

HOME

Manju Kapur

a novel



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For

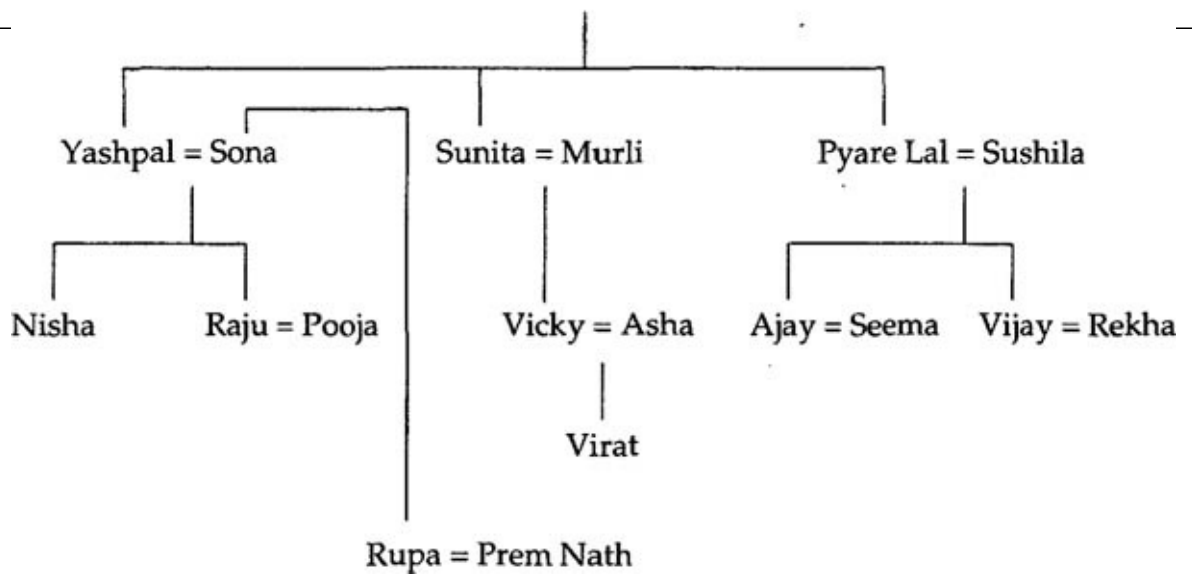
Amba

Maya, Katyayani, Agastya

&

Nidhi

The Banwari Lals



Joint family

The Banwari Lal family belonged to a class whose skills had been honed over generations to ensure prosperity in the market-place. Their marriages augmented, their habits conserved. From an early age children were trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested. The education they received, the values they imbibed, the alliances they made had everything to do with protecting the steady stream of gold and silver that burnished their lives. Those who fell against the grain found their homes knives that wounded, and once the damage had been done, gestures that reconciled.

Sisters

Mrs Sona Lal and Mrs Rupa Gupta, sisters both, were childless. One was rich, the other poor, one the eldest daughter-in-law of a cloth-shop owner, the other the wife of an educated, badly paid government servant.

They lived with their in-laws in the same neighbourhood in Karol Bagh. They met frequently allowing each husband ample opportunity to justify his secret contempt for his wife's relatives, while each sister reinforced her belief that the other's problem was light in comparison to her own.

Rupa, the younger one, had difficulties that are easily narrated. She was fortunate in that she only had a father-in-law to look after; in her case, the thorn in her life came from the wicked tenant upstairs, a man skilled in making the couple's life miserable. He was a lawyer, who refused to pay his meagre rent on time, and who was protected against eviction by unfair, tenant-favouring laws. The family was fighting him in court, but instead of getting justice, the lawyer, who represented himself, was successful in using legal tactics to delay hearings and continue the status quo. They knew his goal was to torture them into believing the only way they could achieve peace was to sell him their home at distress rates.

The educated, badly paid government servant had to spend much time and money, blood and sweat on this case. Rupa frequently remarked to her sister, while spending the day, 'We are cursed, Did you know what to do? It is our fate. Perhaps it is just as well we don't have children, that man will trouble us little after life.'

It was all very well for Rupa to be complacent, thought Sona bitterly. She had her own cross to bear, and she thought Rupa's troubles insignificant. What was some nuisance-mongering tenant, who ultimately would be got rid of, compared to relatives, attached for life? Rupa was supremely lucky she only had her husband and father-in-law to deal with. She was not subjected to sneers and taunts she was not the only barren woman amongst myriad sisters-in-law whose wombs were bursting with perpetual pride. She didn't have to dandle a thousand babies on her lap, coo over them, pretend to love them, while the ache in her empty heart and belly increased day by day.

Unlike Rupa, whose marriage had been arranged, the history of Sona's courtship did much to intensify her misery.

Sona first entered the Banwari Lal Cloth Shop on a hot morning during the marriage season in March 1965. She was seventeen, in her last year of school, and had come from Meerut with her mother and sister to attend an uncle's wedding. It was necessary for marriageable girls to blossom during such occasions, it being likely that among the guests a boy, or better still his parent, would cast a glance and hold it steadily upon her person. Then it was hoped subsequent enquiries would yield results.

With this in mind, the mother was shopping in Karol Bagh, determined that her daughters should look their best for every function. The Banwari Lal Cloth Shop, they were told, provided tailors who could stitch blouses in a day, with free dyeing thrown in. Sona's mother was at that moment trying to stretch the free service to its limits. Her own old blouses she had already altered for her daughters, now for the price of one little cloth piece, she wished them dyed to match the saris she was showing to the young attendant.

He was patiently explaining the service, one free dyeing per blouse material bought, when Son blushing, looked up and smiled appealingly. The shade card the young man was holding persuasive against the mother's sari drooped. Confusion overtook him as he fell in love, and contemplated future with this beauty by his side.

He flung the card away, and picked up the old blouses. Yes, of course, he could get them dyed and sent to her house in one day, and in order to secure a client's good will, dyeing, delivery, all would be free. The shop was theirs, they only had to let him know how else he could serve them. All the while his eyes sought to convey that such sales talk would be, in this instance, the literal truth for the rest of his life.

He found out that the girl was from Meerut (he had to move fast, she might return before he could secure her), here for a wedding and wearing a sari for the first time (still unattached, obviously meant for him).

Alone, he held her Delhi address in hot sweaty hands and stared at her handwriting. The girl was reflected in the tidy round curves and careful lettering – now all it needed was a proposal.

Yashpal spent the night in the throes of love, and next morning presented the address to his father. At this place for a few days resided the girl on whom his happiness depended. His father should go and talk to the family without delay. If he could not marry her he would leave the shop and spend the rest of his life celibate, by the banks of the Ganges.

His parents did not take kindly to this threat. They were traditional business people. In order to remain financially secure, and ensure the family harmony that underpinned that security, marriages were arranged with great care. The bride had to bring a dowry, come from the same background, and understand the value of togetherness. Falling in love was detrimental to these interests. How was it that their son, so sensible, had forgotten this?

'The girl must have done black magic to ensnare him,' wailed the boy's mother. 'Otherwise would he go against his own family after seeing her face for a second? Tell him not to bother leaving the house. I myself will disappear to make way for the wretch he prefers before us all.'

Her husband recognised the shock that made her talk such rubbish. He himself was disturbed. He had hoped for an alliance from one of the better cloth shops in Karol Bagh, Sadar Bazar or Chandni Chowk. Perhaps he should not have waited so long to marry his son, already past twenty-five. At that age he had been a father. But circumstances had stepped in, shaken the family, along with a continent, and irrevocably altered the life he had known.

Lala Banwari Lal, the family head, had a deep belief in fate. Before Partition, his had been one of the largest cloth shops in Anarkalli, the famous commercial district of Lahore. However, fate had seen fit to teach him that in this world nothing is permanent. His shop had been one of the first to be destroyed, but amid the slaughter that raged, his family survived, and grief for material loss assumed a less significant place in his scheme of life.

With his seven-year-old son, two-year-old daughter, pregnant wife, and wife's jewellery, they crossed the border into their new, wizened nation. First they were sent to a camp in Amritsar, then to Delhi, to finally arrive in Karol Bagh. The jewellery was sold, a house bought, and a shop rented within walking distance on Ajmal Khan Road.

Which was a good thing because Banwari Lal was not about to waste money on even a cycle in the early days. All his profits were poured back into the shop. The family never took holidays. Their ma-

entertainments were eating and an occasional trip to the local cinema. The clothes they wore had everything to do with shop leftovers and wholesale prices.

Lala Banwari Lal allowed no regret to weigh down his attempt at rebuilding their lives. At thirty-two he felt great rage at being forced to start again, but that made it all the more necessary to bury his feelings in the determination to recreate every brick, every shelf, every thread of that which had formed the substance of his life from the age of fourteen.

Once settled in Karol Bagh, Lala Banwari Lal became a devotee of a holy man, a Baba, who lived near the house. His faith needed an anchor, and the holy man combined astrology, palmistry, spiritual guidance, and reassuring predictions about the future. Pray to the Devi, everything will be all right, feed the cows, feed the Brahmins, everything will be all right.

When she turned eighteen, Lala Banwari Lal married his daughter Sunita to someone Babaji knew in Bareilly. The dowry asked for had been negligible, and the boy, when Banwari Lal went to visit him, had seemed decent enough. There was no mother-in-law to trouble Sunita, no sisters to share the house with, the family business was a small retail one in hosiery with every prospect of growth.

That these facts proved inadequate to ensure Sunita's happiness, that the boy drank and became abusive was something the daughter did her best to hide from her parents. This shame was now her own.

The Banwari Lal Cloth Shop continued on a small level for fifteen years, while the father waited for his sons to grow. Yashpal finished school at sixteen and joined the trade. The younger brother Pyare Lal followed rapidly in his brother's entrepreneurial footsteps by refusing to graduate. The shop was his future; he saw no reason to postpone its realisation for the dreary memorising that passed for studies. The father saw his point: the boy kept on failing, and at forty-six, he felt the need for the active presence of both his sons. A year after Sunita's marriage, the fourteen-year-old Pyare Lal started travelling with his father and was in the interesting process of being introduced to all the ins and outs of purchasing. Every month or so, depending on the season, father and son journeyed to large retailers in Madras, Varanasi, Bombay and Calcutta, besides investigating new ranges at annual summer and winter garment fairs.

The two sons had been brought up to consider their interests synonymous with those of the family. The patriarch was keenly aware of any disagreement between them. Neither must feel exploited, but the eldest had to have the final say. This was not a democracy, in which freewheeling individualism could be allowed to wreck what was being so carefully built. United we stand, divided energy, time and money are squandered.

In Lala Banwari Lal's mind, the business was still struggling to reach the heights of the Lahore days, and he had chosen to wait in order to get the best possible match for his son. Though the boy's mother sometimes complained of his advancing age, he knew how obedient the boy was, and thought he had nothing to fear. He had not seen the dangers of celibacy in his pliant son till his falling in love spread terror and confusion in the home.

Even he had noticed the girl, but then dealing with cloth and colours, appearance and apparel, one became adept at observing people. The girl was pretty, very pretty – but to want to marry a customer? Where was his son's professional objectivity?

She had been dressed in the latest fashion. Churidars, kurta tight around the knees, two large

flowers appliquéd across the front. Her fringe swept her eyebrows, highlighting her long brown eyes. She had a little bouffant, and down her back hung a long, glossy, thick plait with reddish tints. Did all this portend simplicity? Homeliness? Dutiful service to elders? Was this girl destined to make his son happy, while at the same time understanding that the interests of a business family came before her personal concerns?

Ah, the fires of youth, he sighed, thinking of his slightly pot-bellied son, so careless of the large picture, so heedless of where the collective good might lie.

His wife was not so tolerant of the fires of youth. The boy had to see sense. She would rather eat poison than negotiate for a girl like that. With their status and position, why should they have to ask anybody for anything?

Babaji was consulted. The son's horoscope was as good as his father's. Their stars were in the ascendant, anything they touched would turn to gold.

Gold. Sona. It was the girl's name, and from Babaji's mouth, the word took on the hue of a good omen. His wife should make the required visit to the address his son had given.

The wife repeated her threat. She would rather eat poison.

'It is our son's happiness we have to think about,' said her husband severely. 'If he wants a love marriage, he shall have it. He has worked sincerely all these years. He has never had a holiday, never taken one paisa. His younger brother travels with me, spends what he can, while the elder one is simple and retiring. Who knows what he might do if he is thwarted in the only thing he asks for?'

'Better he had asked all his life than stab us in the back like this,' muttered the mother. The thought of her favourite son entrapped by a clever, manipulative, dowryless creature made it barely possible for her to look pleasant during the visit her husband forced her to make. She looked at the blushing girl and found nothing remarkable. If it was beauty the boy wanted, she could have found a dozen such, accompanied by similar backgrounds and suitable dowries. Adamant though he might be about Yashpal's happiness, she knew her husband had planned to aim high with his son's marriage. Those hopes were now ruined. She could tear the girl's eyes out, mischief-makers, tear them out with her bare hands.

Meanwhile the girl's side was apprehensive. They were small people. In marriage they could offer nothing but their daughter, whose heart was golden like her name. They did not wish any regret to follow this alliance. The boy's side should think carefully and contact them in Meerut if they wished to pursue the matter. Sona's father said he understood young people to behave irrationally; wisdom lay in greater introspection.

Yashpal wanted nothing to do with greater introspection. If the girl's parents did not agree, he would devote himself to the life of an ascetic. His parents made a trip to Meerut to finalise the marriage.

Perhaps her relative poverty would ensure the necessary amount of gratitude needed to be an ideal daughter-in-law.

The news spread through Sona's community in Meerut. The girl was going to marry the Banwari L. Cloth Shop in Karol Bagh! How adroitly had her looks been used! It is all the mother's doing. Cunningly she has been pushing her daughter forward since the girl turned sixteen. She must have known there was a marriageable son in that shop, or why did she pick that particular place to go with her blouses? As though you can't dye blouses in Meerut. Now she will think she can do the same with

Rupa, but let us see if she has the same luck with the sister, who is so much darker.

~~And did you hear what the father said to the boy's side? We have nothing but our daughter—we are~~ small people. And the cloth shop was forced to say their only interest was the girl. Will Sona, from an educated family, be happy with shopkeepers? The boy is only high-school pass, but Sona now says she does not want to study any more, she wants to remain on the same level as her husband.

Babaji was consulted about the wedding date, which was fixed for six months later. The marriage took place with the ceremony due to the eldest son of the Banwari Lal Cloth and Sari Shop. The bride travelled to Meerut, the shop closed for one day, and by the following evening Sona shifted to her new home.

Why, this house is smaller than mine, thought the young bride, as she surveyed the small paved area between front door and gate, the angan at the back, with its toilet and kitchen on opposite ends, and the four rooms in between.

'Who lives upstairs?' she asked her husband a few weeks later, when some of the timidity had worn off.

'Tenants,' he replied, caressing the peach-like skin and tracing the red lips with his fingers.

Playfully she held the finger between her teeth. 'Shall I bite you?' she asked.

'Just try,' he invited.

She giggled. He was her husband. How could she bite him? Her thoughts wandered. 'I didn't know the whole house was yours.'

He put his hand over her mouth.

'Whose?'

'Yours,' she mumbled.

'Naughty. Married a whole month, and still saying yours. Say ours.'

'Ours,' she repeated, flushing with the pleasure of togetherness.

'Maybe, when the children come,' said the husband, caressing the wife's still-flat belly, 'we can move upstairs. Or Pyare Lal can use it after he gets married. We can't bring his wife to the dining room.' For that is where the younger brother-in-law had been shifted after Yashpal's marriage.

'I don't want to leave Baoji and Maji,' said Sona, trained from an early age to love, serve, and obey her in-laws.

Her husband looked at her with approval. 'You are my everything,' he murmured into her ear. His parents in the next room were sleeping, he could now lock his door, now undress his wife, still shy. With the lights off, he at last got what he had longed for all day.

Yashpal's love was so overwhelming that he was driven to demonstrate it endlessly. In the way his eyes kept seeking her face, in the small gifts he secretly gave, in the way he waited for her to finish eating before leaving the dining area, in the way he hung around the kitchen when she was cooking, the way he demanded her presence even when he was talking to his mother.

The mother's eagle eye noted these variations in her son's behaviour. Truly you never knew your boy till he married, she thought bitterly. All her years of silent suffering after fleeing Lahore, the years of sacrifice for her children, were now to be rewarded by the obvious preference for a wife. She had known nobody else would matter from the moment he fell in love. Her overwrought feelings made this knowledge public.

Yashpal knew his mother was distressed; since childhood he had been attuned to her moods. He turned to his wife, giver of so much joy, and expected her to bring the same joy to his mother.

‘She can’t help herself, she spent nights and nights in camps wondering how we would survive, and then my father had to sell her jewellery when they came to Delhi, and when Pyare Lal was born there was no one to help her. She was all alone.’

‘So were thousands of others,’ pointed out Sona, possessor of the husband’s history, bound by love to try and make him feel better. ‘Besides, you supported her in every way. You cooked, you shopped, you cleaned, you looked after the baby.’

‘She feels things deeply,’ sighed the son.

Even the eighteen-year-old Sona knew the difference between feeling things deeply and voicing them loudly, but she was in no position to destroy her husband’s illusions. ‘I want to be a daughter to her,’ she sighed, ‘but sometimes I feel Maji does not like me.’

‘Never mind,’ said Yashpal, pulling her close for the second time that night, ‘once we have children, she will melt. Sometimes she gets into moods.’

By now Sona knew this. When the two of them were alone, she could see how her mother-in-law had to struggle to even talk to her. Every gesture suggested the daughter-in-law had no right to exist and if she had to live, why was she doing it in their house? Only when the men came home at night was there the semblance of a caring family.

So between day and night Sona seesawed between love and something more unnameable. Had she been outside the family it would have been called hatred.

Sometimes she cried and told her husband she wanted to go home, nobody had asked him to marry her, her self-respect did not allow her to be subject to such treatment.

‘She’s not threatening or beating you,’ reasoned Yashpal.

‘No,’ sniffed Sona.

‘Then patience, my life, patience. Once we have children, you will see how she changes. Inside she is all love.’

At this Sona allowed her tears to flow copiously, which drove her husband to take her for a little outing to cheer her up, without making sure it was convenient for everyone else to accompany them, thus adding to the black marks against his wife.

Two years passed. Sona still wasn’t pregnant, though twenty and old enough. ‘Enjoying, enjoying’ muttered the mother darkly, imagining the use of birth control. Sona said nothing. Her husband’s steady love helped inure her to these taunts.

By this time the younger brother’s marriage was arranged. One love match was all any family could sustain, and Pyare Lal had turned twenty-one when his father told him he was going to wed the daughter of one of the wholesale cloth dealers in Chandni Chowk.

‘Whatever my elders decide,’ said Pyare Lal, showing that model sons could not be judged by daily behaviour. His father was pleased with him. He had a head for figures, he managed the bank work and his separate bookkeeping for the number-one number-two money was meticulous.

The girl was in her first year of college, but marriage provided enough reason to discontinue her education. She was reasonably pretty, reasonably fair – to be too extreme in the looks department could be deceptive, look at the eldest daughter-in-law, still without issue.

Once the engagement was decided, the tenants upstairs were asked to move. A bride of this quality could not be asked to share a dining room. Silently Sona watched as Pyare Lal’s father-in-law gifted a scooter to his future son-in-law and furnished the four rooms of the second storey with a fully stocked

kitchen, fridge, cooler, double bed, dining table, chairs, and an upholstered sofa set in red velvet. She realised as she had not realised three years ago, how poor in gifts her own marriage had been.

The upstairs kitchen would not be used for regular cooking, just tea, snacks, and special meals should someone fall ill. Otherwise, everybody would take their meals downstairs, the new daughter-in-law sweating in the small, hot kitchen along with the older one. Listeners to these explanations nodded yes, wisdom lay in this only. Separate kitchens led to a sense of mine and yours, dissatisfaction, emotional division, and an eventual parting of the ways.

If families did not even eat together, what was the point of living as a unit? You might as well emigrate, pursuing your autonomy in lonely isolation.

Meanwhile in Sona's heart festered the bitter knowledge that had she had children she would have been the one upstairs, with or without a kitchen, while Sushila, Pyare Lal's bride, would have been the one moving into their old bedroom, next to the parents-in-law.

She indulged in one wild fantasy, maybe Sushila will not have children, then sadly got rid of it. Her sister's condition led her to believe hers was the fault, but this knowledge was too frightening to contemplate, let alone discuss openly.

Pyare Lal's prospective sons lay upon her consciousness like a stone. How their mother would shine, how little by comparison would there be to recommend her in the family's eyes! What had she given them? So far as wealth was concerned, they had chosen with their eyes open, it was not expected she provide gifts like Sushila. But no children? How could anyone justify that? To blame nature was a poor excuse, she did not even try. She trembled at her future, and lay awake for hours with her adoring husband snoring gently beside her.

But how gaily she participated in the plans for the coming wedding, how completely she agreed with all who described the joy she would feel as a new sister entered the house, how pleasantly she acquiesced in the insinuation that the barren spell would be broken with babies to gladden the grandparents' hearts.

During the wedding, none looked happier than she, none more loving and tender to the bride, none more delighted about upstairs being done up so nicely, none more willing to show every curious visitor how much the bride's family had given.

And over the three-day festivities none so beautiful as she. She shone, she glowed, her husband looked at her and thought he would never wish to exchange places with his brother, despite all the obvious advantages of an arranged marriage. He was continually attracted to Sona, and though he knew Pyare Lal would fall in love within a few months, his own method of doing things was vindicated every time he looked at his wife, more beautiful than when they had first married.

Sona's fears were realised sooner than she had anticipated. Sushila exhibited no difficulty in conceiving; within a year she gave birth to a baby boy.

Great was the jubilation at this first grandchild. (Sunita's son Vicky, born six years earlier, did not count.) The male line was augmented, courtesy of Sushila and Pyare Lal. A boy brought up within the nurturing ambit of the shop would in turn ensure its continuing prosperity when he grew up.

The new aunt was secretive about her feelings. Yashpal was not to know how jealousy raced up and down her veins like sharp-pointed needles when he came home and called for the baby to play with. He actually thought she would be happy when he proffered the child to her, and said, look, now or

house is full, actually thought she would be happy. Was it men, or the exceptional large-heartedness her husband?

Covertly Sona became even stricter in the rituals she observed. Where could she turn except God? Her face was already in that direction; now she did not allow herself even a sideways glance.

Every Tuesday she fasted. Previously she would eat fruit and drink milk once during this day, now she converted to a nirjal fast. No water from sun-up to sundown. She slept on the floor, abstained from sex, woke early in the morning, bathed before sunrise. For her puja she collected fresh white flowers, jasmine or chameli, unfallen, untrod, from the park outside the house.

In the evening she went to the local temple, buying fruit on the way to distribute to as many Brahmins as she could.

By the time Pyare Lal was twenty-six he was the father of two sons, and Sona thought it was not possible to be more miserable. There must be some deficiency in her prayers or a very bad past karma that made her suffer so in this life – and that too when she had the appearance of every joy a woman could have. Beauty, a fair skin, an attentive husband, a well-to-do family. She had tried to make sure her in-laws never regretted her husband's transgressive love, proving her suitability every day, year after year. She was humble, easy to mould, and ready to please. Sona was gold, like her name. But what use was all this if the Banwari Lal blood did not pass on in its expected quantity?

The fruits of Sushila's womb delivered with so much promptness caused the gold in Sona's nature to bend under their weight. As she lay in bed, she could feel the fecundity of life upstairs, falling through the floor and pressing upon her heavily, so heavily, that for nights and nights she could not sleep.

In the day small things drove her into a frenzy of irritation. Everyone, she felt, found her defective goods, despite her pale colour, large hazel eyes, small neat nose, red lips, even teeth, and perfect skin. How she wished she did not have to live in a joint family! If she and her husband lived separately, she too could be happy, like her sister Rupa.

Sona's marriage had not in fact led to a brilliant future for Rupa. No proposal had forced her to give up her education. She finished her BA, after which her father arranged her marriage to the son of a retired colleague, based in Karol Bagh. The location of the groom in the sister's neighbourhood was one of the reasons the alliance was deemed suitable.

Given Rupa's dark skin, she was considered to have married as advantageously as her circumstances allowed. The family was very small: one father, one married daughter, and one son. Their eligibility came from the ownership of a house in Karol Bagh, their security from the boy's government job as a minor employee in the Defence Ministry.

It turned out that Rupa too failed to conceive. Sona hid this fact as long as she could from her in-laws, she knew exactly the kind of comment it would elicit. Bad stock, tainted bloodlines. But concealment was useless, eventually these things were said.

'Why don't you ask Babaji for a remedy?' Rupa asked Sona occasionally. 'Your father-in-law has so much faith in him. He might be able to help.'

'It is up to them to suggest it,' said Sona proudly.

'You can give them the idea, no?'

'Look at what happened to Sunita. That was Babaji's doing.' Sona lowered her voice. Disrespect of

Babaji was not allowed in the house.

‘But he also encouraged your marriage,’ pointed out Rupa.

Sona sighed. How could she make her sister understand? Looking at Rupa, it was possible to envy a woman in the same situation as herself, and with less money too. Rupa was childless, but free from torment. She accepted her fate, she didn’t spend every Tuesday fasting, she had no one to envy, no one to rub salt in her wounds, no one to keep those wounds bleeding by persistent hurting comments.

Without children, Rupa had the time to start a little pickle business. Her husband encouraged her, her father-in-law helped her paste on the labels with a trembling hand, her brother-in-law (Sona’s husband) helped her with his contacts among the shopkeepers of Karol Bagh. As long as her products were good, orders were plentiful. Rupa worked hard at her recipes, experimenting with new ones and expanding her repertoire.

Sunita seldom visited her parents. If money was sent to spend on a trip home, she usually made some excuse: the husband is not well, the father-in-law is not well, I am needed to look after them. They thought maybe her postal order was snatched away, they sent tickets instead. But the visits were still infrequent.

Lala Banwari Lal insisted the brothers take time off from the business to see their sister once a year. Though she was married, her unhappy situation made her their responsibility, now and after his death. The brothers went, though reluctantly; their sister’s life was the result of bad karma and there was nothing anyone could do. Still, they made allowances for a father’s love.

Once Sona accompanied Yashpal to Bareilly to meet her sister-in-law. The plan was to take Sunita and Vicky for a holiday to Rishikesh, forcibly if necessary.

Force was not required. The brother-in-law, Murli, whatever his treatment of his wife, was always exceedingly hospitable towards his in-laws. Their superior status meant his politeness and warmth never ceased.

During the trip Sona and Sunita exchanged confidences. Why she would never come home, why the tickets were returned instead of used. Murli wanted her family to invest in Bareilly, to either open an outlet that he would manage, or failing that, to help upgrade his shop. Her dowry had been small, but he demanded redress. They are cheating you, they palmed you off like a poor girl, now they are rich, they should share. Should she visit Delhi, it would have to be with him, and her life would be hell afterwards. But she would not exploit her father, no matter what her husband’s demands were.

She shared the general belief in her bad karma. Let her present miseries expiate the sins of her past lives. All she wished was to leave this world, it was only her son who kept her back. Here she clutched Vicky to her bosom, her face contorting with tears and tenderness. The boy remained there passively while Sona looked on. See, how children were recompense for everything.

Fourteen years after her marriage, Sunita’s hopes were answered. The Banwari Lal family got the news by telegram. There had been an accident in the kitchen, and Sunita had died of burns in the hospital. The cremation would take place the next day. She was only thirty-two.

Banwari Lal and Yashpal prepared to leave for Bareilly by the night train. Pyare Lal would manage the shop. The women stayed home, as was appropriate.

At home the mother cried non-stop. ‘Why not me? Why not me? What crime have I committed that my child has to go first?’ she wailed. She hit her head repeatedly with her hands while her daughter

in-law looked on, their faces serious and solemn, tears in their own eyes. It could have been them, but for their own more fortunate destinies.

The night meal was sombre. Sushila's maternal responsibilities allowed her to retreat upstairs afterwards. Sona was left to continue the comforting.

'Sleep now, Maji, sleep – you will make yourself ill if you cry like this, and it will not bring her back.'

And then for no reason, no reason but that they were alone and nobody else could see her true colours, the old woman glared at Sona and spat out, 'You think sleep is possible? What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you.'

It took all of Sona's training in daughter-in-lawhood to continue her attentions as though this had not been said. Then, as she had so often, she lay awake at night, going over her mother-in-law's words, gnawing at them, teasing out of them the last shred of bitterness.

All the suffering in the world was not enough to make that woman human. Though grieving, she could still find energy to taunt. She talked of love, but did she know the meaning of the word? If she had cared for her daughter, would she have allowed her to be murdered? Could she believe the lie that her clothes caught fire while cooking? They knew how badly off she was, still they neglected her. If she had a daughter in a bad marriage, she would insist she come home, she had so much love to give.

Here Sona pressed her hands to her breasts: they felt good, large and full, but their weight only increased her wretchedness. How could she accept they would never be used for more than one purpose? She tried to calm herself by praying, closing her eyes to concentrate on her favourite image of God, the little Krishna, looking so naughty, so mischievous, so adorable – please, I am growing old, bless us with a child, girl or boy, I do not care, but I cannot bear the emptiness in my heart.

The adopted son

Sona did not realise her prayers would be answered in two days. Her father-in-law came back with Vicky, ten years old, skin the splotchy brown of mud, large staring eyes, bony knees, neatly oiled hair, spindly legs, and snot that continually ran into his shirt sleeve.

The boy was pushed towards her. With a presentiment of what was going to happen she drew back in revulsion before a word had been exchanged.

‘Maybe it was meant to be like this,’ sighed the patriarch, as the men sat around sipping tea, looking grave, relating the story of their trip. How Murli had received them at the station, weeping steadily, how they had been pushed into the role of consolers rather than accusers, how Murli had said wildly he was going to give up his life, there was no meaning in it any more. How the boy, sobbing hysterically, had begged his grandfather to take him with them. Murli encouraged this. What could he do with a child, alone as he was, poor and distraught?

Perhaps he had already found someone to marry, they speculated darkly, he was always on the lookout for money. And that was the real reason for Sunita’s death.

The two sisters-in-law were able to be more dispassionate. Sushila – mother of sons, her concern about their future claims still too remote to be considered insensitive – could say: might not Murli exploit the child to get money out of the family?

Sona added her weaker voice to Sushila’s suspicion. With a full heart, her eyes red with distress, she hinted that Murli would use the boy to gain entry into the business. She recounted again Sunita’s confidences in Rishikesh. Murli had been bent on using his wife to extort money from the family. She had resisted, and now in deference to Sunita’s wishes, such intentions should be thwarted by returning the boy.

Lala Banwari Lal was unable to bear even the suggestion. They had a moral responsibility towards Sunita’s child. His head was bent, his tears were falling. He would carry the curse of his daughter’s death till the day he died. Had he remained in Lahore, this never would have happened. She would have married into a family of equal status.

His grief further shook the family. What else could they do but cluster around him, soothe him, tell him they would do whatever he wanted?

His wife wept in turn; this child was all that was left of her daughter. The boy, who had been hunched silently over his tea, was now grabbed, clasped to his grandmother’s chest, and rocked violently back and forth till he started crying.

It was decided that at the first hint of financial pressure Murli would have his son back, but then he would remain with them. Where duty to one’s own was concerned, the heart should always be big.

In the days to come it became clear that Vicky fell to Sona’s lot by default. Sushila’s two sons were still small; she had her hands full. Sona’s were palpably empty.

Sona did struggle at this fresh arrangement by the fates for her certain misery.

‘I do not think I will be able to look after him,’ she said to her husband a few days later. The

emotional levels of the house were lower, she could now speak her mind. 'At least send him back to finish the school year. Right now he sits around all day, doing nothing.'

Yashpal smiled lovingly at his wife. 'Yes, we must see about a school here. In the meantime if he does miss a year, how does it matter? It is not as though he is going to be a scholar.'

'Maybe not, but it will add to his discomfort. No child likes to fail.'

'Poor boy, I doubt he will think of it as failure. A new school, a new city, a new home. He has to get used to all this, though only ten. Poor boy,' he repeated, 'he was so glad to come with us.'

'Making use of the goodness of his grandfather and uncle.'

'Sunita's soul will be at peace if we take care of her son; it is all we can do for her. You heard how upset Baoji was. I have only seen him like this when I was very young.'

Lahore again.

'Only daughter, bound to feel it,' was the answer dragged out of Sona. Everything was stacked against her, she could see that. Her husband never reproached her for not having a child, and she was grateful, but did that mean she could be saddled with some dirty boy, and be expected to dance with joy? 'He will miss his mother, he will never accept me. It is better if he is returned to his father. Like this, instead of losing one parent he will lose both.'

'You will make it up to him, I know,' said Yashpal. 'You have such a tender heart.'

She went on trying. 'Isn't it better if he goes upstairs? He will fit in nicely with the children there. As it is, looking after Maji takes all my time. You don't know how it was when you were away. I thought she was going to fall sick, she cried so much.'

Yashpal sighed. 'The boy is orphaned. He needs a mother's special attention. Let him be your child.'

'A borrowed child? Ten years old? From another woman's womb? Tell me, is this what you really want?'

'It is the will of God, what can we do? This is what has been given us.'

Sona felt her chest would burst with pain. Tears gathered on her face. Her husband touched her cheek, and said, 'Sona, you will get used to it. We cannot decide how our prayers will be answered.'

So he had prayed too. She looked at him, her heart melting with anguish. It was for his sake she wanted a child. He was such a good man, why should he be deprived of issue?

For the moment there was nothing more she could say or do. Maybe Rupa, her mind unfettered by Banwari Lal blood ties, would be able to suggest something.

Rupa was no help. 'What can you do, Didi?' she asked. 'You are the one without children.'

Sona glared at her. 'Is that my fault?'

Rupa quickly covered her mistake with her sister's favourite topic. 'That witch upstairs will not take him, instead she will say all kinds of things against you.'

'Ever since that woman has come, my life has been a misery,' responded Sona eagerly.

'Why give her more opportunity to rub salt in your wounds? It may do you good in the long run, Didi. With the family.'

Sona's eyes filled with tears, as she murmured hopelessly, 'I want my own child.'

Rupa stroked her back and murmured, 'Bas, bas, in the end it will be all right. Your time will also come.'

'Never. Your Jijaji says we must acknowledge we will not have our own children. Now he looks at others as his own, first his brother's, then his sister's. I do not understand him.'

'He has accepted the situation, that is all. At least he is not blaming you.'

Sona remained silent.

Rupa said, 'Didi, why have you never considered going to a doctor? You can afford the best medical care. Even God needs to be helped sometimes.'

Sona side-stepped the question, not wanting to reveal how humiliating it would be to be seen as a flawed creature, whose body needed expensive medical aid to perform its natural functions. If her family had wanted it, how willingly she would have put herself in the hands of modern medicine. She had suffered a thousand tests. But strangely her in-laws had never suggested this. Perhaps they wanted to punish her, perhaps they felt she was not worth the money.

Suppose she did manage to go, secretly with Rupa, and there turned out to be something really wrong with her, she would be doomed to live with this weight on her hopeless heart.

'I don't understand you, Didi,' went on her sister, irritated by the way Sona was staring at her perfect white feet, encircled with silver anklets, studded with tiny blue and red meena hearts. 'If you wanted something as badly as you do, I would try everything, not just rely on puja and fasts, which you have been doing for years, with nothing to show.'

'If you are so keen on doctors, why don't you go?' flashed Sona.

'I have accepted my condition, my husband does not hanker after children, he says his sister has enough, he helps with their education, his heart is as big as the sky,' said Rupa, with a pride her sister thought totally unbecoming.

'It is easy to accept when you have no in-laws always making you feel bad.'

'But we have other things to make us feel bad. The tenant upstairs sits on our head, with his schemes and his plans. From before our marriage they are fighting. My father-in-law worries he will die with it unresolved, and *he* feels it is just as well we don't have children who will inherit our problems. At least your house is properly your own.'

Depends on what you mean by properly, thought Sona sourly.

'And,' went on Rupa, still inappropriately exaggerating the difficulties of her life, 'I have to work very hard with the pickles, just to make a little extra money. The case costs a lot, he sends his sister an allowance every month, we even buy the cheapest tickets at the cinema in order to save. If I didn't have this extra income, we would never go anywhere, never go to India Gate, restaurants or film shows, we always sit at home.'

'You are lucky your Jijaji helps you so much with the pickles, making sure they are sold. He takes so much personal interest in grocery shops only to help you, otherwise it is not really his line of business,' pointed out Sona, annoyed that her sister should be talking about the money she made without due reference to her husband.

'We live in your shadow, you know that, Didi,' said Rupa guilelessly.

'He was even saying the other day that later you can supply the local eating-places. Your Jijaji always has very good ideas.'

At this news, Rupa's mind began to race, as many fantasies filling it as might have been justified by the news of a pregnancy. She felt a little ashamed, and said modestly, 'I am so stupid, on my own I can do nothing.'

Sona gave her a sharp look, and said, 'Because you are a woman, with no business background, I feel he should help you.'

'Your husband is so generous, always thinking of others. One day your time will come, Didi, I am sure of it.'

Sona's childless situation continued to make her vulnerable. She was considered to have a fund of

motherly emotion waiting to pour itself into the orphaned Vicky.

‘Bechaara,’ said her mother-in-law to Sona, ~~‘he has only us now. We have to make up for his~~ sorrow in life. It was your kismet not to have children so you could be a true mother to your nephew.

Sona’s position forced her to bear these remarks in silence, but her internal repartee was fierce and pointed: How can I be his mother? Or make up for anything? If it is in my fate not to have children, it is in his not to have parents. I have to accept that as much as he. How can some dirty little street boy be forced on to me as my child? I would rather die.

Oblivious of her thoughts, they reiterated night and day, ‘Beti, now you are his mother. God has rewarded your devotion. Sometimes our wishes are fulfilled in strange ways.’

She was the instrument of their care, and like most instruments she writhed in the hands that wielded her. Dark and vicious thoughts crept up in Sona as she looked at Vicky, the answer to her prayers.

It turned out that his Bareilly education did not equip him for the school his cousins went to. He had to be accommodated somewhere, so he was sent to the poor-quality English medium school around the corner, where learning was crammed into the upper storey of a house, with no playground and certainly no status. If the boy showed aptitude he would be shifted to a better place. Meanwhile Sona could help develop his potential.

The whole family rejoiced that there was something so tangible by which Sona could express her thwarted maternal longings.

With Vicky, Sona had to be on her guard all the time. The house had many eyes quick to detect neglect, and many people quick to attack with their conclusions. As God was her witness, she had nothing against Vicky. But was this dark, ungainly, silent, sullen child any substitute for the baby that was to still the yearning in her heart, that was to suckle from her breasts, and use her ample flesh to her satisfaction? Her blood burned, and though her blood was used to burning, it now raged so fiercely that nothing but her own blood could staunch the flames.

‘Didi,’ said Rupa one weekend, as she was over with a new lot of mango chutney for her brother-in-law to supply to the grocer he knew, ‘how is it with Vicky?’

‘All right,’ said Sona tonelessly.

‘Isn’t the Ganesh Chaturthi fast coming up?’ It was winter, and she was well aware of Sona’s fasting schedule.

‘I’m not keeping it this year. What is the use?’

Rupa clicked her tongue disapprovingly. ‘Don’t be like this, Didi. God is watching; you should be afraid.’

‘I don’t care. I am tired of praying, tired of hoping,’ said Sona bitterly.

Look at me, thought Rupa. I also don’t have a child, or half the other things she has. From the time we were children, she was the special one, always noticed for her fairness, her prettiness, and every day I had to hear how well she would marry, while I would be lucky to find anybody, dark and ugly as I was. For nine years now, I have seen her become more and more depressed. For a condition she shares with me, I have to console her all the time. Beauty is not everything; just as well, or some of us would be left with nothing. ‘Won’t your mother-in-law notice?’ she asked at last.

‘What will she notice? According to them my prayers are answered. Now they are busy making sure that child is a noose around my neck. Why didn’t he die with his mother?’

Rupa examined Sona. She was thinner, her flawless skin had a dull, pallid tone. ‘Didi, you shouldn’t say such things, you are forgetting we cannot always see the purpose of what happens in our lives, maybe this is a test,’ she reasoned, while Sona let tears testify to her state of mind. Rupa started the caressing that was now automatic with her. Poor Sona, if only she could get rid of certain notions her life would be easier. Having Vicky was not such a bad thing, all the boy needed was a little love, he was still a child, and from the same family.

‘Do you want me to keep him sometimes?’ observed Rupa to her sister’s back. ‘He can come when he doesn’t have school, *he* can also help him with his studies.’

Sona shuddered and shook her head. ‘Can you see what they would say?’ she demanded. ‘No, I have thought and thought. I am going to tell your Jijaji that if he doesn’t move to a separate house, I am going to fall ill – you can see how thin I am.’ She held out her arm – the sleeve of the blouse hung from it.

Didi has gone mad, thought Rupa, that is why she is so out of touch with reality. How else can she even suppose that an old-established joint family with a growing business would deflect its time and money, and resources to cater to the whims of a daughter-in-law? ‘Try this mango chutney,’ she said nervously. ‘It is a new recipe, sweet, sharp and salty, you can have it with Chinese also. It will bring back your appetite.’

‘Nothing will bring back my appetite,’ declared Sona firmly, ‘and I know what I am doing. The woman upstairs keeps talking of how the children are growing and need more space, and how we should all move.’

‘*All* move,’ pointed out her sister.

‘I am sure your Jijaji can be made to see reason,’ said Sona, setting her mouth in a pretty red-lipped pout. Rupa wondered how far her beauty would take her. Would it take her out of the house?

Rupa waited in vain for any change in the Banwari Lal household. Sona continued as Vicky’s reluctant mother in her marital home. Obviously she had thought better of a plan that would result in suspicion, resentment, opposition, and further opprobrium.

A few months later a supplier came to the shop with a box of the finest almond sweets Karol Bagh had to offer. The occasion? A baby son, after years. The man was fervent in seeking the blessings of everyone in his life. He talked, and in what he said Lala Banwari Lal found much to ponder.

A few days later he revealed an unprecedented plan for the summer. They were going on a holiday. For one week Pyare Lal would look after the shop, Sushila would look after him, while Yashpal, Sona and the three boys, and the grandparents went to the hills. Among the places they were going to visit was a shrine at Chitai, near Almora. Though the shrine was small it was famous, the Devi of those hills was said to have miraculous powers.

Yashpal added to his wife’s joy by telling her they could include Rupa and her brother-in-law on the trip. A childless couple, they might benefit too.

Sona looked at him, put her hand on his knee and smiled. Yashpal was a man of few words, but she understood everything without his having to open his mouth. In his silent way he was doing what he could for her: he had seen her pain, he had registered her trauma, he too wanted a child of his own. He had found out where to go – the very fact that he was taking Rupa too was a sign of the faith he placed on their journey. And best of all, he was making sure Sushila was left behind. There would be no one’s eye to negate the blessings bestowed by the Devi.

‘I am sure Rupa will be very happy to join us,’ she murmured. ‘She is always talking about how good you are, helping so much with her pickles and chutneys.’

‘Poor woman, she is your sister after all,’ said Yashpal.

‘There is no man like you,’ said Sona, gazing at him, love in her eyes, the desire Vicky had driven away palpably swelling back.

Yashpal drew her soft and yielding mass to himself. His arms around her, he tugged at her lower lip, sucking it. In the morning he knew it would look even redder, and only he would know the reason. This secret made him increase the pressure. Sona’s hand crept to his pyjama tape, the darkness allowed her to do things she never would have if they could see each other. She opened the buttons of her blouse, slithered down, kissing him all the way to finally press her breasts on either side of his erection. Yashpal moaned. Sona took him in her mouth, teasing him with her tongue. The man arched into her, and thought no one on earth could ever be a wife to him but Sona, and he would give his life to please her.

This thought remained with him next morning as they made plans for the trip, and made him insist once again they take Rupa and her husband with them.

Chitai, near Almora.

A little mandir, painted white, in the bend of a road. Pine trees tremble nervously around it. The ground is covered with dry yellow needles. Busloads stop here. The temple is on a raised platform, a tattered red flag waves from its top. All around are bells, innumerable bells, hung on ropes strung between poles criss-crossing the temple courtyard. Big ones, little ones, jammed together till they are silenced.

The door to the mandir is so small that pilgrims have to bend double to enter. Inside, a decrepit old man squats beside the small marble sacred figure. Smoke from a thousand incense sticks colours the dim interior grey. A few diyas flicker, glowing in the haze. Motes of light filter through the cracks in the bodies plastering the entrance.

The stone platform is hot, bare feet burn, the rush to fit inside the shrine is desperate.

Sona, Rupa and Maji come dressed in bridal clothes, red and gold dupattas around them, new glass bangles on their wrists, sindhoor bright in their hair, bindis large on their foreheads. In their hands are trays of offerings for the hill goddess, the goddess with miraculous powers. Ask and she shall give.

Sona asked, as she had been asking for ten years. Rupa must also have asked – certainly her little business continued to thrive, while other things remained the same.

During the trip, Sona felt closer to her husband. It was their first holiday, and with a cunning she could only admire, he arranged two large rooms in the hotel for his parents, Rupa, and Prem Nath, farming out the children between them. They themselves had a small room on another floor – nothing else available, he explained.

Nightly, away from home, family, and shop, Yashpal gave himself over to the pleasures of his wife’s body. Sona had not realised how much difference leisure and a change of location could make to a man’s sex drive.

The three boys also grew friendlier during the one week. Six years older than Ajay, and eight years older than Vijay, Vicky was looked up to by the two boys when given a chance.

Back in Delhi it was easier for Sona to send him to play with them. Vicky’s skill with a cricket bat and his dexterity at gulli danda and pithoo, established his reputation, and by implication raised Ajay and Vijay’s stock in the neighbourhood.

Shortly afterwards Lala Banwari Lal decided they could at last afford a car. Once a week in the

evening, all nine would get into the Ambassador that Yashpal or Pyare Lal drove, and go to India Gate. There the children and the two uncles played badminton, the women took out tiffin carriers, spread food on durries, and bought strings of jasmine buds to put in their hair. After they had eaten they bought ice-cream, and because the shop was doing well, they bought the most expensive, cassata slabs of pink, green and white ice-cream, topped with cream and chopped nuts, on thin paper plates eaten with little wooden spoons.

A few months and Sona could look at Vicky and see a child. Perhaps her luck was going to change (maybe this was a practice run?), she thought superstitiously as she tried to be a mother to the poor orphaned boy.

With three boys in the house Banwari Lal felt the need to cater to their futures by expanding into shawls. Pyare Lal's travelling time increased as he journeyed to the Punjab and Kashmir commissioning shawls from weavers in all varieties: men and women's shawls, plain, fully embroidered, or just with borders; woven in wool, pashmina, or mixes.

Birth

Two months later Sona discovered she had conceived.

‘Maybe it will be your turn next,’ was how she broke the news to her sister.

Rupa received the information stoically. Her mind leaped to the little baby in her sister’s arms, the loneliness that would be hers as the only childless woman in the family. But then Rupa was also fair. She had not suffered like her sister, nor had she fasted and done penance. With only initial difficulty, she smiled and hugged Sona, whispering that not for nothing had she prayed, and looked after Vicky so selflessly. God was rewarding her.

‘I feel it is because of the Devi,’ went on Sona, not wanting to take credit for her pregnancy. ‘I feel a change after we went, didn’t you?’

Yes, Rupa had. She was now supplying pickles and sweet chutneys to local restaurants as well as shops, and had hired a woman to help her. She wished to purchase a car, she wished to go on more holidays, above all she wished she had enough money to buy out the tenant who was causing her husband and father-in-law so much tension. More than an elusive baby, Rupa focused her attention on financial success.

‘We must go again, our trip has been very auspicious,’ she now said.

‘Your Jijaji can’t be travelling all the time,’ said Sona tartly. Really, her sister must learn to be a little more independent, and not be taking her brother-in-law’s generosity for granted.

A storm rose in Rupa’s heart. This was the kind of woman her sister was: cry on her shoulder incessantly, and the minute things improved, she turned her back. Always she had been like that, getting her way in everything because she was pretty. If Sona wasn’t her only relative in the city, she would never bother with her again.

‘See what *he* gave me, when I told him,’ said Sona now, going to her Godrej almirah, unhooking the keys that hung from her waist. ‘Even though I said I didn’t want – *he* insisted,’ and flushing with pleasure, she handed her sister a long, red velvet box.

‘He is so good to you, Didi,’ sighed Rupa, removing the hostility from her mind when she saw her sister take out in addition an almost new silk sari, divining it to be for herself. In the general happiness she too must have her share.

She opened the velvet box carefully. There lay not only a gold filigree necklace but matching dangling earrings. How had Yashpal managed to buy a necklace for his wife, and that too for a recognised occasion, without having to buy one for every other woman in the family? Was Sona’s pregnancy going to divide them? Had Yashpal Bhai Sahib gone mad for love of his wife?

‘Don’t be silly,’ giggled Sona when she asked. ‘It’s just one little necklace.’

‘Not so little,’ said Rupa, taking it out of the box to calculate its heaviness. ‘Must be thirty grams at least.’

‘Thirty-five.’

Worse and worse, thought Rupa, while Sona held the necklace against her sister’s neck in order to admire it more.

‘Does your father-in-law know?’ she persisted.

‘How do I know?’ pouted Sona. ‘Really, Roop, how can you grudge me a bit of jewellery after a

these years?’

Rupa gasped and shut up. If the Banwari Lals were going to be divided over one necklace, it would not be for lack of warning.

But she noticed that Sona never wore the necklace publicly. It remained a private thing hidden between husband and wife.

A pregnancy after ten years in a woman almost thirty had to be guarded, protected, and encouraged. The elders decreed that Sona should not be allowed to deliver at her mother's, as was the custom. Gopi knew what facilities those people would provide – they were not well off, it's better to do everything here.

The next seven months were momentous ones. Sona's diet, her rest, her activities were treated with the greatest of care. Vitamins, minerals, iron supplements, almonds, butter, and milk were showered on her. Her body grew heavy with the weight of two; her round face became rounder and shone like the moon.

She was never allowed to go alone and friendless for her check-ups. Always there was Sushila and the mother-in-law, asking questions, carefully holding Sona's medical file, meticulously inserting the test reports.

‘What does Maji say to you now?’ asked Rupa once.

‘Oh, she has completely changed. She doesn't even let me bend to pick up anything,’ giggled Sona.

‘That's very convenient,’ remarked Rupa, ‘to change from poison to honey just like that.’

‘Oh, she wanted a grandchild. It is understandable,’ replied Sona, taking two glasses of tea from the boy who had been recently hired to help in the house.

‘But that is hardly fair to you,’ flashed Rupa, who after all had been the repository of everything Maji had said through the years, and could neither forgive nor forget so easily.

‘It is the way of the world,’ said Sona, speaking across a divide Rupa had never felt before.

One day, two days overdue, waters burst but no contractions, and Sona was rushed to the hospital. She was put on the drip to induce labour, while the family waited patiently, knowing this would take time.

How often had Sona waited in similar situations. Now it was her turn to be waited for. Let her take her time, let it be as long and as difficult as possible, Sushila, Maji, Rupa, their husbands, all were prepared.

Morally, mentally, emotionally, financially, domestically. One amongst them was dispatched when it was time for the children to come home from school. One received the men in the evening when they came home from the shop. Yashpal himself was shadowed constantly, he could not be left unsupported for even a second.

The waiting period grew tense as it became clear that Sona was not responding to the drip. Even after fifteen hours she had not dilated beyond six centimetres. Rupa sat with Sona throughout, holding her hand, pressing her cold feet, giving her little sips of iced water, wiping her forehead, and listening to her groans.

Finally the doctor said what everybody had suspected all along, but nature had to be given a chance. ‘The baby's heartbeat is recording stress. Sign here for a Caesarean.’

Yashpal signed.

A girl was born.

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