don't feel like eating jiji," she refused politely.

"Don't fret too much. God can't be this hard on us." Chandro almost talked to herself.

The entire day passed in despair and anticipation. Sun had vanished in the sky and moon was shining bright as ever. Chandro had put Meena and Bimla to bed as she sat on a moodah in the Dalaan, staring at the floor without blinking. Lajjo prayed ferociously. She staggered through the house, picking at her hair and biting on the nails. No one talked. Their eyes were heavy but far from sleep.

At the break of dawn, a bullock cart halted at their entrance. Lajjo's heart sank as if sensing something ill-omened. A shiver ran down her spine at what became visible thereafter. Kishore was lying straight in the cart, covered with a white sheet. Kartaar was standing a few steps away with swollen eyes and dropped shoulders. A few man from the neighbourhood were trying to take down the body from the cart.

Chandro ran to Lajjo and grabbed her from behind. Lajjo cried like an infant. She was inconsolable. She collapsed in Chandro's arms.

* * *

Lajjo was lying on a rug spread on the ground in Dalan, her head resting on Chandro's lap, surrounded by a flock of women gathered in the house from neighbourhood. Lajjo's face was bloated, her hands wiping away the nose periodically. Chandro was still, her one hand on Lajjo's forehead and the other on the ground. There were all sort of women, ones who lamented the death of their own loved once, women who talked all things that had to do with death, trained consolers who would not let anyone be ahead on their self assigned duties. Lajjo was tended to by some sniffling women who took turns patting her back giving sermons about how life is harsh at times and one must learn to deal with their sorrow.

The men sat outside, on the rug spread along the boundary wall, under the neem tree. Several Hukkas were arranged for them to puff on. They would gather there for thirteen days, talking about uncertainties of life, karma, life after death, Punarjanma and all.

The next day, some elderly women took Lajjo to the Johad (Water reservoir in northern parts of India), shatter her bangles there for dis-mission in water as was the custom, while singing some folk songs.

Everyday, groups of men and women would come, mourn the death of young man, console the family and leave in few hours.

* * *

On fifth day, Sumitra descended with four other women. As a preliminary she let tears gather in her eyes. The woman threw her palla at her face and started rocking back and forth, wailing loudly, "what sins my daughter have committed in her previous life that God has punished her this way. The apple of my eyes became a widow at such a tender age. How unfortunate a mother I am." She kept moaning.

It was a cloudy day. Lajjo was sitting adjacent to a wall in Dalaan surrounded by a group of consolers, her eyes fixed on the sisam tree, unblinking. She seemed to be unfazed by Sumitra's arrival. Few of the acquaintances got up to get hold of Sumitra and made her sit on the ground across Lajjo and tried to console her. Her grieving ceased after sometime.

Clusters of women started chattering among themselves. Sumitra crept her way to Lajjo, hugged her tightly and whispered in her ears, "It's not too late yet. You must had obeyed your mother in the first place and you would have been happier. But life has given you a second chance. That trader is still in contact with me and after all that you had done, he is still more than willing to make you his queen. Grow up, do not behave like an emotional fool. Otherwise you will become 'a rotten piece of bread' and stay like a servant in this house your whole life." She shifted back to her seat gently, releasing Lajjo from her grip, her sobs subsided.

Lajjo gave a stern look to Sumitra and turned her gaze away. She kept mum. She wanted to shout loudly at her mother, but chose to keep quite. Her lips pressed tightly.

Sumitra got up and left with the fellow women.

* * *

After the final rituals were performed on the thirteenth day, people ceased to gather in, except for Vidya Kaki who had become a constant visitor to their house. She would often come in morning and leave by evening. Expressing her concerns over how Lajjo would do without a Husband. Then she would narrate how she struggled all her life after her husband passed away while the kids were too young. She would recall the torment she had gone through. At times she would bring the topic of remarrying, considering Lajjo's age as she was too young to be a widow, giving examples of her acquaintances who had done so.

Lajjo would not get involved in such conversations. She would sit forlorn, staring at the sky for long, trying to make an image of Kishore on the scattered clouds. Her life seemed such a burden. Her body so difficult to carry.

From her bones to her mind she felt dull and heavy. There was murderous loneliness. She struggled hard for long to reconcile herself to the reality.

12
Prayers Unheard

Four months have passed. Chandro's belly has grown considerably big in size. Life started running at a slower pace. The routine was gradually resumed.

Chandro was cutting fodder for the cattle with a hand held chopper, sitting under the sisam tree. Suddenly she felt immense pain in her abdomen. She called out Lajjo for help who in turn rushed to Vidya Kaki's house, which was not very far from theirs, meanwhile sending Bimla to call the midwife.

Chandro was laid on a charpai inside her room. Vidya kaki sitting on a wooden stool beside her, holding her hand and gently pressing on the forehead. The midwife had instructed Lajjo to arrange for some fresh pieces of cotton clothes and boil some water in a big pot.

Bimla and Meena were sitting on the ground near the Plinth, waiting anxiously. Chandro's loud screams made them nervous.

Soon the house was filled with the newborn's cries. Lajjo rushed inside the room. Vidya kaki was hoding the baby in her lap, wrapped in a saffron coloured cotton cloth. "It's

a girl again," she said impassively as she saw Lajjo approaching. Chandro looked sweaty and exhausted, her eyes closed. The midwife was busy cleaning. Lajjo took the baby in her arms gently from Vidya Kaki and ran her fingers over the baby's forehead gingerly as it was the most delicate and fragile thing on the planet. There was a tinge of smile on her face for the first time in past four months.

"She is as delicate and beautiful as a flower, will name her as 'Phool' ," Lajjo announced.

Lajjo's days were centred around Phool who had become six months old and was learning to sit on her own. Lajjo would swirl her around, change her nappies, bathe her and put her to bed. Meena and Bimla would take turns to take Phool in their arms and roam her around the house. Sometimes they all would go to the fields. Bimla and Meena would walk ahead playfully, followed by Chandro who would carry a sack and a sickle and Lajjo would linger behind, holding Phool securely in her arms.

* * *

"It has been over an year now. Till how long you will keep enduring. What was destined has happened, you played your duties exceptionally well. But one can not change the destiny. You have a long life ahead. Now you must look forward." Vidya Kaki opined, sipping on hot tea served by Chandro.

Vidya Kaki was sitting on a Moodah in the Dalaan, Chandro sitting across her on a wooden paatla (step stool) while Lajjo standing besides her with Phool in her arms.

"Now that you are young and immensely beautiful, there are many men in the village itself who are eager to tie the knots with you. They are from well-to-do families as well. But once the time has lapsed, things would be diffrent." The old women envisioned.

"I have been trying to convince her for the same but she is hell bent to live in solitude," Chandro said ratifying to what Vidya kaki has expressed. She continued, "The other day an old man who is a distant relative of ours, visited Bimla's Bapu. He came with the proposal of making Lajjo his daughter-in-law. The family is decent and well known to us. But she is too complacent to listen to anybody, not willing to even talk about it."

"It's very tough for women and especially for those too young as you, to live un-escorted in this society. Life is very harsh at times, my child!" Vidya said looking pitifully in Lajjo's eyes.

"But you did the same, kaki. You lived on your own after Kaka passed away." Lajjo spoke for the first time.

"Ahh! Mine was a different scenario. I had my three children by the time, one boy and two girls. I had to labour hard to raise them alone. But their mere presence dwindled all my torment. I got them all married when they were grown ups. My daughters are well settled in their respective families. My son is always there to take care of me at this age and I am relishing the company of my grandchildren. Having children made the difference." Vidya answered thoughtfully.

"I don't fear solitariness. I vowed to my Lord (referring to Kishore) not to leave him or this house ever. It is he who abandoned me. Now there is nothing left for me to relish upon. I will spend the rest of my life serving the family he belonged to. Only my corpse will leave this house. This is my way of penance. Please let me do that in peace." Lajjo said courteously and marched to her room where Bimla and Meena were playing with their dolls.

* * *

Phool turned 3. Bimla had completed her grade 5 and had now discontinued her studies as the school she was in, happened to be till primary only. Almost all of the girls in the village who were attending school, would drop after completing primary education. Only some of the boys who wish to pursue further studies would walk to a distant village, miles away, by foot.

Meena was still in grade 3.

Bimla would now join her mother and learn the household chores like cooking, knitting,sewing, making achaar, murrabba etc.

“Hope Mahadev will bless you with a son this time,” a lady almost same age as Chandro said to her while handing her a handful of Prasaad she had brought from a temple in the locality. Chandro took the prasaad, her hands folded mechanically in prayer like manner.

“It has been quite long time now. Till how long would Lajjo keep suffering. She should look forward and think about her future.” The women said in an interrogating rather concerning tone.

Chandro kept looking at her, not knowing what to answer.

“A cousin of mine intends to marry her. He is not even mindful of her past. If you say so, Should I carry the conversation forward?”. The women added enthusiastically.

Lajjoj was sewing a dress for Phool's doll, overhearing the exchange. She got up and went inside her room, Phool trailing behind her.

"We will have a talk with her and let you know. After all it is her whole life that is at stake." Chandro replied

politely.

"Keeping a young widow that too as beautiful as hers may not be favourable for you too. I gave you the sage counsel. Rest is upon you." The women whispered and left.

Chandro was nearing the third trimester of her pregnancy. The month of Kartika had just begun. It had been pouring heavily since morning. It was an unusual rain at this time of the year. Water had lodged in the courtyard. The girls got drenched despite all the warning and yelling from their mother. Phool had been sneezing consistently after the soaking.

Bimla had made a boat of an off-white paper that she managed to take out from her father's accounts dairy. The boat was shining brightly as the mid-day sun has emerged in the sky after the rain. The wind had become sharply cold after the downpour.

Chandro was cleaning an earthen pot, stooping over it. Her water leaked. She started howling in pain.

* * *

Chandro was lying in her room on a charpai. A fleece blanket spread over her. Lajjo was standing beside her charpai with a glass of hot milk in her hand. The midwife sitting on a stool on the other side.

"Was it a girl or a boy?" Chandro asked plaintively.

"It was a boy. But what difference would that make now?" The BachchaDaani (Uterus) have become very weak and inflamed. Any further gestation would cost your life as well as the infant. Take the Kadhas on time." The midwife said sharply and stood up to leave.

A silent tear flowed down Chandro's cheeks.

"A mother's womb doesn't differentiate between a girl or boy. It nourishes them equally and bleeds the same on losing either. The only difference it would have made is that had the boy been born healthy, he would have stayed in the house with his children and grandchildren." Chandro almost mumbled to herself.

Kartaar was sitting on a wooden chair near the entrance. His head bent down and palms pressed against the temples. The midwife came near him and halted for few seconds before leaving. "One must accept what is in the stars. May be this is what God's will is. We cannot change what the almighty has planned for us," she preached and exited the main door.

13
Emotional Conflict

Lajjo was braiding Bimla's hair when Meena came running, "Lajjo Kaki someone is calling you at the door."

There was a tall man in his mid fourties, dressed in light brown kurta and matching payjama. Lajjo tried to press hard on her brain but could not recall if she had seen him before.

"I have come from Kamalpura. Your mother has sent me here". He said in a heavy voice.

Lajjo stood silent.

"I was visiting a relative of mine in a nearby village. Your mother requested me to pass on her message to you." He clarified further, "Sumitra is suffering from tuberculosis. She is in a very poor state of health, deteriorating with each passing day.

All your brothers have moved to the city to earn their livelihood except for the youngest one who has decided to stay, to help his father in the fields. She regrets being unfair to you. She wants to see you one last time and

apologize for what she had done, otherwise she will not be able to get the Mukti." He concluded.

Lajjo didn't say a word.

The man departed.

* * *

"She has never given me the love and affection of a mother. She wanted to sell me to a guy who had been married thrice and triple my age just for the sake of her greed. And after all this, when I have found solace in this house, she want me to go see her." Lajjo fumbled.

Chandro and Lajjo were sitting on the kitchen floor, facing each other. It was dark outside. A kerosene lamp was hanging on the wall. Children had slept after having their dinner. Kartaar had gone to take a round to the fields.

"May be she is repenting her deeds. Or may be she fears facing God after doing all this to you." Chandro said subtly.

"She didn't even let me mourn in peace when my Almighty abandoned me. Still my heart is aching to hear her suffering," Lajjo expressed her dilemma.

"Forgiveness is the greatest virtue." Chandro replied.

When Lajjo went to bed, her mind was muffled up, clouded, incapable of sustained rational thoughts. She could not sleep through the night. She strolled across her room, turned sides on the bed. There was everything on her head but sleep. Memories of past flashed through her eyes. Her heart became heavy. She was in conundrum.

Though she hated her mother for all the things she had done to her, Lajjo could not be that hard on her. She could not let her die like this, feeling mortified, remorseful.

She would exonerate her mother for everything in the past. That would be her modest attempt for her mother's liberation in the final days of her journey, may be that will ease her own suffering a little.

* * *

It was early in the morning.The atmosphere was calm and peaceful. Chandro was kneading the dough. She tore off a small portion and gave it to Phool who started playing with the damp thing, pinching and pulling it between her fingers.

As Lajjo was preparing to leave, Chandro interrupted, "Bimla's Bapu would be back in 3-4 days. You can wait for him to return and he will take you to your mother's place. It does not seem appropriate to me to let you go unaccompanied."

"I do understand your concern. But the man who came with her message expressed that her health is worsening swiftly." Lajjo tried to explain the dilemma.

"I will be back by tomarrow," She said in an assuring manner.

The cloth sack hanging from Lajjo's shoulders thumping on the side of her waist periodically as she moved on the unpaved road, steadily. She was following the route Chandro had instructed her to. This was the first time she was traversing on her own. Images of her mother flashed through her mind.

Mustard fields on the sides were in full bloom, transforming the landscape into a golden yellow canvas, appeared as a vibrant sea of yellow flowers. The air filled with pleasant, slightly intoxicating fragrance of the blooming flowers, humming of bees, fluttering of butterflies. A bull bellowing in the background, she passed buffaloes sitting in muddy ponds edged with slime and shrubs. Navigating her way through the veil, Lajjo was

walking at a considerably faster pace so as to avoid the examining glares of the passer-byes.

In no time, she ventured on the main road and walked towards the huge banyan tree on the sidewalk. Two earthen pots with jute sacks wrapped around them were placed under the enormous wood , copper glasses with long handles placed upside down above the pots. A middle aged man with shades of grey hair sitting there beside the water kiosk in squatting position, cladded in a brown chadar, a basket of produce beside him.

Lajjo stood at an evident distance from the bloke and looked in the other direction, anticipating the arrival of the bus, tightly securing the pallu over her face with one hand. A bullock cart clopped around the turning, leaving behind a cloud of grey dust.

Memories of childhood occupied much of Lajjo's thoughts till they were interrupted by a long, loud horn. A constant rumbling sound echoed across the plains as the bus approached. The air filled with the smell of diesel. Lajjo grew anxious as the giant halted a few steps from her. She stood aside and let the man board first. The bus pulled off with a jerk.

There were few female passengers inside the bus, most of them accompanied by their male kins. Lajjo occupied a seat adjacent to an elderly woman who was leaning over the back seat , eyes closed, snoring loudly, her spine curved outwardly.

Every time the bus bucked over a pothole and jerked forward, Lajjo would re-adjust herself on the seat again.

Some passengers were pointing out at something and others leaned across their seats to ponder. There was a constant murmur.

Lajjo leaned towards the old woman and gazed out of the window trying to whip up some feeling of the landscape. She could spot monotonous fields, houses built with mud and straw and a few brickyards.

The woman got up with a sudden jerk and displayed a toothless smile at Lajjo who pulled herself to a silly grin in reciprocation.

"Where are you going beti?" the woman asked.

Before Lajjo could comprehend an appropriate reply, she drifted off again.

Lajjo shifted her gaze to a young couple inhabiting a middle seat. The man in bright white clothes and his companion in a colorful attire, face fully covered with the dupatta, hands adorned with maroon bangles. Lajjo envisioned herself and kishore in their place. Her heart twinged.

Lajjo was shaken off her thoughts as the conductor screamed 'Kamalpura'. Shortly after a while she was on the tortuous kutcha road. The surroundings were familiar.

She knew the course here on.

14
Betrayal

Lajjo was standing under the pipal tree, a woollen shawl wrapped around her. There was a faint sheet of fog, dim sunlight was trying to illuminate the surroundings. Nothing much had changed in all these years, only the colour of the thatch had turned from brownish to charcoal black. In the frosty month of Paush, wind is merciless. Lajjo could feel the cold air piercing through her earlobes.

Lajjo had loitered around this house for sixteen years, still everything looked so indifferent and unfamiliar now.

She groped irresolutely around the compound for quite some time. She moved with slow deliberate steps towards the main gate, waited to be discovered before stumbling inside.

Lajjo opened the door hesitantly and crawled inside. She caught a glimpse of Sumitra, who was trying to close the lid of a container inside the room. Her hair straggles untidy, her clothes hang limp and careless on her. Lajjo peered at the face and see a wistful melancholy. Should her memory persist in touching her, the bloom would vanish into the mother she knew, angry, brisk and bad tempered.

She stopped midway, in the courtyard. When Sumitra got aware of Lajjo's presence, she came out quickly.

"Oh! my beloved child! I knew in my heart that you would come, and look, here you are, standing in front of me." Sumitra exclaimed.

"Come inside my child, the weather is freezing outside. I will prepare some hot milk for you." Sumitra spread a charpai across the room, instructing Lajjo to sit, with show of hands.

"Where is everyone? I mean my brothers." Lajjo probed while entering the room.

"Well they are growing to be men. They must learn how to earn. I have sent them to the city, to seek jobs. What is left for them in this penurious village. I don't want them to become destitutes like your father." Sumitra replied enthusiastically.

"Only Gopi insisted on staying here and giving a helping hand to his father. The miserable man has sent him to Mandi to buy seeds for the coming harvesting season. He will be back by evening." She continued.

"We don't have any acquaintances in the city. Who will provide them with jobs there?" Lajjo questioned, her eyes searching around.

"My child you have just arrived. Take some rest. I am preparing hot milk with jaggery, for you. We can talk later, at length." Sumitra tried to dismiss. There was something

vaguely unsettling about the way she moved around the room.

"I need to know," Lajjo demanded, eyes fixed on Sumitra.

"First take a seat at least." Sumitra persisted.

Lajjo sat on the charpai, her hands working her dupatta. Sumitra sat beside her. She took Lajjo's one hand in hers, reluctantly.

"I know I had never been much of a mother to you. But you will never know the hardships of a mother unless you become one. I spent all my life with that pathetic man who could not provide us anything more than two meals a day. But I want all my children to be well-off. Rashid is a very affluent man. He has connections in the city."

Lajjo snatched her hand away, her face flushed.

"He promised me that he would provide your brothers with jobs and shelter." Sumitra tried to calm her down.

"The person who came to me, told me that you have got tuberculosis." Lajjo was furious.

"I bribed him to say so, otherwise you wouldn't have been here. It's been years since your husband passed. By now, you must also have seen the true colors of that family. All I am doing is for your sake only. Rashid will come in a day or two and take you along." Sumitra said in a pleading tone.

Lajjo's flesh prickled at the revelation. Her face assumed a pinched look, the lips thinned and straightened, the eyes

glassed over as though they could not see. Even her cheeks seemed to fold inwards.

"You make me feel disgusted. I am ashamed of calling you my mother." Lajjo was fuming as she stood up and started walking towards the door.

Sumitra gripped her hand from behind and tried to pull her back.

Lajjo was backing out of the room, trying to free herself from the brutal grip her mother had on her arm. She turned around, jerked her mother's hand away and pushed Sumitra back with much intensity. Sumitra's head struck the foot of charpai with a 'thud' and she fell on the floor.

Lajjo was sweating. She bent down to check on her mother. There was a pool of blood under her head. Lajjo became pale. Her heart was pounding. As she stood up and turned to leave, her father was standing there at the door. He as always, kept mum. Lajjo exited the room quickly and rushed out of the house.

Lajjo's legs faltered as she paced to the main road. On the bus ride back, she felt contrite. Her situation was helpless. Precipitation dripped from the side of her face onto the veil that she had intentionally put on so as to avoid being seen in such state, conscious of the curious gaze of the fellow passengers. Her heart crumbling apart.

* * *

Phool was making a mud house on the raised platform around the Plinth. Lajjo headed to her room at a snail's pace. She closed the door behind, leaned her back against it. With no strength to remain standing, she gradually slipped onto the floor. There she remained a long time, her hands cradled on her arms. A bubble of dread filling her chest. Even crying was no help.

Lajjo pictured her brothers taking their mother to the funeral, oblivious to the sin that she had comitted. Shame sat in, followed by the guilt.

15
Remorse

Lajjo was crying profoundly. They were in Chandro's room.

"I never intended to.....," Lajjo fumbled crying like a baby.

"It was an accident. No fault of yours." Chandro rubbed her back.

"I would never be able to forgive myself for this," Lajjo sniffled. She continued to abandon herself to her crying, wiping her face with the palla from time to time.

Chandro stood next to her patiently, waiting her to stop. She then held her arm around Lajjo and pressed the younger woman closer. Finally she felt Lajjo quiten down.

"It would never have happened if she had not called for you in the first place." Chandro said and after a long pause, she spoke again, "Forget that you have ever been to your mother's place after coming to this house."

Lajjo kept looking impassively at Chandro as she added,

"we have to accept - this is our lot in life."

Kartaar had been out for work, for a week. When he returned, he asked Chandro, "I learnt from an elderly man in the neighbourhood that Lajjo's mother slipped accidentally and passed away. I would arrange for her if she is willing to go for the rituals and consolation of the family.

"Everyone she considers as a family is here only and very much alive. There is no need to do anything. Wash your hands and face, I will serve you food. You must be tired and hungry from the travel." Chandro replied blankly.

* * *

Harvesting of wheat crops had begun. Kartaar was busy in the fields most of the days.

It was a bright sunny day. Neem trees were in full bloom, with fragrant white flowers and a few new leaves emerging here and there. Birds flying in clusters in the sky creating swirling, ever changing patterns.

"Your eyes look heavy. Have you not slept enough?" Chandro glanced at Lajjo. Her hands busy with knitting needles. She was making a sweater for Kartaar.

"The still face of my mother hounds me. No matter how hard I try, I am not able to get over that incident. I am filled with immense guilt for a thing that I never intended to do in my life. It's suffocating." Lajjo's voice became heavy.

"We females are programmed to feel that way innately. We hold ourselves guilty for things we are not even accountable for." Chandro's hand movements slowed down as she continued, "I feel remorseful for not being able to produce a male child. There are many men in the village itself who had left their wives or married twice just because their women were not able to provide them with a heir. But Bimla's Bapu is not one such man. He will never even think of leaving me or risking my life with any further conception, though he also desperately longs for a lad. This feeling of helplessness makes me feel even more pathetic. But we must learn to live with our tribulations."

"I don't feel like living anymore. As if his departure was not enough to make me obsolete, that all this transpired.

At times, the thought of jumping into a well and ending this misery crosses my mind. There is no reason to live on," Lajjo poured her heart out.

Chandro's hands ceased to move. She kept looking at Lajjo and then spoke after an unusually long pause,

"Would you become my co-wife?"

Lajjo looked at her, baffled.

"Your children will give you a reason to live. This had been on my mind for quite some time now. But I had not the prowess to talk to you. The midwife is of the opinion that I would not be able to make it very long in life as something is wrong with my uterus. All three of our daughters will move to their respective houses sooner or later. Sometimes I fear what would become of you after I have gone." Chandro concluded in a hoarse voice.

"Don't you feel scared?"

"What kind of a woman on earth would not be scared to have a co-wife as beautiful as you." Chandro said mockingly.

For the first time in past many years, Lajjo saw a tinge of smile on Chandro's face.

"Where does the strength come from?"

"Hope gives strength."

"What kind of hope?"

"That this House will get a heir someday."

Lajjo fell silent for a moment. The silence was one of acquiescence, thought of renunciation took over.

16
Conundrum

"Yes I too long for a son. But what you are suggesting does not seem to be the solution to our longing. I have accepted what the almighty have written in our fate. And I expect you to do the same. I would never be able to look upon her as a wife." Kartaar did not look pleased at what Chandro suggested.

Chandro kept looking at Kartaar, her head processing what to say next. His brows wrinkled with unhappiness.

"It's not about our wish only. Have you ever thought what would become of her after us. She is still too young and ardent on not leaving this house. You know how harsh the world is for an unattached woman. Our daughters will also leave to their would be houses, one day. What would she do when we won't be anymore." Chandro tried to reason.

Kartaar twitched his head but the silence continued.

"Children would give her the strength to carry on the weight of life and purpose to live on." Her tone calmer this time.

Kartaar was defenceless before these oblique references.

"It would be hard for me and harder for her as well." Kartaar tried to explain the dilemma to Chandro who looked in no mood to give up.

"I have already had a word with her. It would be better for her only, to live the life with purpose rather than dying in solitude." Chandro used the last weapon.

"Vidya kaki is also of the opinion that this would be the most appropriate thing for all three of us." Chandro stated as if declaring the verdict.

Kartaar lost the battle of words before Chandro's abstinance. He acquiesced. Inside him a war was being waged. Hesitancy on one side, partnered with awkwardness, and on the other, the conviction that what was needed had to be done. That it was the ultimate resort, good for everyone, God's will.

Silence fell over the house. He hung his head.

17
Coincidence

1946, Lajjo gave birth to a girl named Kamla in the month of maagh. Chandro would take great care of Lajjo throughout the gestation and even after the childbirth.

"Perhaps this is God's will," Vidya Kaki would often say while rocking the newborn in her arms.

Chandro would shower the newborn with love and admiration, saying, "Look at her slender nose and lustrous eyes. She would grow to be as beautiful as her mother."

Phool was the happiest to have a newborn around.

August 1947,The Month of Savana was coming to an end. Kartaar entered the house with grimace spread over his face. He called for Chandro and instructed, "The government has announced the partition of the country. A separate nation is being built for Muslims. Riots have sparked between Hindus and Muslims. The situation in Dilli has become perilous. We are fortunate that ours is a Hindu village predominantly. But still we need to be cautious. Things can worsen here also. Do not let the kids

play outside. Keep them inside the house only. And in case any of you two need to go out, I will accompany you."

It was a Monday morning. Kartaar had been off to fields. Chandro insisted that she would go to the Temple in the locality to offer her prayers to Mahadev. When Lajjo expressed her concern , Chandro assured her that she would not take long.

The lanes seemed quieter than usual. The Temple which was otherwise witnessing the hustle and bustle of villagers, felt abandoned. There was no sign of life in the Temple compound except for a pigeon hopping on the stairs to the platform on which the Mandir was built.

Chandro climbed the stairs, holding the basket of dhatura flowers and Belpatra in one hand while managing her daaman with the other. She entered the Sanctum without ringing on the large aluminum bell hanging in the middle of the entrance, so as not to disrupt the tranquillity of the place. She did the Parikarma and offered her prayers to the deity, chanting some mantras with eyes closed. She came out taking backward steps and scattered the wheat grains for the pigeon to pick-up while descending the stairs. As she put on her chappals and prepared to leave, she felt some jitter nearby, unsettling her for a moment. But she

remembered assuring Lajjo that she would return quickly, so she did not paid much heed and rushed back home. As she crossed the water tank built on the outer portion of the temple compound, she sensed something creeping inside the bushes behind the water tank. Chandro grew

restless and followed the shifting. As she went deeper in the shrubs, she was dismayed to find a young woman bleeding heavily who was trying to suppress her moaning. Her clothes were drenched in blood and sweat. By her attire, it did not take long for Chandro to make out that she was a Muslim woman who was midway in the process of childbirth. The women tightened further as Chandro pored over her. She subdued her moans but her breath was heavily audible.

Chandro placed one hand over her wrist and caressed the forehead with another. "How come you are here in this condition?" Chandro stared at her in amazement.

The women eased down a bit.

"A group of Hindu boys were after my life. I somehow managed to escape from the jaws of death. This baby deserves to see the world. Please save me sister." The woman gasped for air, her teeth clenching with pain.

Chandro pressed on her temples, moved a hand in circular motion over her belly as if examining the position of baby the way midwife used to and spoke hurriedly, "You wait here till I return. Stay strong. I will be back quickly". Chandro vanished from the compound.

A few minutes later, she returned with Lajjo and a pair of fresh clothes for the mother and the newborn, wrapped in a cloth sheet. The woman had delivered the baby by then and was in a devastated state.

Chandro picked the newborn and placed it in prone position over one hand, rubbed the back and then cut the umbilical cord with a chisel she had brought along.

She then handed over the newborn to Lajjo who in turn wrapped it in the cotton sheet. Chandro helped the woman to clean and change.

As they walked through the barren lanes, Lajjo held the baby close to her chest, hiding it under her dupatta so that the cries were only feebly audible. The woman waddled as Chandro paced along supporting her from the side.

"Kaki, whose baby is this in your arms?", Meena asked trailing behind as they entered Lajjo's room.

She is a cousin of mine who has come to stay with us for a few days. The baby and mother needs some sleep." Chandro answered instead.

"You bring some hot milk with jaggery as the mother is drained from the travel." She instructed further.

Meena headed to the kitchen.

"Thank you so much sister for saving our lives. Allah will bless you forever." The women mumbled as Chandro placed the baby by the mother, under the quilt.

"What is your name and how come you are here in this village, unaccompanied?". Chandro expressed her astonishment.

"My name is Fatima. I got a little left from the caravan as I was not able to keep pace with them due to my condition.

We were moving to the refugee camps installed by the government in the outskirts of Dilli."

"Your husband must be searching for you there." Lajjo sighed.

"My husband had been away for work for six months. I was there in the caravan with my in-laws. Last night our group was attacked by a Hindu mob. Many among us were killed and many were severely injured. As I was at the farthest end, I started running for my life. A few young boys ran after me but I somehow was able to dodge them and hid myself under the bushes, where you found me." The woman tried to explicate.

* * *

"You should not have brought her home." Vidya Kaki said when she came in evening, with a tension spread over her face. Her brows furrowed, wrinkles on forehead.

"Could not leave her like that either," Chandro reasoned.

"These are challenging times. Even Kartaar would not approve of this decision of yours. If the villagers find out about her, there would certainly be trouble." The old widow reckoned sipping on hot tea from the earthen cup.

"It would not come to that. I will arrange for her to go and join her family at the camps, tomorrow itself. It's just a matter of one night only." Chandro said in a reassuring tone.

* * *

"Why she came here at such a crucial time of her pregnancy?" Kartaar looked surprisingly at Chandro.

"Her husband had to leave for some urgent work. His parents are no more. There was no one else to look after her. How could he have left her alone at such time. It's good only that she would be under my supervision." Chandro articulated while serving him food.

"You must take good care of her then," Kartaar said, nibbling on food.

Bimla, who had been scribbling for a while on a paper, suddenly interrupted, "Maa, there is something written on your cousin's arm in a different language. I am trying to copy that." She said while showing the paper to Kartaar. It had some crudely written alphabets of Urdu.

"Oh! That. She, I mean Antima, tried to get her name inked once, in childhood. The artist was a Musalman guy. He wrote that in Urdu. And she was too young to understand that then. We all used to make so much fun of her for the same." Chandro tried to conceal.

"And why are you wasting time. Come help me with the dishes. There is so much work to be done." She said to Bimla while leaving, trying to pipe her down.

* * *

"I have already fed the cattle. There is not much work left for now. I want you to help me with something else." Chandro announced as soon as Biswa came the very next morning.

"If I would come across a Musalmaan, I would chop him into pieces. Would not spare one, at any cost." Biswa was mumbling to himself, viciously spitting out bits of neem twig he was using to clean his teeth.

"What is wrong with you? Why are you raging without any reason?" Chandro seemed baffled.

"Have you not heard of what happened in the adjacent village?" Biswa looked at her in disbelief.

Chandro was dumbfounded.

"There was an invasion of Muslims. In an onslaught, several of our Hindu brothers were killed and many women assaulted. Those Harami's didn't even spare the children." He blurted out while carrying a bamboo tokri over one of his shoulders. His eyes were cold and narrow, the brows contoured with rage. There was implacable hostility there.

"Not all the people of a community are same. There is a Muslim family in our village too. They had been living here for generations. They are so kind and generous people. We must not forget that." Chandro tried to calm him down.

"'They are all the same." Biswa said lividly and proceeded to the cattle yard. He came back shortly after and asked, "You were asking me to help you with something?"

"Forget about that. Go to the fields, Bimla's Bapu must be waiting for you there." Chandro said while handing him a food container.

The day passed in contemplation. Vidya kaki came in evening , only to find the woman was still there.

"Why didn't you send her with Biswa?" She asked in an interrogating manner.

"How could I ? He was already incensed with what is going on with the other community. It won't be appropriate I thought." Chandro answered back.

"He is right though. What the Musalmans have done to our kaum is unforgivable. I completely resonate with what Biswa or everyone among us is feeling right now." Vidya kaki exhaled. Her brows flattened, slightly raised. "It would be real tough to send her back to her family. And on top of that she is accompanied by a newborn, which worsens the case." She added.

"I too am distressed about that. Won't be able to keep her here for long. It makes me feel wretched to deceive Bimla's Bapu like that." Chandro expressed.

The newborn was crying unusually loud today. Lajjo was endeavoring to help the mother calm down the baby.

"If God has sent her to you, there must be some reason indeed," said Vidya kaki.

Chandro looked blankly at her.

"You have been vying for years to have a lad. Even Lajjo delivered a girl. Consider this baby as a gift sent to you by God." Vidya clarified further.

Chandro still looking at her, expressionless.

"A newborn has no religion. He will turn out to be what you raise him into. More-over it would be less challenging to send her back, unaccompanied, without the baby." Vidya Kaki tried to enlighten.

The baby was still crying profoundly.

Fatima who had been overhearing the conversation, didn't say a word. Her hands became stiff, movements mechanical. She was struggling real hard to pacify the neonate.

Chandro got up from where she was sitting, marched across the room, went straight to Fatima who looked hysterical. Fatima tightened her grip over the baby. Chandro un-clutched the baby from the mother's grip, drew it close to her chest and started rubbing it's back with gentle hand strokes. The newborn calmed down abruptly.

Fatima knew she could only bow before the inevitable.

Chandro turned to vidya Kaki and announced, "Had God been willing to bless me with a Son, he had not taken the one I had in first place. Nobody knows the pain of losing a child better than me. I would do my utmost to send them back, safe and sound."

No one uttered a word. The baby fell asleep. Vidya Kaki left, knowing Chandro would not budge from what she had decided. Lajjo served food to everyone.

* * *

As Kartaar left for the fields, Chandro briefed Lajjo that she will take Fatima to the only Muslim family in the village, as keeping her inside the house for long may invite some adversity and they were the only hope left now.

Chandro held the newborn in her arms, wrapped it in a shawl, covered slightly under her dupatta while Fatima dogged along.

The dwelling sat in stark silence, all its doors and windows shutted, giving no sign of life. The imposing front door was secured with a heavy, unyielding, rusty padlock. Both the women stood at a distance, clueless, in despair.

Chandro had known the family for years. They were among one of the most influential people in the village. It was hard for Chandro to believe that the riots have made them flee too. For the first time she realized how intense the scenario was, outside the house.

"May be they too had left." Chandro whispered in despair and turned to leave. Not far had they gone, they were interrupted by the rhythmic gentle creaking sound of a bullock cart in the background. Chandro came to a standstill and turned back to find out the source of rattle.

The bullocks stopped at the locked door. An elderly man got down the cart and headed to the entrance. Chandro could recognize him even in the dark. He was the elder son of the house who used to visit Kartaar very often, for work. He took out keys from his pocket and entered the Haveli, closing the door behind. Chandro and Fatima stood still in the darkness, puzzled.

The man came out quickly with a trunk box in his hand, followed by few women and kids who all were carrying some of their belongings. The man guided them to the cart and started arranging the luggage as mutely as possible.

Chandro approached them, moving cautiously. They looked at her with suspicion while she spoke to the man, "I came here to seek some help. But I am disheartened to find that your family is already in trouble. Never thought a day like this would ever come."

"We are frightened and disgusted at the behaviour of people we have spent our whole life with." He said while arranging the belongings in the cart.

"Anyways, what you want me to help with?" He asked without looking at Chandro.

"Here is a poor woman", Chandro said pointing at Fatima who was still standing at a distance. "She has separated from her family while moving to the shelter camps. I found her in the temple vicinity in a miserable state. She has just delivered a baby", Chandro said shifting her dupatta, unveiling the newborn. "As the circumstances are, it won't be possible for me to keep a Muslim woman in my house for long. I request you to take her along so that she can be with her family, again." Chandro concluded.

"Off course, she can come along. I will try my level best to send her back to where she belongs". He said in an affirmative tone. "I wish all the people were as generous as you. There had been no riots in the first place," he mumbled further.

"It's good only that you came." The man said, taking out a shimmery potli bag from a trunk placed at the rear end of the cart. Handing the bag to Chandro, He spoke again, "All the family ornaments are in this bag. I fear that we may get robbed of our belongings on the way. Hand it over to anyone from the family who manages to return someday or the other."

All the members of the family boarded the cart one-by-one, quietly. The man signaled Fatima to join them. She crept her way towards them, taking the baby from Chandro's arms.

As Fatima was about to climb the cart, she turned back, crept her way to Chandro, touched her feet and moved back to board the conveyance.

There was a faint cloud of dust as the bullocks moved. Soon they vanished in the dark. Chandro kept standing there for quite some time with the warmth of Fatima's tears on her feet.

When she returned home after a few minutes, Lajjo was standing in the dallan, waiting Impatiently.

When Lajjo inquired about the Potli bag, Chandro informed her about the plight of the Muslim family. "Time is ruthless," She remarked.

"Help me put it in my Sandook. We must keep it safe till they return or someone from the family comes to take it back."

* * *

"Is everything alright with the baby? I didn't hear a peep from the newborn, the entire morning." Kartaar asked while pumping water from the hand pump, looking upwards with pursed lips.

"I was about to tell you. They had left early morning." Chandro replied abruptly.

"How come so suddenly?" Kartaar looked staggered, one side of the mouth pulled slightly higher than the other.

"When Vidya Kaki visited last evening, she told us that there were rumours in the village that the government may soon impose a curfew due to the ongoing riots."

"Antima grew concerned over the hearsay. She thought, she might not be able to return to her home if the situation worsens." Chandro tried to explain.

"When I woke up in the morning , she had already packed her belongings and was about to leave." Chandro continued, glancing sideways.

"You should not have let her go like that. Travelling alone is not safe for women at such a time." Kartaar expressed his apprehension, a slight frown over his face.

"I tried a lot to persuade her to stay till her husband comes to take her back but she was so disturbed by the tattle that she didn't listen." Chandro clarified.

"Hmm" Kartaar said with raised brows. He looked half convinced.

Chandro headed to the kitchen, momentarily folding her hands towards the heaven, asking the mighty to forgive her for being unfair to her husband.

18
The Co-Wives

The following year a Boy was born on a cold December night. "The Heir". The atmosphere filled with high pitched, frantic screaming. The mother looked at the will of god lying next to her, closed her eyes and let the suffering of past few years wash over her.

Chandro was in seventh heaven. Lajjo would be delighted to see the fanatical gleam in Chandro's eyes when she held the newborn in her arms.

Vidya Kaki would bring a black cotton thread with black and white beads on it, to keep off the evils and wrap it around the newborn's wrist. She would name him "Krishna", as he has got two mothers. The One who birthed him and the other who loved him like anything.

After Krishna was born, Chandro would be on tip-toes looking after the baby and the mother. She would stuff Lajjo with milk, butter, ghee, laddoos and what not.

When Krishna started taking his first steps, Chandro brought a pair of anklets from her Sandook. While putting them on Krishna's feet, she instructed Lajjo, "My mother

gave me these when Raam-Mehar was born. Pass them on to your daughter-in-law. It's a family heirloom."

Krishna's birth changed the atmosphere in the house. Lajjo had never seen this side of Chandro. She had become full of life. She was so joyous, vibrant, ecstatic all the time.

Krishna was growing up in a very pleasant environment. When both the women would be busy in housework, the elder sisters would take up the job of baby-sitters, for Kamla and krishna.

Vidya Kaki would often visit them. She would take krishna in her lap and pour him with blessings. "Now I can die in peace," she would often say.

Kartaar would often take Krishna for a stroll to the fields. Chandro's joys knew no bounds when she would see the father carrying the scion around, on his shoulders.

Lajjo would consider herself fortunate for coming of some use to the family that had harbored her.`

To the world outside, they were the co-wives. But inside the house, they were the collaborators who braced and strengthened each other.

Vidya Kaki passed away a year after Krishna was born.

* * *

Chaitra 1949, Suitors were found for Meena and Bimla in a nearby village. The Boys happened to be cousin brothers.

The preparations for the auspicious day began. The women of the house spent hours sewing, knitting, weaving, preparing the trousseau.

Kartaar would make several visits to the bazaar buying stuff, arranging things. He would pore over the menu many a times, consulting with the halwais. There would be fifty to sixty people in the baraat and they need to be feed at regular and steady intervals. Some of the baraat intended to stay even a week because they meant to make a holiday of the expedition. So the arrangements had to be done accordingly.

Two big metal trunks were brought home and stuffed with clothes, bedding and utensils.

The atmosphere at home was delightful as the wedding festivities were performed. Every evening women from the neighbourhood would gather and carol folk songs, dancing playfully.

Phool,kamla and Krishna relished the occasion the most, for the novelty of it.

At occasions, Chandro would sermonize the brides-to-be about the duties of a married woman, orating enthusiastically the Sanskaars she had received from her mother and wished for her daughters to carry forward to the family they were going to join.

Both the girls were married off on the same day.

19
The Last Words

Year 1952, Cholera endemic broke out in the region, taking lives of hundreds of people including that of Kartaar.

Kartaar's departure was a sudden blow. The family was grief-stricken by the unexpected demise. Chandro was shattered. She became bed-ridden. The condition of her uterus was also worsening by the day. She would barely get off the bed or come out.

Lajjo was dejected. It seemed as if a huge tree that had provided and protected quietly, for years, had suddenly fallen down, taking away with it, the soothing noise of the birds living under its shade. But she stood firm, despite the loss. She would look after Chandro day in and day out, the children, the house, the fields and everything else.

The family's financial condition deteriorated badly after Kartaar's passing. Expenses were cut down to bare minimum, considering the need for frugality.

Despite all the struggles, Lajjo made sure the education of her children was not hampered.

Spring of 1955. Chandro's health declining with each passing day. Her back curved in towards the base of her spine. Heaviness in her belly, bile in her throat while eating, hairs falling out in clumps. Her body looked pale and weary. Her teeth bled when she chewed morning neem twigs, she could sense some of them wobbling.

The midwife visited only to establish what she had predicted long before. She looked sympathetically at chandro's drawn face and shadow rimmed eyes, giving her some words of wisdom.

There followed a series of bitter powders and liquids, distilled from a dozen different roots and herbs. But none of the remedies seemed to work. There would be more puking, cramps, blackouts and headaches.

The Vaid also stated he could not answer for Chandro's life. A western educated allopath declared that repeated conceptions and miscarriages have depleted the body and that no medicine could help chandro through life.

One sunny afternoon, Chandro made a visit to the outhouse. The chills and trembling began soon after she reached her bed. Her moaning attracted the attention of Lajjo ,who came, leaving the work midway.

Lajjo looked at her mournfully. She had become so thin and weak over the period. With pale skin, dry eyes and sunken cheeks, the suffering was immeasurable.

Lajjo cried in a pleading tone, "It's time we should consult the doctors in dilli. They have better equipments and facilities there."

"You have young children to look after. The expenses need to be managed. What is destined, can not be altered. The suffering will end soon." Chandro uttered in a feeble voice.

"No one from the Muslim family came to claim the ornaments all these years. For how long will we be waiting. It's hard for me to see you live through like this. This helplessness kills me from inside." Lajjo said, cradling Chandro's hands in hers.

"One must never lose their integrity". Chandro replied firmly, eyes twitching with pain.

Vaishakha 1955,Chandro pre-assuming that her time was nearing, announced to Lajjo, "For me it ends here. Everything I wished for as a woman, almighty has given me. Now that you have provided the house with a successor too, I can die in equanimity. Henceforth, the liability is on you to pass on the family values."

Lajjo could find no reasonable answer for anything Chandro said. But she rambled on anyway, incoherently, childishly about how she would do without her. The words dried up, the tears did not. She muffled desolately to herself. All she could do was roll herself up and bury her face one last time in the welcoming warmth of the woman who salvaged her.

"May this house prosper always." Chandro breathed her last.

Lajjo kept looking grievously at the hands of the woman society called her "CO-WIFE".

Lajjo felt abandoned, disintegrated. The emptiness seemed eerie. She was consumed by the desire to bury herself somewhere and never come out. But for a fact, she knew how indispensable she was to the house. She looked at the three of her children and pulled the pieces together.

20
Reasons to Live

Year 1985, Krishna has reconstructed the house into a big mansion. He is married to a beautiful woman, Shakuntala, and blessed with four children, two girls and two boys.

Krishna graduated from the University Of Delhi in 1971 and received an offer to work at the same. But he decided to look after the land and be there by the side of his ageing mother. He loves all four of his sisters immensely.

Krishna is a respected figure in the village. People in the locality talk highly of him. They often turn to him for seeking help with social and domestic issues as well. When Lajjo looks at Krishna, her heart swells with pride. She feels delighted to visualize a strong reflection of Chandro in his conduct, firm yet polite.

Lajjo is sitting in her room enjoying the cute banter of her grand kids. All her daughters happy and prospering, in their respective families. Chandro's words echoed in her mind, "Children will give you a reason to live."

5 December 2008, I asked her out of sheer curiosity, "Why were you worshiping a woman along with the deity?"

"She was the woman who gave me the love and affection that I always craved for, from the one who brought me in this world. She gave me the life I had lost. She gave me reasons to live. She deserved to be worshiped." She replied straightly.

I was fascinated.

When I probed further, she narrated her journey to me. By the time she ended, a single question had been popping in my head consistently. So I dared to ask, "Were not you hesitant to share a husband with the women you revered?

Her reply moved me and gave me a comprehensible picture of how the relationship was like. "I never looked upon him as a husband. I only made children with the Saint man, not love. For me, the chapter of love ended the day my Almighty passed. I was there by his side to breed only, never as a wife. That place belonged to the noble woman (referring to Chandro) only."

"I was indebted to the couple and I idolized them both. Had he not been there the day my mother was trying to send me with the traders, I would not have been here sitting in front of you. Had she not been there, I would have become lifeless." She explained.

"All the three of us were aspiring for the same, 'a successor'. There was no question of being envious." She cleared the dust, untangling the thoughts in my head.

I did not refrain myself from asking again, "Were she not envious, ever, even slightly?"

"She was indeed insecure at times, of my looks, fearing that I may captivate her husband." She said mischievously, eyes glistening like that of a child.

"That would have been obvious." I agreed, mockingly.

"Most men in the village wished to marry me." She tried to enlighten me further.

"And what you wished?" I asked in amazement.

"There was nothing for me to wish for, after He left. All I knew was that he wished only two things for me. One: to bear the responsibilities this house had to offer. Two: to stay cheerful, always. I Put my best foot forward to accomplish both." She manifested.

I was spellbound at the level of devotion.

"Had he been watching me from above, I hope he be proud of my journey." Her eyes rolled upwards to the heaven.

I was staggered at how deeply she was in love with the man, she barely spent an year of her life with.

* * *

13 March 2011, it was a busy day at office. I unlocked my phone screen at 7 in the evening. A notification popped on the screen showing 2 missed calls from Shruti. I placed the phone back in my pocket and headed to home thinking I will call her back once I reach home. Not very far I have gone, my phone was ringing again. Shruti's name flashed on the screen. I parked the car to one side of the road and took the call. "Hello" I said.

Shruti was sobbing at the other end. I grew concerned. Several thoughts crossed my mind at once. Whether she had a heartbreak or she is going through something at work.

Not knowing what to say, I asked "Is everything alright?"

"Grandma is no more," She replied pulling herself together, her voice heavy with the pain.

"I will be at your place as soon as it is possible for me to come," I replied spontaneously.

Both of us didn't say a word for few seconds. She hung up the call.

Neither the details were asked about how the tenacious woman passed nor were words of consolation offered. I knew what the grandma meant to Shruti and how affectionate they all were to the heavenly soul. I could imagine what shruti might be going through. Grandma's journey running on my head as I drove back home at an unusually slow pace.

I applied for a day's leave before going to bed.

* * *

The house was crammed with people. There were Lajjo's daughters, their families, neighbours, close and distant relatives. Krishna was busy attending to those who had come for the 'antim darshan' of the mortal remains. The relatives came to embrace their passive bodies in a steadfast stream.

Shruti reached for me as she spotted me making my hesitant entry through the rabble. She burst into tears as I offered her a hug. I wrapped my arms around her and caressed her back gradually till the whimpering ceased.

I took off the chappals at the entrance to the main hall as we moved inside. Lajwanti was laid out on the floor, body covered with white sheet, nostrils stuffed with cotton.

An elegant portrait of Grandma displaying her standing in a mustard field, the playful smile still there, placed in frame and mounted on an easel beside the remains. A yellow garland of marigold flowers placed about the frame, two incense sticks lit in front placed criss-cross.

The face had turned bluish overnight. There manifested a divine glow on the mortal frame.

I touched the feet and placed my hands in a prayer like manner as I paid my last respects to the earthly body.

As we watched the cortege led by Krishna and his son, carrying the bier on their shoulders, barefooted, from the terrace of their house, Shruti told me about grandma's desire to be immolated in their field where her beloved was cremated years ago, rather than the cremation ground of the village.

I watched intently as the last rites were performed. Krishna circled the mother's body thrice with a matka over his shoulders, through which water kept spilling. Lajjo's body was then shifted to the pyre, logs placed criss-cross on top. Straw was stuffed in between, ghee poured on top and all around. Krishna circled the pyre before lighting it with a flame at the end of a thin log.

Shruti cluched my hands from beside, tears rolling down her cheeks. I let her mourn without any disruption. She being the eldest grandchild was the most dotted upon by her grandma.

I stared at the flame that rose from the shriveled body and wondered if I could have met the divine soul one more time before she bid adieu to the world.

Later in the day I offered my condolences to the family. I sat for some time with Shruti's mother who diligently reminisced the bittersweet memories she had with her mother-in-law. As per Shakuntala, she found the childish banters of her mother-in-law too much to handle at times but she stressed that she loved her immensely as Lajwanti was the most affectionate women she had ever seen who always put family and relations before everything else.

Shruti's mother also briefed me about what happened the previous night.

Lajjwanti had been in bed for last one week. It was only yesterday she called for Krishna. It was past eleven in the night. She was fully aware that the time had come. She took her Son's hand in her own and mumbled in a husky voice, "Never forget the teachings of your Badi Maa."

Krishna cradled her hand with affection and nodded his head in affirmation. Before krishna could anticipate anything, she whispered again, “May this house prosper always.” She said placidly and ceased to breath.

“What a peacefull departure.” Someone from the acquaintances commented.

People remembered her as a lively, vibrant soul. That was one side of hers, very few knew another.

21
Lessons Passed on to Generations

12 March 2013. Krishna is sitting across a man on a sofa in the drawing room. The man appears to be in his late thirties and is dressed in a suit. He told Krishna that his name is Salim. The shrieks and squeals of Krishna's grandchildren playing in the lawn outside is clearly audible, making the atmosphere less tranquil.

Shakuntala served them tea in a beautiful, white porcelain tea set with floral design. Salim's gaze fixed on the saucer plate in his hand while he sips on sluggishly.

"I have flown to Delhi from Lahore for some business work. My grandfather insisted that I must visit your house." Salim said softly.

Krishna handed over the Potli bag to him.

"To be honest I was not expecting my family's belongings to be here after what has happened between the two communities over the decades." Salim was moved.

There is an expression of contentment over Krishna's face, "ONE MUST NEVER LOSE THEIR INTEGRITY."

4 January 2015, Present day. As I sit down on a chair in my room with a dairy and a pen in my hand to write down Lajjo's odyssey, I know the reason why I love visiting their place and why the family is so warm and welcoming to everyone around,

"COMPASSION IS IN THE BLOOD."