



Short Story

Narcissi

○ Madhulika Liddle

A caressing zephyr, bringing with it the delicate petals of almond blossom. The deep pink blooms of a cherry tree, its roots still deep in snow-covered earth—a tree too impatient to wait for the thaw. Daffodils. Tulips. Narcissi... and blood. Warm, sour-smelling blood. Welling up, incessantly and unstoppably—and leaving behind it stains which even a lifetime of scrubbing could not remove.

I was nine when we arrived in Srinagar. My father was a police officer, and close to two decades of shuffling around discontentedly from one dusty town in Madhya Pradesh to another, had left him—and us—gasping for breath. The transfer to Srinagar was like a celluloid dream come true. All those gorgeously beautiful locales—those rolling meadows, those snow-capped peaks, those pine woods and those fields full of flowers: all seemed, all of a sudden, very close indeed.

An elderly aunt, much-travelled, remarked in a matter-of-fact voice, “It’s more beautiful than Switzerland, you know. Switzerland could never compare with Kashmir; *never*.” “And the flowers,” she breathed, her cataract-clouded old eyes lighting up at the mere memory, “Absolutely divine- wait till spring, and you will see what I mean.”

I missed that last bit about waiting till spring, which was a bit

unfortunate, because I ended up imagining, in my childish innocence, that entering the Kashmir valley itself would be like coming into a garden full of flowers. Maybe we would come over a hill, and suddenly there it would be—a vast plain, with fields of flowers all over, in every nook and cranny.

Our first view of the Valley, as we descended from the mountains down into Qazigund, was nothing short of disastrous. The fields were there all right; but they were muddy and ugly, and the towns and villages we passed were all ramshackle, one-street affairs with rough wooden houses, leafless willows, roadside ditches—and mud all across. I gazed out of the blurred window of the Ambassador we were traveling in, looking on in disappointment at the bleak, drab landscape which flashed by, without a spot of colour to relieve its grimy monotony.

Srinagar itself was ugly—winter was already setting in. The season’s first snow had fallen, melted and left behind it a mess of slush and murky water. A few half-rotten apples scattered unremembered under the trees, and a clutch of brave irises battling it out against the elements in a nearby graveyard—that was all the colour that remained. The rest was cold, colourless, and inexorably dull. The skies hung grey and heavy, the earth lay half-frozen, black and

brooding; and the numbness of winter set in, worse than we had ever experienced in our wanderings further South.

My mother, her face kinder than always, patted me on the head, kissed me and murmured in that warm, comforting voice of hers, “Don’t worry, *beta*. Just a month or two, and then it’ll be all right. This snow will go, it won’t be so cold any more, and we’ll be able to go and visit the gardens, you know. Everybody says Shalimar and Nishat gardens are absolutely wonderful.”

My sister, seven years senior to me and very sure of herself, threw her plait back over her shoulder, looked up from the novel she was reading and remarked, “Don’t count on it, Ma. This place is so awful, I can’t imagine how anybody could think it’s beautiful—Auntie must’ve been totally bonkers to say it’s prettier than Switzerland.”

Ma gave her a look of disapproval, and as if defending Auntie, said, “The snow looks pretty enough. All that white—on the roofs and on the pine trees—it’s really beautiful, Sheetal; you can’t deny that.”

My sister nodded. “Yeah, beautiful all right- and *so nice, too!* That driver of Papa’s nearly got killed the other day when that load of snow slipped off the edge of the roof and missed him by—what was it? Two

inches? No thanks, Ma; give me Indore or Gwalior or even Rewa any day—at least places like those don't kill you." She smirked, then added, "This is what fatally beautiful means, right?"

Ma gave up on Sheetal after that, but a few months down the line, Sheetal had to admit that Ma, Auntie and all those Hindi films were right after all. Srinagar in spring was a sight for sore eyes. Ethereal, breathtaking, stunning—I was too small then to know all those big words, but now that I come to think of it, each of them could easily have been used for the beauty of that particular season.

The huge chinar trees and the delicate willows would be among the first to greet the spring, the pussy willows with their pretty yellow blossoms waving gently in the breeze, and the chinars with an exuberant outburst of leaves. Fresh, clean green leaves, not the dark, weather-beaten hues of summer, but the new, just-born tint that meant spring had arrived.

And, of course, there would be flowers—so many flowers that sometimes it was just hard to believe that we were actually seeing all of it. Our daily ride to and from school was a floral feast in itself. From the huge windows of the bus—which we insisted on keeping open, despite the chill breeze that blew—we would watch—to see the purple irises at Barzulla, the lovely apple trees, all covered with white blooms, just before Lal Chowk, and the glorious golden sprays of forsythia, unstinted in exuberance, which lined Residency Road. And beyond all of those would be the cantonment area of Badami Bagh, a vast almond orchard, each tree a mass of fragile pinkish-white blossoms.

Yes, my sister admitted; it was rather pretty. Maybe Auntie wasn't completely senile, after all.

It was in that same year—in summer, I think—that Papa first met Mrs. Malik. And no, contrary to what you might have begun to imagine, he didn't plunge headlong into an affair with her. Papa was too devoted to his wife, his children and his garden for all that; and anyway, Mrs. Malik was a good twenty years older than him, a cheerful and motherly little lady who got along fabulously with both Ma and Papa. No; what brought Papa and Mrs. Malik together was their passion for flowers. Papa, always a keen gardener, was the type who could coax roses and chrysanthemums, nasturtiums and gladioli out of the most unyielding of soil; and Mrs. Malik? Mrs. Malik owned a flower farm.

I had then no idea how big it was. I, in fact, had not even been aware that such things as flower farms existed; but Papa and Ma said that Malik Auntie grew lovely flowers on her farm, and when the next spring came, perhaps we'd go and visit it.

Meanwhile, we visited Auntie and Uncle at their home now and then. It was a large but comfortable-looking house off Boulevard Road, with a great view of the shimmering Dal Lake beyond, screened by the ramrod-straight poplars that I've seen only in Kashmir. A pretty house, its garden, and its balconies bursting with flowers—a welcoming, happy house, much like its owners. Both Auntie and Uncle were very alike. Lively, generous people, the sort who really made you feel at home without heaping obligations on you. They didn't have any children of their own, but they managed pretty easily to make both of us—Sheetal and I—look forward to visiting them. We'd be allowed the run of the house—to pick green almonds from the trees in the yard, to search for elusive strawberries (invariably sour)

in the patch behind the kitchen, and to borrow books. Or to just hang around—you know, sitting by and listening to Auntie and Papa talking about their flowers, or things like that.

When spring came, so did the promised treat, the trip to Malik Auntie's flower farm. Neither Sheetal nor I had ever been to a farm before, let alone a flower farm, and we were not quite sure what—or how much—to expect. Two-terraced fields, with a few rows of snowdrops or irises? It was all a mystery.

On the appointed day, Malik Auntie greeted us at her house, and from there we carried on, in our cars, to the farm.

It stretched in a vast swathe of the most brilliant colours ever, over all of two hills. Flowering quinces, cherries and plums bordered row upon row of flowers—deep yellow daffodils, fragrant narcissi gently nodding in the breeze; hyacinths—pink and purple, blue and white. And there were tulips—deep red, yellow, purple, white—even green—stretching across two extensive fields. The farm was a vivid splash of colour and fragrance, amazingly beautiful, an experience so completely paradisaical that I can still recall it, every detail as clear as it was on that day.

Malik Auntie and her local gardener in tow, took us around the farm, stopping now and then to instruct us to bend down and sniff a certain variety of narcissus; to get the gardener to snip a spray of forsythia, or to promise Papa a bulb or two of a fabulously lovely new variety of tulip she had just acquired. It took us four hours to do the circuit—four hours of heady fragrances, of colour and beauty. By the time we got back into the car to head home for lunch, we were totally intoxicated. Ma, Sheetal, and I held reminders of Malik Auntie's

generosity—armfuls of daffodils and narcissi, hyacinths and irises—and when we got home, Sheetal and I helped Ma arrange the flowers. For the next two weeks, our drawing room and dining room were like a green house, with vases, china bowls, anything that would look pretty with flowers in it—crowded with the blooms. They stood on every table, every windowsill—and for two weeks, while they lasted, those flowers gave us an idea of why our old Auntie’s eyes had misted over when she talked of Srinagar. Yes, it was beautiful—perhaps more than Switzerland.

That visit to Malik Auntie’s flower farm was not a one-time visit; nor was it a daily, a weekly, or even a monthly affair. We were caught up in our daily routine of school, office, and more. Papa being in the police, we’d acquired a small but very sociable crowd of friends, all Papa’s colleagues and their families, and the visit to the flower farm was not repeated in the weeks to come. When spring gave way to summer, when the plum and cherry blossoms turned to fruit—well, then there was really not much point going to a flower farm, was there? Malik Auntie phoned now and then—we even visited them at their house sometimes—but no more was said about visiting the farm.

Until the next year, of course, when another spring came, another breathtaking upsurge of warmth and colour and fragrance. We went, like the year before, to the farm, and like the year before, came back completely benumbed by the experience.

Another year passed, another spring came, and by then Papa had got his marching orders. He’d been transferred to Delhi—promoted to a post he’d been hoping for the past few months. Violence had begun



erupting in Srinagar long before; every now and then, there would be stories in the local newspapers of people being killed, and of curfew being clamped in town. The situation was worsening, and we were only too glad to receive the news that we would be going away to Delhi—safe, happy Delhi. Ma had begun packing, we’d begun preparing to say goodbye to friends; and Srinagar was, once again, bursting into bloom. And once again, just like always, Malik Auntie phoned.

“I know you’ll all be busy,” she said to Ma, “but I was wondering if you’d like to come to the farm one last time? The narcissi are really exquisite this year—there are also loads of tulips, and we’ve managed an entire field of Roman hyacinths.”

Ma was in between wrapping her best china in newspaper and straw (this was before the time of professional movers and packers) and telling our orderly exactly how the books were to be placed in the trunks. We were busy—Ma perhaps most of all—but the temptation to go on this, our annual pilgrimage, was just too much. So Ma said yes, and none of us, when she told us about her unilateral decision, opposed it.

It was a goodbye of sorts to Srinagar.

The farm, as always, was lovely. The Roman hyacinths were truly heavenly, and the narcissi, as ever, stole the show. We wandered along the fields, in Malik Auntie’s wake, savouring each fragrance, tucking away a picture of each flower deep in our minds—trying desperately to hang onto a bit of heaven of which only memories would remain. Three hours we took that day—a little shorter than before, but three full hours of happiness, nevertheless—and then, with our car spilling over with tulips and daffodils, and loads of narcissi, we headed home.

Just as we’d been getting into our car, Malik Auntie turned to Ma and invited us to their home for tea. It had been a late and tiring trip; we’d left home a little before noon, after a heavy breakfast, and now, having trudged what seemed miles, Sheetal and I at least looked forward to something to eat—which was certain to be on the agenda at Auntie’s house. Probably those huge six-inch coconut macaroons and massive pineapple pastries from Ahdoos Bakery; maybe some of those gorgeously succulent kababs Auntie’s cook was so good at

conjuring up—definitely cucumber sandwiches and hot pakoras; and cupfuls of steaming, cardamom-scented *kehwa*, fortified with crushed almonds. Ma looked around at us, and the two of us nodded instant approval. Papa, busy getting the tulip bulbs put in the boot of the car, would obviously not disapprove.

I don't remember much of the drive itself; it must have been very like our other trips to Malik Auntie's house. Flowers filled our laps, spilling over onto the seat, and I, with a gargantuan bunch of narcissi in my arms, could barely see where we'd reached. A blue sky and sloping roof after sloping roof was all I could see—and then, after we'd driven for what I imagined would have been long enough to bring us to Auntie's house, the driver suddenly brought the car screeching to a halt. There was a horridly frightening silence of a moment, and then Papa, who had been sitting in the front seat next to the driver, said in a voice I can still remember: "Oh my God!"

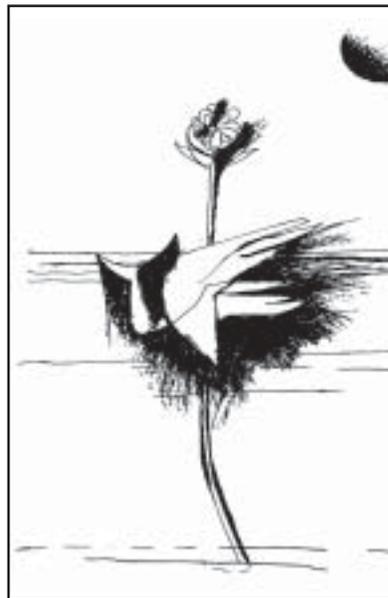
That was all. Just Papa. And those words.

And then Papa and Ma tumbled out of the car, racing towards—I could not see what. Sheetal had been sitting next to Ma, and she quickly shoved the flowers she had been holding into my lap, and ran off behind them. I sat, flustered and scared, flooded with flowers, and wondering what was happening, when I heard the high, keening wail which cut through every other sound around. Suddenly, the sound of some not-too-distant hand-pump being worked; the songs of the birds in the large walnut tree at the Maliks' gate, the far-away sound of traffic on the main road—all of that seemed to have been wiped out, and all I could hear was that terrible wailing. I couldn't even call it crying; it was

too terrifying a sound for such a mundane word—too terrifying, too inconsolable and too raw for me to forget—*ever*.

I slid across the seat, and with my arms still full of narcissi, I peered out of the car, half-curious, half-scared. At the iron gate of the Maliks' house stood my father and my sister; near them, on the ground, sat Ma, trying desperately—and unsuccessfully—to stem that awful flood of grief. On the ground, sprawled alongside a wonderfully maintained flower-bed of narcissi, lay Malik Uncle, his chest a mass of blood. Blood which oozed out everywhere, blood which found its way onto Ma's clothes and hands too. And next to him, covered in blood, sat Malik Auntie, her wailing filling the air with anguish beyond description.

Papa, by some strange instinct, looked around right then, and saw me standing there, my arms full of narcissi. He took one look at me, then turned hurriedly, took my sister by the arm, stooped momentarily to whisper something to Ma, and then brought Sheetal to the car. Without a word, he hustled us into the vehicle, gave the driver a few quick instructions, and



then stood looking on while the driver took us back home.

We were told, much later, that Malik Uncle had been stabbed—by the youths from the neighbourhood. Two of them had come while we were away at the flower farm, asking Malik Uncle if they could come inside to retrieve a cricket ball which had been hit into the Maliks' backyard. Malik Uncle, who had known the boys since they were children, had happily let them in—and had been knifed while he stood there, at the gate.

Why they chose him nobody knew—but many guessed. Where so many others had been killed, the death of one more man made no difference; it was not even mentioned in the local dailies.

We were obliged to leave Srinagar a week later, and to come away to Delhi. A year later, an ex-colleague of Papa's mentioned that Malik Auntie had sold off the house and the flower farm, and gone off somewhere in Uttar Pradesh—or was it Madhya Pradesh? Nobody knew. Later still, someone said that whoever bought the flower farm decided that it would be much more profitable to grow turnips on it. Each daffodil, each tulip, each narcissus was uprooted, and replaced with good sturdy turnips.

...But it's spring again, and all across Srinagar there will be flowers. Or will there? I haven't seen that glorious land for two decades now. Do the *chinars* still stand as tall and majestic, their branches covered with that pale green froth of new leaves? Do the snowdrops still manage to be the first flowers to break through the snow? Is the forsythia as golden, the daffodils as abundant? Are the narcissi still as fragrant?... *Or are they still bloodstained?* □

The author is a Delhi based writer and works as an Assistant Editor with a travel portal. She won the Commonwealth Short Story Competition, 2003.