

I never write a preface to any story or novel. Like Virginia Woolf, I believe that a preface to a book is like a piece of cardboard that is used to steady a shaky table. In Woolf's opinion, if a table has shaky legs, it has no right to exist. A work of writing should be strong enough to stand on its own without the help of a cardboard support. One day, when the piece of cardboard is removed, the table will become unsteady once again.

However, today I am breaking a self-imposed rule because my pen wants me to do so. Almost every day, I get hundreds of letters from my readers asking me questions such as: Why did you write this, what inspired you, is this a true story?... Sometimes, I feel as if I am a fish in an aquarium whose every move is observed. Writing gives me immense pleasure, but talking of my characters—their joys and sorrows, their fears and desires—is very difficult. This is because I often feel I have not been able to fully bring out what I had in mind. Janaki's intoxicating gaze, which I could see so clearly, refused to get translated when I sat down to describe it. I discarded countless sheets of paper but still the expression in her eyes remained elusive. It was as if she moved just before my camera had been able to click or my film had got exposed. The fleshy lips of a Muggi or the gold glinting in the teeth of the warden's grin, have I been able to portray these as I wished to?

This is the frustration a writer is often confronted with—I saw, heard and experienced the pain of these characters in an environment that is impossible to convey in words and images. And what experiences they were! Among them was the pathetic

*Female Criminals

PART ONE

Apradhini*

Stories from Prison Cells

○ Shivani

request of a Kumaoni girl, whose story absorbed me so completely that I forgot where I was. For a brief moment, both of us became oblivious of the hot *loo* (wind) that raged outside and were transported from the cell to a land where cool breezes blew down mountain sides. It is one of the ironies of life that we are unable to accept the truth unless we can see, feel or hear it. And yet, whether we accept it or not, nothing can ever change the truth. Then there is another kind of truth: the sort that we accept simply because it is there. For a brief moment, I was back with Chanuli in her village and it was the hour when the cows come home—what we call *godhuli* in Hindi. The prison, its walls and the searing

afternoon heat, all vanished before the truth of Chanuli's story.

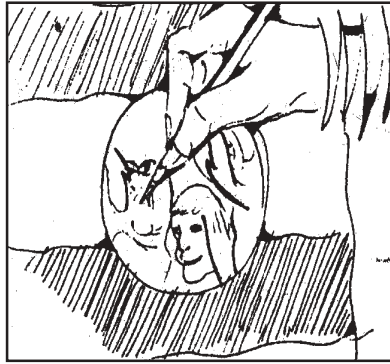
A prison can also make a writer's imagination oddly redundant. The characters I met there converted me into a sort of medium, a planchette if you wish, and my pen wrote down whatever stories were revealed to me. Unfortunately, I cannot write of those whose cases are still *sub judice*, yet there are some faces that will forever haunt me. A fourteen-year old girl whose eyes welled up at the sound of a kind voice, what crime could she have committed to barter away her whole life? She had been persuaded by her seventy-year old uncle to get her young lover to the house. The old man then implicated her in the murder he committed and left her to her fate when he died. Along with her



was a woman who everyone called 'Maa-ji'. Her tall and upright bearing was topped by a face that had the slyest eyes I've ever seen. Even in the prison she had managed to collect a band of devotees and her voice, when it rang out, vaulted over the prison walls in thrilling cascades. Her hooded eyes contained dark secrets that I cannot reveal until her case has been decided by the courts. Embezzlement, fraud, cheating gullible villagers—she was guilty on all these counts. My fingers itch to write about the countless characters I encountered there but the laws of the court forbid me to do so.

Kalhan writes in the *Rajtarangini* that a writer should be able to uncover emotional diseases the way a surgeon's knife lances tumours. What else can prove that he has the gift of healing? But this is easier said than done. When *Dharmayug* was serializing *Ja re Ekaki*, I was flooded with protests from the government. How dare I write that the children in the prison school were unhappy or of their pale faces? Did I know that they were given milk every day? I did not see the need to justify what I had written but I will tell them now that there are some environments where no life can prosper or thrive. Even if those children were given the best milk the government could procure, I can wager that their pale faces would never bloom healthily.

Some months after my visit to the women's prison I received an invitation from another one. This time I was invited to come on *raksha bandhan* and tie *rakhis* on some male prisoners. Usually, I avoid these empty gestures made by well-meaning social organizations. This one-day charity is not my cup of tea at all. And, when I often forget my own brothers on *rakhi*, how could I take on the responsibility of acquiring some more? But this time I felt compelled to go.



When I entered the vast hall and was confronted with rows of prisoners seated neatly, my heart sank. When I saw five men, clad in identical yellow clothes, come towards me. I remembered hearing in my childhood that all murderers are issued a special uniform to distinguish them from the others. They had been chosen as the representatives of the entire population and were the ones on whose wrists I would tie the sacred thread. Each one of them, chosen today for exemplary behaviour in the prison, was guilty of killing another human being. My new brothers approached me and when they knelt in front of me, their wrists spread obediently in my direction, they seemed to me like the players from a *Ramlila* who had put on the mask of a demon for the duration of the play and had now unmasked themselves to mark the end of a drama. Their clean faces, shining with a palpable affection and devotion, bore no trace of the hideous role they had played earlier. Truly, they appeared no different from any brother. 'This is – Singh,' the warden introduced the first one with a smile. 'He recites wonderful verses. And this,' he introduced the next one, 'is a marvellous singer. His band is famous even outside the prison.' The poet bent low over my feet: tall and handsome, he could well have been a hero in one of my novels.

The ceremony over, drums and cymbals struck a lively tune as they sang 'Yeh hai ujade watan ka chaman bhaiyyo/ bahene ayin to isme bahar aa gayi'. (This is otherwise a wilderness, my brothers/ But Spring has followed our sisters here today).

I could follow the sweet voice of my brother throughout, just as there is a young *qawwal* (folk singer) whose clear soprano rings high over the deeper notes of the rest of the singers, his voice soared like that of a nightingale over the rest. Those of you who have heard the high-pitched voice of Master Madan will understand what I mean. He was the music director of the prison and brilliant at his job. Then, one day, I am told, he made an unusual request: could he take his band outside the prison to play at weddings or parties? Naturally, he was turned down: who could allow such dangerous players outside? Suppose they snatched a rifle from an enthusiastic man accompanying a wedding procession, what could they not do with it? 'I beg you, sir,' he pleaded, 'just give me one chance. I promise you I will not let you down.' Miraculously he succeeded in convincing the staff and he was true to his word. Now, I was told, he is in great demand all over the town and what is more, never once has he cheated on his promise to return to the prison at the appointed hour.

I ran my glance over the faces in front of me, trying to see beyond the polite masks and my eyes picked one whose face was buried in his knees. Throughout the ceremony, he did not lift it even once. All I could make out from his slender shoulders was that he was very young and my imagination began to spin tales. I listened with half my mind on him to the poems being recited or the songs being sung and my hands clapped mechanically: I just could not take my

eyes off those defeated shoulders. I was so tempted to ask the warden who the young boy was but just could not get myself to intrude into a grief so private. Obviously, he wanted to have nothing to do with the world, he had ducked out of sight—what right had I to disturb his retreat?

Finally, I turned to the warden. ‘There must be some children from the juvenile home here today: why don’t I tie a *rakhi* on the youngest member from there?’ Within a few minutes, the young boy stood before me, his wrist outstretched obediently. I held his wrist and it was burning with fever. I was told he had insisted on coming and specially worn his NCC uniform for the occasion. I tied the simple silken thread on the wrist and regretted that I did not have the kind of flashy *rakhi* that my young son ordered: one with a plastic aeroplane or a watch studded on gaudy tinsel. Poor little boy, I thought, what crime could he have possibly committed? My feelings must have reflected on my face for the warden smiled as he said: ‘This is a very brave boy, aren’t you son? Last year, he shot a friend with his father’s gun.’

This boy? He had shot someone dead? They were playing a game of marbles: and an argument ballooned into a full-fledged fight. The boy ran inside, picked up his father’s loaded rifle and shot his friend dead. The impact of the shot felled him as well and both friends lay side by side. Except that one of them was dead. He was sentenced to three years in a remand home and sent to the juvenile home. He was followed by a fifteen or sixteen year old boy. His upper lip had a faint trace of down and his voice was still breaking. A Muslim boy, he was serving the last year of his sentence. By now, I had no curiosity left: whatever the crime, the punishment seemed far in excess of it.

‘What class are you in?’ I asked him.

‘The ninth,’ he replied, head low.

‘Where is your home?’

‘*Ji*, in Rampura.’

His lips were trembling perhaps in dread of the question he thought I would ask next: why are you here? Of course, I did not. He turned swiftly and soon was lost in the crowd.

‘Do you know how important these *rakhis* are for the men you have tied them on?’ the warden asked me later. ‘They put them in their Ramayana or holy book and look upon them as their sisters.’

I felt I would choke. Who knows whether my *rakhis* were pressed between the pages of a Ramayana or a Koran and I realized then that whether or not I had a pressed *rakhi* in my books I would never forget the faces of these brothers. That bent head, the sweet soprano, the shy poet—they stand eternally before me.

I know that mere stories do not engage readers for long: until they can sense the writer’s own emotions behind a character, stories remain dull and lifeless to readers. I do not know how far I have succeeded in bringing alive these characters but when these stories were being serialized in *Dharmayug* and *Saptahik Hindustan*, I was drowned with fan mail. Someone had recognized a character from an incident she had witnessed in Tikamgarh thirty years ago.

‘That *maalin* is from Tikamgarh, isn’t she?’ she wrote. ‘When the police were taking her, the crowd passed in front of our house. I still remember her face and the gunny bag that contained the remains of the husband she had murdered.’



Yes, she was the same *maalin*. On the pretext of taking her ailing husband to the toilet, she had led him to her lover’s hatchet. Then the two had dug a pit and buried him nearby. A few days later, a huge downpour had uncovered their hideous crime and the dead man’s hand arose from the earth as if in accusation. Another reader recognized Janaki, another character I had written about.

‘If you could write about her,’ she wrote to me, ‘then would you like to hear my story?’

I tore the letter. I am no voyeur, I wanted to tell her. I don’t write to titillate.

As I recall the faces I saw during my visits to the prison, I am reminded of Habib Tanvir’s brilliant play, *Agra Bazaar*. I hear the three *fakirs*, clad in their flowing tattered robes, tambourine in hand coming towards me from behind the wings of a stage. I cannot see them yet but their sweet voices echo all around the hall:

‘*Gul shor babula aag hava/ Aur keechar pani mitti hai/ Hum dekh chuke is duniya ko/ Yeh dhoke ki si tatti hai...*’

(A ball of fire, a gust of hot wind/ Mud, water and slime/ We have seen this world, my friends/It is a mirage, a false curtain...)

Ja re Ekaki

Just before *Holi*, sometime in March or so, the postman brought me two invitations.

One was from a prosperous Ladies Club: set in acres of green, velvety lawns, it had lines of posh cars outside it when I reached. An unending stream of beautifully dressed women in their *kotas*, *chanderis* and *mulmuls* were alighting, leaving trails of perfume behind them. The occasion was a pre-*Holi* celebration and the ladies had invited a well-known *qawwal* to sing the traditional *horis* (songs of *Holi* festival)—rose-water was sprinkled on the guests and clouds of *abeer-gulal*

coloured the atmosphere. Tinkling laughter greeted me as I walked in and uniformed waiters with trays of drinks and snacks circulated discreetly among the guests. I was proudly shown a marble plaque bearing the names of the Club's past presidents, which read like the roll call of Avadh's best known *taluqdar* (title given to revenue collectors for the British in Awadh) families.

My second invitation was from an entirely different kind of place.

I was an honoured guest once again but what a strange setting this was! When I reached the venue, the iron gates were barred and shut. Two frightening-looking guards with huge moustaches eyed me suspiciously as I looked around me nervously. Was this still a part of Lucknow? Scrub forest stretched as far as I could see and an eerie stillness beat against my eardrums. Even the sky that stretched over it, infected by the miserable lives inside, had a dull, grey pall. The trees around had leaves, yes, but they were a sickly yellow, limp and listless. A grove of mangoes stood motionless nearby but not a leaf stirred and I was sure that no *koel* ever sang there. My reverie was broken by the harsh cry of the brain-fever bird as it screeched across the sky. I moved forward slowly and looked apprehensively at the guards.

The guards caught hold of the heavy iron bars and slowly opened the doors to reveal a knot of women prisoners eagerly waiting to greet me inside and I was immediately surrounded by their affectionate greetings.

Fate, circumstances and social laws had wrapped these lives in their coils to thrust them into a world where youth, love, desire and hope were barred from entering. However hard I



looked, there was neither joy nor hope in the faces before me. These were women grown old before their time: the young looked like middle-aged crones and the older ones were like walking corpses. Expressionless eyes stared at me in the hall where we sat as I felt the piercing gaze of a hundred and eighty eyes bore into me. I looked around to see individual faces. Each one was clean, neatly-dressed, obedient and silent and I felt a garland of flowers had been placed by the reverence I saw in their eyes as they stared at me. Who could say that these faces were placed on necks that had barely escaped a noose!

'Most of them are murderers,' the doctor informed me, as if she had heard my unspoken question. 'Some are here on charges of dacoity or armed robbery. Not one of them is here for anything less. Often the ones who are sent here are those whose death sentences have been commuted.'

Lunch had been served on a table for the doctor and me and the women, like well-trained soldiers, had sat down behind small slabs of cement that served as *chowkis*. Their faces showed little interest in the food before them.

'The whole meal has been cooked by them,' the doctor went on and I looked carefully at the feast before me. I tried to suppress the vision of a pair of hands severing a head with a hatchet. Before me were deliciously puffed *puris*, *khasta kachoris*, *raita*, *chutney* and the kind of pumpkin vegetable without which the richness of a *khasta kachauri* is incomplete. Each dish was more delicious than the other. I wondered when they had last had a meal like this served to them on their *thalis*.

And then my eye fell on one who looked at the food in front of her with no delight:

had the aroma of the *ghee*-soaked food awakened some memories that had robbed her appetite? A wedding feast, a *mundan*, or a family *puja* perhaps when the kitchen at home overflowed with the fragrant smells from the pots and pans? Was the memory of that occasion choking her now?

'Come on, start eating, otherwise they won't eat,' the doctor's smiling voice brought me back to the present. I broke one piece of a *puri* and immediately the entire row of women started to eat.

The kind-hearted doctor had brought about several changes in these drab lives. From time to time, she would invite guests to meet the prisoners and her research work was dedicated to studying their behaviour. She had mingled her heartbeat into the hundred and eighty that she monitored. By now, she knew their bodies as well as she knew their minds and had the histories of each one of them at her fingertips. Their lives were like well-thumbed books that she read and re-read almost every day.

'The one who is fanning you,' she went on, 'her name is Heera. She must

be about fifty-eight or so, but if you had seen her dance last year at the Independence Day function, you would be amazed. She could shame any twenty-year old!' I looked up to see this Salome and her lined and withered face broke into a sweet smile. When she was not fanning me, she ran to fetch me hot *puris* from the kitchen and no matter how much I dissuaded her from piling more on my *thali*, she would slip another hot one in. When I finished my meal, she ran to fetch me a basin and jug of water and made me wash my hands as if I were a baby. Then, before I knew what she was up to, she drank the water from the basin.

'Stop!' I cried in horror. 'What are you doing?'

'*Bahuji*,' she looked into my eyes, 'my burden of sins is so heavy that I can hardly hold my head upright. This water from the hands of good women like yourself is not dirty water, *bahuji*, it is like *gangajal* to sinners like us. It may wash my past away.'

I returned to the table and asked the doctor to tell me more about Heera and was stunned by what I heard. The woman who had drunk '*gangajal*' today had helped her son to burn alive his young wife. The son had been sent to the gallows but she had been given a life sentence and left alone to be forever haunted by the noose that had killed her son.

The doctor next pointed out a young, dark girl with sad eyes. She was innocent in the sense that she had committed no heinous crime herself, but was guilty of assisting her three brothers in committing armed robberies. Now she was the unofficial seamstress of the jail and would be sorely missed by her fellow inmates when her term came to an end, the doctor went on. Her nimble

fingers crocheted complicated roses and flowers and her knack for transforming the drab prison uniform into something else was widely appreciated. Give her a shapeless vest and she would add a tuck there and a pleat here to make it into a sexy body stocking.

I was aware that the minute a woman enters a prison, she is stripped of all her jewellery and personal clothing and issued a coarse *dhoti-kurti*. Yet, these women had devised all kinds of ways of adding a touch of individual fashion. I had



been struck earlier by the absence of any mirrors—for most women this must be a fate worse than death. Yet, every woman had neatly parted hair, some had a black *bindi* on their foreheads and even a hint of *kajal* in the eyes. How had they managed this without a mirror, I wondered? Then, the secret was revealed to me. I saw a tall, strapping woman bent over a pail of water. She looked at her reflection in the water and patted her hair. Obviously, not even the grim confines of a prison can squash some women's vanity! The doctor told me how they would make *kajal* from burnt wood, crush coals to make *missi* to fill the spaces between their teeth and cut rose petals to make a *bindi*.

After the meal, I went with the doctor on a round of the cells. The sun was shining outside but a pall of silence and a suffocating darkness seemed to envelop the rooms. The windows had thick iron bars and the sky had shrunk so far that it was just a hint of blue-grey. I could imagine how they must crane their necks to see more of it before their eyes, tired of squinting, gave up the effort. The large dormitory had a long, depressing row of cement slabs, not unlike those that you see in a morgue. Each one had a neatly rolled up bedding of rough blankets. The walls had '*Raghu Pati Raghav Raja Ram, Patit Pavan Sita Ram*' (a popular devotional song that Mahatma Gandhi loved) painted in bold lettering all along the room. Did these lines provide solace to restlessly tossing souls at night? Or did these words, strike out like hooded snakes and remind them of all they had done? The neck of a husband severed for a lover, a daughter-in-law burnt alive, the rape and pillage of a dacoity, selling young girls to pimps and prostitutes, killing newborn girls...

Until a few months ago, two sisters-in-law were incarcerated together in this jail, I was told. Both were serving a life sentence but their visceral hatred of each other became so hard to handle that one had to be packed off to Naini Jail near Allahabad. 'I was afraid they would kill each other one day,' the doctor said. And then I was told of the strange saga of their feud. For years, the older one had watched her brother-in-law lavish attention on his young wife. He was prosperous and she loved clothes and jewellery. Each time he gave a new gift, she would come to her older sister-in-law and

show it off. Finally, the older one could take it no more. She decided to hack off the neck that was draped with the jewels that she coveted and would have been given a death sentence were it not for the infant at her breast. The mother and baby were sent here. According to the rules of the time, a child could stay with its mother until the age of six. In the meantime, her brother-in-law married his late wife's sister and when her son turned six, he was sent back to his father's home. The child became very attached to his new aunt, who loved him in turn.

Then, one day, the child's mother reached home on parole. The son refused to go to her and clung to his aunt's sari. Burning with rage, the mother felt as if her new sister-in-law was just another head grown to replace the one she had hacked all those years ago. As the time for her return to jail drew nearer, she felt more and more enraged and helpless. Her frustration had added a wicked edge to her tongue and her family began to dread the lashings they received from her. Then, one day, she turned to her new enemy.

'I'll hack your neck just as I hacked your sister's off, understand? I'll come from jail if I have to,' she spat. 'Don't you dare charm my little Nanku away from me! You think I haven't seen you slyly feeding him milk and *jalebis* to wean him away from me? I know you will kill him one day.' The child, who was listening to the spat, blanched when he heard his mother. From that day, he wouldn't step near his aunt. His mother had barely reached the jail after her parole, when she was told that her son had been hacked to death by her sister-in-law.

This is how they both found themselves in the same jail, serving life sentences. Forced to see each other every day, this was a predicament harder than the sentence itself. Finally, the older one



was packed off to Naini jail. With her arch enemy gone, the younger one began to be haunted by the crime she had committed.

'Why didn't they send me to the gallows instead?' she would wail. 'Every night, the little one comes to my ears and calls out, "*Chachi, O Chachi!*"'

I was told that the room where she killed her little nephew was so dark that the police had to take burning torches to collect the pieces of the child's body.

Yet the same jail also houses those who are completely unrepentant. The doctor took me to a cell where a tall woman, Najmati, stood proudly alone. Her arms were decorously crossed in front of her and she looked briefly at us as we entered, then turned her gaze away. What a glowing skin she had and what a nose! Perhaps her haughty and irreverent attitude was responsible for her being excluded from this morning's feast. That brief glance she had cast at us had shaken me—she looked like a barely controlled lioness in a circus who could jump and grab you between her jaws if the ringmaster lost control. Her tawny eyes burned with an anger that sent a shiver down my spine. I stood hesitantly at the door of her cell as if she were a *maharani* and I had dared to intrude into her private chamber.

At first glance she appeared to be about twenty or so, but when I

looked closely, I realized she was older. I saw her slyly look at us and assess me exactly as I was assessing her. 'So,' she seemed to say silently, 'seen enough, have you? Are you satisfied with the specimens you've seen in this zoo?'

She flashed one defiant grin my way, dazzling me with her *missi*-laced teeth and tawny eyes. Then, she rudely turned her back on us and withdrew to her own world.

'What a beauty she must have been in her youth!' I told the doctor as we moved on.

'I wish her life had been half as beautiful,' the doctor replied. 'God knows how many lives she helped extinguish, how many happy families she destroyed—she was the moll of a dacoits' gang. You should see the visitors she gets! One of them is a young *Thakur* boy: he'd come the other day with a basket full of dry fruits for her. No one is allowed to keep so many, I said. You can only bring her as much as she can eat while sitting here. So he flashed me a wicked grin and fed her the whole lot in one go!' she laughed. I was reminded of a story I was once told of a *Pathan* who was travelling on a train with his ram. When he was asked to buy a ticket for the ram, he cut it up and ate it there and then!

'Wait till you meet this one,' my doctor friend smiled as we walked on. My appetite was whetted by her enthusiasm and we strode towards the kitchen, a poky little room, full of wood smoke. Two tall, strapping women were frying *puris* in a huge wok and my eyes almost missed a third person hidden by the swirling smoke. She got up and joined her hands in a greeting and the doctor said heartily: 'This lady is from your part of the world, Chanuli,' and Chanuli blushed as she turned to face me.

'So, Chanuli, what is your village called?' I asked her in Kumaoni. Little did I know that the sound of her

mother tongue would undo the floodgates of a past that Chanuli tried to erase as she cooked for her fellow prisoners. She covered her face with both her hands and sobbed into them as if her heart would break. I felt unable to say or do anything and looked to the doctor for help.

‘She has heard her own dialect after so long that she could not control herself, poor thing,’ the doctor said kindly. ‘I have never seen her cry like this before.’ Then she turned to Chanuli and said, ‘Come on, Chanuli, I have some work for you. Take this lady on a round of the jail and show her the school, all right?’

Chanuli tried to regain her composure. She wiped her eyes with her *pallu* and then turned politely to me: ‘Please follow me,’ she said. I followed her wordlessly through the jail to the school. My heart felt it would break as I saw the rows of children sitting in their class, for they were like no other children I knew. The face of a six-year old looked as if he had the eyes of a person twenty years older studded on it. Their joyless faces twinkled briefly as they saw us approach, almost like the fading light of a flashlight, and then the sparkle was snuffed out once again. They were asked to recite poems for me and they went through the motions mechanically: their voices rising and falling and their little hands describing arcs and circles as if they were clockwork toys that had been wound up to perform. I remembered the Rajasthani puppets I had seen as a child, whose puppeteer used to beat a sardine can to keep the beat. The puppets slashed each other in a mock battle and then arose once again to play another story, another character.

These children—all under six, the age till when they were allowed to stay with their mothers—were forced into a life where they had no place. What kindness did the framers of this rule have in mind when they forced these innocent lives to start their

life’s journey inside the four walls of a prison?

I could not bear to stay any longer. Suddenly the doctor appeared again. ‘Perhaps you may like to speak to Chanuli alone,’ she said thoughtfully and led me out. I went into a clean, spartan cell and Chanuli came and sat as obediently near my feet as if she were my pet cat. For some time, we were silent: where could I begin and where could she start her story? I looked at her face once again—its pristine innocence struck me. How could someone like her have murdered anyone? And then, she started to tell me the strange story of her life.



Far in the Uttarakhand area of Kumaon, there were two villages close to each other: one was Chanuli’s father’s village and the other her father-in-law’s. Her husband saw the pretty Chanuli grazing her father’s flock of goats on the terraced fields of her village and fell in love with her. His mother never forgave him for choosing his own bride and refused to accept Chanuli as her daughter-in-law. Their daily fights became the favourite entertainment of the village and the entire community participated in their angry verbal battles. To add to her misery, the Indo-Chinese war broke out soon after Chanuli was married and her husband was called to the border.

He never returned.

Her son’s death turned her mother-in-law mad with grief and she turned the full force of her fury on poor Chanuli: ‘*Kulachchini*, you cursed creature,’ she yelled, ‘you are the cause of my son’s death!’ The old woman turned into a virtual cannon and spewed abuses on Chanuli night and day. One day, as soon as Chanuli took a new sickle and went to the jungle to gather fodder for the cattle, she was followed by a gang of women from the village. ‘Look at her,’ their taunts followed her as she walked, ‘does she behave like a widow? She still wears her *mangalsutra* and her nose ring—a whore! That’s what she is! No wonder the old woman curses her, what else can she do but rue her fate if this is the daughter-in-law she’s got!’ Chanuli refused to discard her *mangalsutra* and her nose ring after the death of her husband and this had led to her being virtually ostracized by the village women.

‘I swear, *Didi*,’ she looked at me with her clear eyes, ‘my heart told me he was still alive. My heart never lies, *Didi*,’ she went on, ‘so how could I take off the *mangalsutra* he had placed there? I had dreamt of him the previous night and my heart was so heavy that something snapped inside me when that woman called me a whore. I flung my sickle at her in anger. How was I to know, *Didi*, that her neck would be severed with that one fling?’

I looked at her wide eyes, and I tell you if I were the judge who she had said this to, I would have freed her there and then. Such clear eyes can only belong to an innocent heart. We both fell silent.

‘What happened then?’ I asked her gently after a pause.

‘It was as if a fountain of blood was spouting: I ran home in terror. But everyone had seen what happened. That night I was taken to Almora.’

‘Did anyone post your bail?’ I asked.

‘Who would do that?’ she sighed deeply. ‘I was guilty of killing someone, of a *Brahma-hatya*. She was a Brahmin, you know,’ she explained. ‘Only my mother wailed and ran after the bus that they took me away in for as long as she could.’

There was a pause. Then she continued, ‘They registered a case. The only question they asked me over and over again was: Did you throw that sickle? And I would answer ‘Yes.’ Then you know that you committed a murder, they would say and I replied, ‘No *sahib*, I did not kill anyone, it was an accident.’

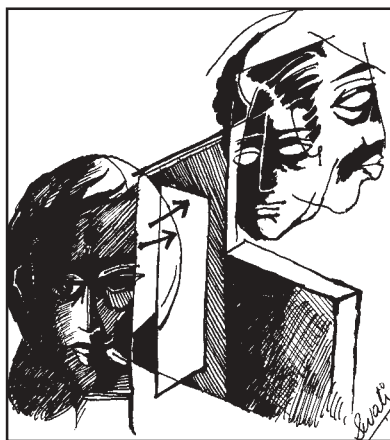
She reached out and held my hand. ‘Tell me, *Didi*,’ she asked me now, ‘I did not kill her deliberately, don’t you see? It just happened!’ I wish I could tell you how innocent and guileless she sounded as she said ‘It just happened!’ to me in Kumaoni. How I wished I had been the judge for this case!

Her gaze was as pure as the Bhagirathi river that flows through our part of the world. She still blushed as she recounted the heady days of her brief honeymoon with her husband. It seemed to me as if her child-like innocence was enough to clear the gloom of this hateful place. She was not just the prettiest prisoner, she was also the one who had the sweetest temperament. They had started a Girl Guide movement in the jail and Chanuli showed me her uniform proudly. Unfortunately, neither her looks nor her touching innocence were enough to absolve her of her crime. Yet, I knew that no hangman would ever find the courage to slip a noose round her neck.

She was sent first to Naini and then transferred to Lucknow. Then, somewhere along the way, like the plot of a bad Bombay film, her husband came back from war, miraculously alive. He ran from pillar

to post to free his young bride. He appealed in the High Court, saying that if she were freed, he would take her back. His wife was blameless, she had been provoked by the village women, was his appeal. All the world loves a lover and the High Court reduced her life imprisonment to four years. He used to write to her regularly.

‘Did he ever come and visit you?’ I asked.



‘No, his mother would not allow him,’ she replied. ‘If he came here, to this polluted place, he would have to feed the whole village as penance. But his letters...’ she suddenly broke off, blushed and buried her face in her knees. I guessed that the letters were passionate enough for her to go on in hope. ‘There has not been a letter for these last two years,’ she whispered, ‘and one day my elder brother-in-law came here.’

‘Did you ask him why?’

‘How could I, *Didi*?’ she asked in shocked tones. ‘I was too shy to speak to him.’

I could only stare at her pale face. For her, the fact that her husband had appealed on her behalf was reason enough to survive.

‘I know he must have remarried by now, *Didi*,’ she went on. ‘I keep thinking, I have already spent two years of my sentence, only two more remain. But where will I go after that? If I ever meet him, this is what I want

to ask him: if you were never going to take me home, why did you fight for my sentence to be reduced? This prison is now my only refuge, *Didi*. It is my mother’s home and my husband’s. When I came here, I did not know how to read and write. Now I do. The day passes in my daily chores but it is the nights that haunt me. In *Chaitra* (spring) I keep remembering the ripe *kaphal* berries of my village and how every home must be preparing a basket of *bhaintuli* to send to their married daughters. In *Baisakh* (monsoon) I remember the apples, the apricots and in *Magh-Pusa* (winter) the snowfalls. There are nights on end when I dream of snow falling softly ...’

‘Chanuli, if I go to the hills this year, I promise you I’ll visit your village,’ I told her. ‘You said your village is just two hours from Almora. What was the name? And what is your father’s name?’

The dreams of snow vanished and the trees laden with apples and apricots withered under my question. She went pale. ‘Why name a village that has ostracized me, *Didi*?’ she replied. ‘I have shamed my father, and I swore the day they took me away that I would never show him my face as long as I lived, nor bring the name of the village to my lips. But there are some landmarks that I can tell you about. My father’s a Brahmin and the village headman. He wears a brown tweed coat and black pyjamas. His spectacles have only one earpiece, the other is looped round his ear with a thread. There is a path on the right side of my house that descends straight from the Shiva temple into our courtyard. And there are three pear trees in front of my house. Behind it is a huge walnut tree.’

She described the geography of her whole village to me in graphic detail and looked at me hopefully. Then, to make it clearer still, she went on, ‘My father-in-law is a very quiet man and my husband’s younger

brother looks exactly like him, only he is fairer. They haven't done his thread ceremony as yet, so he wears his hair in two long plaits.'

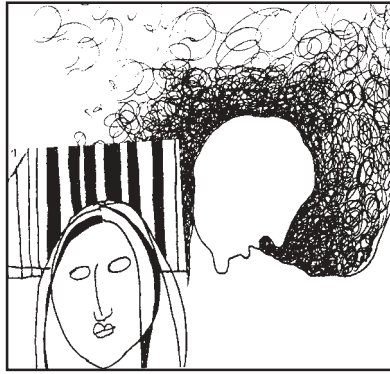
She looked at me again and asked softly, 'You will be able to find them, won't you, *Didi*?'

What could I say? Where in all of Uttaranchal will I find a headman who wears a brown tweed coat and black pyjamas, with a thread looped over one ear to keep his spectacles in place? And if I do, will I be able to give him a message from his weeping daughter? In all the houses scattered on the mountains of Kumaon, where shall I find a house that has a path descending from the temple into its courtyard and one which has three pear trees in front and a walnut tree in the backyard? And will I ever find the young brother-in-law who is a fairer version of a man I have never met?

'Anything else?' I asked her helplessly.

'Yes, *Didi*,' she went on eagerly and pulled me along on the journey from her village to the *kutchery* in Almora. 'After you've met my family, go to the *kutchery* in Almora and do me a favour. When they took me to Almora, they stripped me of my jewellery—I refused to part with my *charyo* (*mangalsutra*) but when they made me unscrew my nose ring, I began to cry. I begged them with folded hands and the *Patwari-jyu* said, 'You silly girl, who cares for auspicious and inauspicious omens in a jail? Are you the first woman who has been asked to remove her jewellery—even a queen would have to do the same.' They took my nose ring and placed it on a stone. I fell at his feet—you know what a bad omen it is to keep a mark of your *suhag* on a stone?'

Of course I knew. No married woman is allowed to keep a *mangalsutra*, nose ring or glass bangles on a stone surface. In fact, one of the worst curses you can hurl



at a married woman is: 'May your *charyo* be kept on a stone!'

The *Patwari-jyu* then told me that they will enter all these items into a register and keep them safely. 'Don't cry,' he told the weeping Chanuli. 'So, please, *Didi*, please go and make sure with your own eyes they have indeed kept my nose ring safely, will you?'

I don't know how I had managed to keep back my tears throughout this sad story but now the dam threatened to burst. Her husband had abandoned her, her village had ostracized Chanuli but she had never given up the hope of wearing that nose ring again! How many men have such devoted wives, I wonder?

I tried to change the topic and said, 'I'm told you sing beautifully, Chanuli. I haven't heard a *pahari* song for a long time. Won't you sing one for me?'

Her eyes lit up and then she turned her gaze down shyly. 'I hear you sang a lovely one at the Independence Day celebrations recently,' I coaxed her like I would a shy child. 'Won't you sing it for me?'

And then the clear tone of a *pahari* flute reached my ears as she sang:

*Paltano ko bajo bajana lagyo/
Jhola tamtola sajan lagyo/ O meri
Ija, pakey de kheera/ Ladan sun
janchcho Kumaiyya veera...*

(The sounds of the war drums can be heard and the army is dressed in its uniform and weapons. O mother, quickly cook some *kheer* for the brave

Kumaoni soldier who is off to fight for his country!)

Chanuli sang on, her eyes closed for the soldier she had once seen leave. The hot *loo* blowing outside was for a brief while turned into the cool mountain breeze of our Kumaon and I was riding a bus to Nainital from Almora. We are driving through the Kakrighat valley with the Himalayas spread before us. The bus is full of passengers with crates of apples from their orchards and it reeks of the slightly sour smell of ripe apples. Sometimes the sound of a plaintive flute being played reaches my ears and I can hear '*Paltano ko bajo...*'

I came back to earth with a thud: I could sense we were no longer alone in the room. Chanuli's sweet voice had dragged in an audience of prisoners and the room was full of silent listeners. I looked at the faces that had seemed so grim that morning—now they were coloured with a sadness as a wave of nostalgia ran through us all. The spell was broken and I rose to leave.

'Won't you say a few words to them before you go?' the doctor asked me.

I shook my head; what could I say? I looked deep into their eyes and said a silent goodbye to each one of them and left.

The open sky seemed vast and cruel after the confined spaces I had been cooped in all day. I turned to look one last time but the heavy iron gates had been closed. A small window was open and I could feel two tearful eyes follow me.

'Two years more, *Didi*, then where will I go?' Her voice rang continually in my ears. Years ago, the blind folk singer Kalu had sung a haunting song for us at Santiniketan. Chanuli's eyes brought back that song:

*'Chhina shikal paye niyo/ re
pakhi/ Ja ude, ja ude, ja re ekaki...*

(Carry the broken chains dangling from your legs/ And fly away, o bird, fly away...)

To be continued