Short Story

That Black Sunday

by

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Illustrations by Babulal Sharma

I am seventy now. At this age, recalling past events from the mortar of memory, with a high degree of accuracy, is an onerous task. My only son has established himself as one of the best lawyers of the district, my only daughter has been suitably married to an engineer, my wife has se-cluded herself in *her puja ghar* (room for worship). After the death of my son's first issue, a boy, a fortnight after his birth, I retired from my profession of defending criminals. I think it is high time to write about Jhumnakaki, a Mundari tribal woman.

To me she was my Jhumnakaki. In fact, I was brought up by her: a tribal woman from a remote tribal village near Khunti, on the tortuous Ranchi-Chaibasa road. She used to feed me my favourite *patpuria* (a tribal recipe of chicken) until I got married; my wife and the Bengali cook (arranged by one of her brothers) then took charge of the kitchen.

My mother had died when I was six years old. I *don't* remember even being fondled by her. Jhumnakaki filled up the vacancy gradually but efficiently with a mother's grace and love. Her entrance into our family of two—my father and myself—is quite a story.

My father, a veteran criminal practitioner of the area, did not marry again after the untimely death of my mother. His love for her was so over-whelming that every morning he would stand silently for quite a while before her garlanded photograph placed on the mantlepiece after lighting few incense sticks.

Later, he would stroll over the many acres of land the family owned that stretched in front out into the far distance from our small castle-like house.

Sometimes he would take me and sometimes he would go on his walk without me. His clients would then start pouring in like summer mosquitoes for his clever counsel. This lasted until he died of a massive cerebral attack. And with his death an era died, an era when sympathy ruled over mundane selfishness, and kindness had not yet become antiquated.

When my father died Jhumnakaki did not cry. She was stunned. It was as if my father's death was something that was not supposed to happen during her lifetime. She remained like a zombie for about a month. Slowly she regained her composure on being consoled for week after week by the bereaved son.

When, one night, my father brought Jhumnakaki to our house, I was only six years old. She was an unattractive dark middle aged woman with tresses awry, wearing a sari that was soiled and torn beyond repair. My father later told me that I was frightened the first time I saw her. She looked like a witch out of one of my comic books.

Later, when I grew up a little more, my father told me the story of that night. He was getting back from Ranchi in the evening after attending a court case there on behalf of one of his countless clients. From the road near Khunti he could see a tribal woman being chased like a mad bitch by a crowd of tribal men armed with axes and other deadly weapons. He stopped the car and got out, holding his black gown on one of his arms and approached the crowd to know what was happening. One of them informed him that the woman they were hounding had been declared a 'witch' by *thepahan* (village priest). They therefore decided to kill her forthwith lest she bring disaster to their village. My father somehow cooled them down with the help of a lawyer's courtliness and the elegance of his black robes. He advised them not to take the law in their own hands. If they were to kill the woman, he predicted that the police would raid their village, arrest them all and put them in jail to rot forever. He suggested to them that it would be wiser to hand over the woman to the police, and get them to do whatever was necessary. If she really wielded such thaumaturgical power as to extirpate or ravage a whole village then, he suggested, they would be better off not taking action themselves. The crowd, under the leadership of the village head, quickly held a short meeting alongside the road. Finally, they acquiesced in my father's proposed course of action.

In those days, people were wont to behold the black coats, black gowns and the white collars of lawyers with awe. My father took the tribal woman in his car, saving her from what appeared to be an inevitable death. He fixed the crowd with a lawyer's stern look and, by a sly bluff, told them that she would be delivered to the nearest police station for her crime. Instead he brought her to our house to look after me as well as our house-hold affairs, which she did till.....

On the way back from Ranchi, my father asked her in Mundari (a tribal dialect of Jharkhand), "Well, I think you would not prefer a police station as your shelter?" She was silent as though dead. "Would you like to stay in my house at Chaibasa?" He asked her again and again. She remained silent. But her dead eyes glistened when my father informed her, "There is a small motherless son of mine in the house... you can take care of him if you like." She nodded promptly. "Henceforth you are my *didi* and my son's *kaki."* My father after saying this paused for a while. Then he asked, "What's your name, *didi!* "Jhumna Kui," she responded. My father felt both proud of his philanthropic act and relieved at the same time, for he needed someone innocent like her to look after his motherless son.

Thus, a tribal woman from an unknown tribal village became my father's Jhumnadidi and my Jhumnakaki the night she entered into the solitude of our family's home. She used to tie a *rakhi* (sacred thread) around the right wrist of my father out of gratitude every year.

My father never repented his lawyer's bluff. He knew that the woman wasn'ta'witch' as the *pahan* and the other tribals of her village claimed. An experienced criminal practitioner, he knew what, in fact, had happened to her.

In Chotanagpur, tribal women are debarred from inheriting landed properties in their traditional

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** **Manushi** had filed a public litigation case in the Supreme Court in 1981 challenging the denial of land rights to tribal women of Chotanagpur and other areas. The case was filed on behalf of Maki Bui, a Ho tribal woman from Singhbhum, who was facing a situation similar to that of Jhumnakaki. Unfortunately, the case was dragged on for years and is still awaiting judgement of the Supreme Court*

inheritance system*. Women who have land rights may live on and cultivate those lands as long as they live. However, they cannot sell this land to anybody, even to another tribal. Even the mighty British did not dare to interfere with their traditional systems when they enacted the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act in 1908. Tribal women of Chotanagpur are left to toil on the land without getting any ownership rights. This patriarchal system also prevails in Santhal Parganas.

Thus, when a tribal woman becomes a widow without any issue, her kinsmen try to expropriate her lands by proclaiming her a 'witch' in connivance with the village priests, who use many types of subterfuge to achieve that purpose. In most cases, many women proclaimed witches are brutally annihilated. The others are driven out from the villages and their in-laws take over the land.

My father was sure that the woman who had run the gauntlet on the road near Khunti was a widow with reckonable landed property. Jhumnakaki later confirmed that he was correct.

When the so-called 'witch', a middle-aged and unattractive tribal woman with an ashen appearance, entered into our house my father told herinherdialect,"Look Jhumnadidi, this motherless son of mine is yours from now on." She came forward and touched my head with tenderness. I don't know why but her touch purged all my fear and shock at first seeing her.

Later, I learnt from her that she had once had a son. He would have been my age had he lived. He drowned in a village pond when he went to learn swimming with other older boys of the village. Her son's accidental death made the villagers look at her obliquely. A week after her son's death, a tribal youth of the same village died of an unknown disease, and a month or so later an old tribal man died following a short sickness. The incidents emboldened those of her kinsmen who stood to inherit the land from her if she died to publicise that she was a 'witch' and responsible for all the deaths in the village. The village *pahan* assisted them by performing some esoteric rituals while sacrificing a cock. He claimed that the trail of the blood of the slain bird led to the house of Jhumna Kui. He then declared that she had killed her own son by eating his *eem* (liver) to complete her course in witchcraft and was now eating the livers of other villagers one by one.

Her story was quite doleful even for a little boy of my age. Nevertheless, her son's tragic death became a weapon which I used to blackmail her for quite a few years. I would say, "Listen Jhumna- kaki, if you don't buy *bairgundi* (powdered dry plums) from the weekly market this time, I'll go to Kuju dam to learn swimming." She would look aghast, shiver with presentiment and scream, "No, no, I'll buy a bagful for you this week." Some days I would ask, "Will you give me some money to buy lozenges, Jhumnakaki?" She would disapprove and say, "Look *beta,* those funny things will create *kida* (ring worm) in your stomach." I would then mutter matter-of-factly. She would soon surrender and start unknotting the end of her sari for coins.

Jhumnakaki was a little intro-verted in the beginning, but with the passing of time she adapted herself to our family and started running the house expertly, save on the occa-sions that she prepared dinners for us on some evenings. She used to order the old Muslim cook from the kitchen. The food would invariably be unpal-atable, and my father would guffaw and say, "Jhumnadidi, you have spoiled a part of your brother's earn-ings today." She would feel hurt but retort "You *babus* (gentlemen) are habituated to eating spicy foods which are not good for your health," and leave the dining room abruptly, promising not to enter the kitchen again. But afterafortnightoramonth she would forget her commitment and prepare yet another punishing dish for us. Her excuse would be, "It is good for health to have less spicy foods occasionally." My father would laugh and quip, "It is rather good for your health to starve occasionally." Jhumnakaki would obviously be grieved by his playful platitude, but then my father would try to appease her, "Oh *didi,* don't take what I said in the wrong way..7. it is in Ayurved don't you know?" She would not know.

But one thing that I remember even today is that my appetite would never ease unless I shared her food from *her pittal ka thali* (brass platter) every afternoon after coming back from school. She would starve waiting for me till then.

I grew into a healthy young man under the care and doting love of Jhumnakaki. My father got me trained to be a fullfledged criminal practi-tioner under his expert tutelage, and a family man as well, before he left me (us) for his dead wife. The last word he pronounced before dying was "Usha", my unknown mother's name. His photo now stands beside the garlanded photograph of mother on the mantelpiece, duly garlanded. Jhumnakaki lit incense sticks for them every morning, after she recovered from the shock of his death. Smita, my wife, relieved her of this duty later.

By that time, Jhumnakaki had be-come quite old—her hair grayed, skin further darkened, teeth decayed and features puckered. She now looked like a real witch, with her humped walking stick my son made out of a bough of the guava tree in our gar-den. She had also become reticent and lost her grip in our family owing to my wife's and, particularly, the new Bengali cook's, brusque behaviour. This started right after my father's death. One day I found her eating her *khana* (meal) on one cor-ner of our inside verandah adjacent to the kitchen. Her brass platter had been replaced by an aluminium one. I asked her about her old platter. She looked up at me, smiled exposing her putrefying teeth, and replied, "That one has become too old *beta... bouma* (daughter-in-law/ my wife) bought this brand new shining one for me." I argued, "This is a cheap one meant for beggars. You should not be asked to eat your *khana* from it." She again looked up at me, again smiled with clemency showing in both her sunken eyes, and said as if to appease her stubborn son, "Don't you worry *beta,* in the past I used to eat *mandi* (cooked rice) from this sort of *thali*... this one reminds me of my lost village."

I did not talk with my wife that nigtht, though she tried to argue, "Listen, she has be-come too old and sick. The cook says she should not use the house utensils any more...." I did not wrangle with her.

Next morning, before going to the court, I told her, "Tell your cook to stay out of Jhumnakaki's affairs, otherwise I'll kick him out of the house.... She must get back her old brass platter." Jhumnakaki did.

Smita, my over cautious wife, who belonged to a Calcutta-based aristocratic Bengali family, never tried to accommodate herself with Jhumnakaki from the very beginning, even when my father was alive. To her she was a *buno* (wild) tribal woman, who could eat human flesh (I am sure she never read Sanjib Chattopadhay's Palamau in her life). But though Jhumnakaki was urged to retire from our household affairs bit by bit with the help of the new mischievous cook (arranged by one of her brothers) my wife never dared to think that Jhumnakaki was someone from outside the family passing her last days on food provided by her and her husband. My affection and sense of gratitude to Jhumnakaki had never shrivelled by an iota. I was not ungrateful, nor was she. She never forgot that my father had saved her life once.... once upon a time. Perhaps that was the reason Jhumnakaki never took exception to my wife's attitude towards her and her occasional contemptuous comments. She had mellowed enough staying in a cultured Bengali family to understand that my wife was a part of me, mother of the children begotten by me. The two children were the light of Jhumnakaki's eyes. And step by step, while she was made to detach herself from the house, and the children, as much as ever she doted on me.

Whenever I would come back tired and worn from the labyrinths of different courts in the town and outside the town, her yellowish eyes would blink with sorrow. Some evenings she would gracefully enter

into our bedroom without caring about the fire in my wife's eyes, and implore, "Khokabeta, I've prepared some neem oil; shall I massage your aching back?" I would gratefully exclaim, "Oh Jhumnakaki, you are so great!" dexterously ducking the fire-arrows from my blueblooded wife. That night Smita would sleep with the kids in the other room. She hated the smell of neem oil. In fact, neem oil meant Jhumankaki to her. But to me it was more enjoyable to have an expert massage than make occasional love to my patrician and snobbish wife to her satisfaction.

Affection, like some dangerous disease, is perhaps hereditary. Our two children, a son and a daughter, were also very fond of Jhumankaki, despite her witch-like looks. They would spend most of their time with her without being disturbed at the eeriness of her features, and despite my wife's numerous warnings. Jhumnakaki would chaperone them to their school, wait somewhere outside till the last bell would ring *chhootti,* and come back home with them as if she too were a student. The Bengali cook, whom we Bengalis call 'thakur,' would say with banter in his voice,"Boudi, that old studentof yours has come back from the school with the little ones," and mutter in a monologue, *"kenoje budi morey na?* (why does the old woman notdie?). Hisfiowdz would come out to receive and hug the children and Jhumnakaki would drift away silently, having completed her duty.

Our kids were happier in Jhumnakaki's propinquity than in ours — the parents. I had taught them to call her 'Jhumnadidi' but they preferred to call her 'granny' (they might have learnt the word from their English medium school), and they played *Chore-poolish* (hide and seek)

with her. Each time they made her the police whose task it was to seek them out from their hideouts. The cook would inform my wife with a serious face that some day the kids would catch some nasty disease from that *nongra budi* (dirty old woman). My wife would, quiver with foreboding (she is susceptible to that till today) and entreat me to do something... send Jhumnakaki back to her native village. I would laugh archly and quip back, "Well, why don't you entrust your cook with the job of tracking her village down?" She would turn her back in a rage.

One afternoon Jhumnakaki bought some *bairgundi* from the lo-cal *manglahaat* (weekly market) out of her weekly allowance and gave them to the kids to eat. They started to eat, relishing the stuff, but the cook intercepted them, seized the *thonga* (packet) despite violent pro-tests from the kids, and handed that over to my wife with the warning that her children were now going to have diarrhoea for sure. My wife rebuked Jhumnakaki with rude words, though she tried .to defend herself and the kids by saying, "Lis-ten *bouma, khokabeta* too used to...." But Smita did not wait for her to complete the sentence.

That night too my wife complained—"Do something...do some-thing." And, for the first time in our nuptial life, I burst out at her in anger, "What can I do anyway? In which law is it writ that if a grandmother dotes on her grandchildren, she should be put into jail forever?" But Smita was not intimidated at all. She retorted, "How can a *buno* tribal woman be the grandmother of *my* children?" I shot back more viciously, "Ask them — they are *your* children and not mine," and turned my back, twisting the mattress of the innocuous bed.

Nevertheless, it was adjudicated that after a month Jhumnakaki ought to be put in jail forever.

That was a Sunday. Yes, it was. I clearly remember the day; the children skipped much of lunch that day though the flavour of the cooked mutton was overwhelmingly mouth-watering. They ate a couple of spoonfuls of rice with the curry and sneaked away a few pieces of mutton.

The detective cum cook, made available by one of my brothers-in-law, discovered them within fifteen minutes. They were blithesomely eating rice from the *thali* of that *nongra budi* in the garden under the shade of a mango tree. This informa-tion was delivered to my wife with sufficient spices to inflame her ears. She looked at Jhumnakaki with hate, slapped the children, and cautioned them for the final time not to mix with their so-called 'granny'. The children were appalled, not for themselves but for their defenseless and assailable granny. Jhumnakaki had not tried to argue that her *Khokabeta* also used to ....

That night the children fell sick. They vomitted out all the food they

had eaten, including some undigested red chillies. Vomitting continued till they became completely feeble and dehydrated. I had to call in a doctor who in a doctorly manner declared that it was due to some bacterial infection. My wife looked at me with you know what kind of expression in her penetrating eyes. The kids were given saline water throughout the night.

They recuperated within a couple of days, but my wife did not allow Jhumnakaki to enter their room. Only once after I interceded did she let Jhumnakaki in for a while to see the kids. They smiled seeing her, painstakingly stretching their dry lips. But by then I had clearly understood that my intermittent interventions would do no good for Jhumnakaki. She would be even more badly treated while I would be away in the courts. I would never know about the maltreatment, for I knew Jhumnakaki would never mention it to me.

Both nights that the children were ill Jhumnakaki spent sleeplessly loitering in the gar-den with her humped walking stick. I heard her humming some tribal prayers for my wife's children. The sky was cloudy for those two nights, but it did not rain.

The impact of these unwarranted events left me isolated. It was as if I had been jettisoned from a ship and somehow managed to reach an island where no human being ever lived. I was helpless and disconnected from the world around me. I had none to beg counsel of save my own battered soul.

I knew that Jhumnakaki was not responsible for the childrens' sickness. That was a coincidence. I had seen the kids eating furtively from the platter of Jhumnakaki several times in the past. I never objected for in my own childhood I had done so myriad times, often in the presence of my generous father.

I could do away with the calumnious cook, who, being a Bengali, was unmistakably envious of an old and ugly tribal woman's graceful status in a Bengali family (because of me, of course). But that too would not do any good now; he had instilled plenty of poison into my wife's ears to make Jhumnakaki responsible for anything bad and baleful that would happen in the house henceforward.

I could censure Smita for her misdemeanours towards Jhumnakaki, but that too would not usher in any real change in Jhumnakaki's fate. My wife is a typical Bengali mother, who can brook any amount of contumely for the welfare(?) of her children. And, more-over, I was never oblivious that being a mother she had endured the pain of giving birth to the children and there-fore deserved more access to them than any one else. Being the only daughter-in-law of the family, she had played a perfect *requiescat* for my parents, starting and sedulously running a Mohtessori school, Usha-Kiron, named after them. I was grateful to her.

I could not stop the kids from mixing with their beloved 'granny' lest they hurt themselves psychologically and become introverts. And I could never imagine sug-gesting to Jhumnakaki that she have nothing to do with the kids, who were the twinkle in her hollowed eyes and the peace of her sinless soul. I remember my own childhood; a tribal lullaby (like her tribal prayer for my sick children) still rever-berates in an obscure niche of my heart, though I do not know what the words she sang meant.

Illustration: Bulbul Sharma

I had only one choice open to me: Jhumnakaki had to go. It was impossible for me to see her sinking into the ocean of degradation inch by inch. She was implanted in this house as a graven image by my father decades ago.

I started my car the following

Sunday without consulting with my wife. I went to Baipi, a village seven kilometers away from the town, to see sister Amla Me. She administers an old age home, one of Mother Teresa's numerous philanthropic organisations. I talked to her, disclosed everything, and she agreed to take my Jhumnakaki from me forever.

I bought three saris, two petticoats, a rug for winter, a small steel trunk and an elegant looking walking-stick for Jhumnakaki. (Perhaps to try to remove my family from her life.) I somehow man-aged to confide to her that she would have to leave for a *buddaghar* near the town within three days. She looked up at me with her sunken eyes, exuding compassion for me and calmly said, "Don't you worry *beta*, it is time for me to go." She silenced herself for a mo-ment, then whispered, "I knew it, *khokabeta*... I knew it." I lowered my eyes. I did not deserve the compassion any more. I had be-trayed both her and myself. I had betrayed the faith of my father. Yet, I tried to say, as if to assuage my own wound, "Jhumnakaki, please, I shall come to see you every Sunday with the kids, your grandchildren." Her eyes glistened for a fraction of a moment.

Jhumnakaki left us precisely three days later. Her shrunken dead body was found under the same mango tree where she had her last joyful meal with the kids that black Sunday. I looked at her dead face. Suddenly it occured to me that she had been driven out from her house once again for the second and last time in her life.

I was 35 years old then. I did not cry. But I was astonished at my blue-blooded wife. She was consoling her sobbing children, and there was a tear in her eyes - for a *buno* tribal woman. The cook stood like a statue beside her. ❐