STORY

A Pair of Ears

Shauna Singh Baldwin

BALVIR arrives before dawn, and the double gates at the foot of the driveway are locked. I tell him it was my fault for sleeping so soundly he'd had to wait outside, but he shouts at my Mem-saab instead.

This man I knew as a beardless boy towers over his mother and shouts - though he could be yawning or yelping for all she knows - he shouts, "You knew I was coming and you tried to lock me out of my father's house!"

"You should be more respectful." I come between them. "She is an old woman left without a man to protect her."

This is to shame him, so he will remember he is a man, and her youngest son. A son whose duty it is to protect her. But he looks at me as though I am only a pair of ears for his mother.

"Go sit in the kitchen, Amma." he says, but I can see Mem-saab is grateful. Balvir calls *Khansama* (cook) and tells him to take his suitcase to his father's old room.

I take Mem-saab her silver water glass and her pills and she gives me a message, "Tell him I am not signing any more papers. I already gave him twenty-five percent of this house last time he came."

I think: Balvir and Jai have decided not to wait till my Mem-saab has gone.

"*Khansama*," I call. "Serve Mem-saab her breakfast." I can't deliver her message; Balvir has locked himself in his father's room. I can hear him inside, unpacking.

"What does he want you to sign?" I ask her. "He wants me to give *all* of this house to him and Jai so they don't have to pay taxes when I die."

"What will they do with this house?" I ask. *Khansama* will need to know - he has four children and a wife in the one-room servant's quarter behind the big house. For myself, I can go back to Jagadri and live with my Leela. Maybe I will even become a Hindu again; sometimes I need more Gods than one, and more than ten Gurus for inspiration.

"They will make Condos," she says.

"What is Condos?"

"Tall buildings," she explains. But I can tell she doesn't quite understand the word either. Mem-saab studied up to class eight before her marriage, which is more than I ever did. At sixteen, the *chauthi-lav* of the marriage ceremony ringing in her jewelled ears, she came wrapped in red silk to ornament her husband's home. I came later, when I was widowed and she had need of my ears. For thirty rains since - perhaps longer, for there were seasons when the rains deserted us - I've only needed to know the art of massage and the timing that turns flattery to praise.

"And where will we live then?" I ask. "Balvir says I should live in a smaller house. He says he is becoming concerned about me here - such a big house ...alone ... with my poor health." she replies.

Balvir's 'concern' is like a *kisan's* for a crop of jute - how much can be harvested and how much will it bring? And she is not alone - I and two other servants are here with her, but we are nothing...

She sighs, "Amma, Money - the very prospect of Money - is changing my sons." Changing? I can remember Balvir at fifteen, whipping a tonga horse who could go no faster. And his elder brother, Jai, closing his eyes in silence till the job was done. I can remember Balvir at twenty, laughing loud at a barefoot beggar who dived into a ditch - full of slime escaping the swerve of his car. And Jai in the front seat with him, calculating the amount they would need for a police-bribe to forget the poor man's life - should it come to that.

"How true, how true." I reply.

A good Amma forgets almost as much as she remembers.

Once, I gave Balvir and Jai all the love my own children needed. I told them stories my Shiv should have been told, and gave them all the blessing and hopes I could have given to Leela. Leela and I said little to each other when I went home for her wedding. She understands - I get tea in the morning and two meals a day, and but for this work, she would have had no dowry.

I must have been a weak Amma; Balvir is an exporter sending scraps

of clothing that would barely cover a child to faithless women in abroad. And Jai - instead of becoming a doctor so he could cure the pains that strike his mother every time she climbs the stairs, Jai is an astrologer in abroad - divining if the prices of things will go up or down and will we have too much of one thing and not of another. Even his old Amma knows prices go up and there is never too much of anything, only less of all good things, more of all bad things in the age of *Kalyug*. So much money spent on his education and he cannot even tell me if Shiv will do well and love me when I can no longer give him money. Foolish mothers like me make astrologers rich.

"Where is Balvir now?" Mem-saab asks.

I listen. I can hear Balvir, trying on a dead man's silk ties and turbans.

"He is unpacking now," I say to Mem-saab.

"Stand here while I eat." Her order is a plea. Perhaps there are things Balvir cannot say to his mother in the presence of a servant.

When she has finished, I call "*Khansama*, tell the driver to bring Mem-saab's car." When the driver has taken her shopping, I wash her heavy silk *salwar kameezes* and soft widow-white *dupattas*, and I hang them on the second floor terrace to dry. Then, using as little water as possible, I bathe and wear cotton.

I hear Balvir send *Khansama* to get him a taxi, and then he is gone.

●

"The suitcase was heavy," *Khansama* says in the kitchen.

Khansama forgets sometimes that he is just a servant. He forgets even more often that there can be honor only from serving those who have honor. He has too much desire, too many expectations, like all young men these days.

"How much did he pay you this time?" I ask.

"Full five hundred rupees."

Half a month's pay just for carrying a suitcase? He fans himself with the notes. He's forgotten to wear the topee to his uniform and Mem-saab will find his black hair in the curry tonight. When Sardarji was alive *Khansama* learned to make dinners like those served in the five-star hotels - rich curries with chicken and mutton swimming in layers of pure butter-ghee. That was only six rains ago, but even then I had become too old to stomach the leftovers - Mem-saab couldn't eat such food either; that's when I started giving food to *Khansama*.

"Only a fool would accept dirty money." He examines the notes carefully, holding them up to the sunlight. They are worn in the centre, but acceptable; he has no wit to know what I mean.

"He says he will bring his *beevi* and son and they will move in here, too."

"Here?"

"Where else? You too are becoming deaf" he says.

"There are only two bedrooms upstairs here, where will they live?"

The Embassy-walla tenant lives in the five bedrooms on the ground floor below us - if Balvir moves in downstairs, Mem-saab's monthly income will be gone.

"Balvir says he will build more rooms on the terrace," says *Khansama*. He looks happy; to those who follow him, Balvir can be the smile of Krishna and Ganesh, all in one.

"Are you finished?" he asks.

He wants me to let him use the sugar I need for my second cup of tea.

"No." I will not give away any more of Mem-saab's food. Nothing sweet, and no more of her salt than I can help, till I know the price of *Khansama*'s heart.

●

Mem-saab returns from her shopping without parcels or bags, eyes red and swollen. She stops several times to rest as she climbs the narrow staircase and I call for *Khansama* to serve her lunch. I stand by her as she eats and then prepare her bed for her afternoon nap.

When she falls asleep at last, I can go up to the terrace and smoke. Leaning over the latticed cement, I light the tan leaf of a bidi and blow the smoke out and down to the Embassy-walla's lawn. Mem-saab will smell *tamakhu* anyway and tell me I must try to be a better Sikh.

I watch from the terrace in case Shiv's round face appears at the iron gates; every few months he comes to pay me respect and I tell him his eyes will roll around like marbles in his head if he spends more years tending machines that copy foreign music cassettes for sale. It takes him three hours each way from Okhla, and food is expensive - whenever he comes, I give him money and later Mem-saab tells me he uses me and I should make him fend for himself. But Shiv is a good son - he does not shout at his mother like Balvir.

When she wakes from her nap, Balvir is still gone.

"I will give you a massage and you will feel better." I offer.

She allows me to draw the curtains in her room and bring a steel bowl of warmed mustard-seed oil. Sweeping the line of her back with my strong hands, I talk about old times when children lived with their parents, and then parents with loving caring children. My massages take a long time; anything important should be done slowly.

I help her to be beautiful, even though she is a widow and her ears hear no sound. I bring water for her to wash her face - a face like the milk-tea I made for her children, not

shisham wood-brown like my skin in the mirror behind her. She takes black *kajal* pencils from my hands to make eyebrows, and I tell her how beautiful they look.

Her hair, resting in my palms as I braid it, is the colour of spent fire-coals. My hair is orange-red in the mirror now - I buy one egg a month for myself and mix its soft bubble yolk with dark henna powder and water that has known the comfort of tea leaves.

Mem-saab goes to the door of her husband's room and feels the padlock, weighing its coldness in her soft hands. She looks over her shoulder at me and there is fear in her eyes.

"Did he say when he would be back?"

"No, Mem-saab."

"Let me know as soon as you hear him arrive."

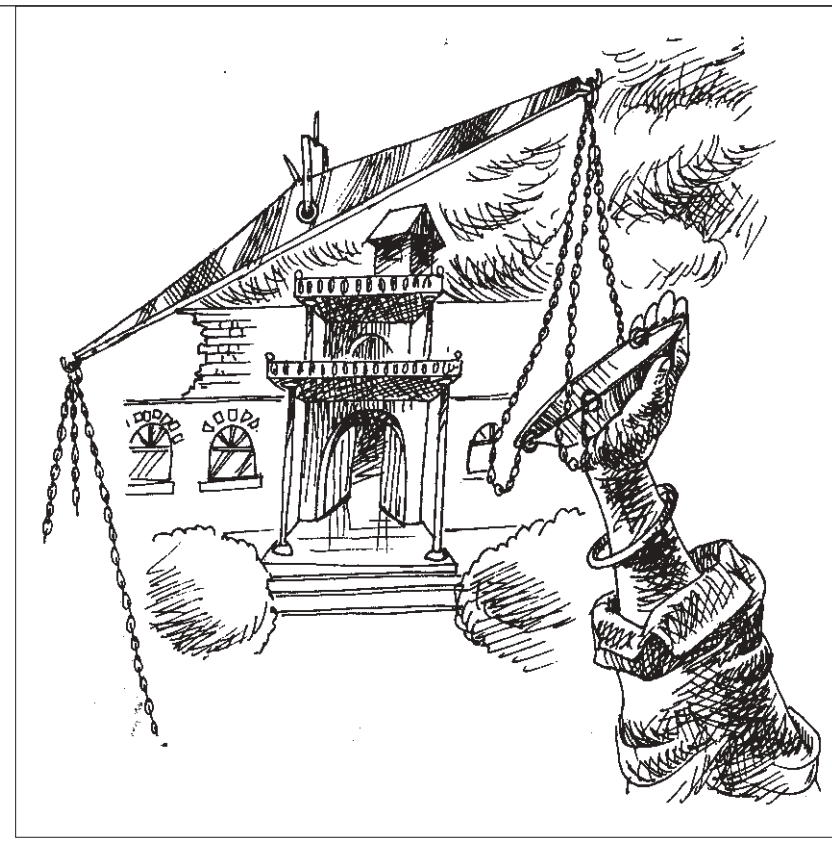
"Will you have dinner together?" I ask. We can pretend she knows the answer; *Khansama* will need to know how much food to make.

"Make enough for two," she says.

When I lead Mem-saab out in the evening for a walk, I am her ears on the street.

"Hilloh," I say to the Embassy-walla tenant downstairs, just like Jai calling from abroad on the phone. The Embassy-walla folds his hands strangely, holding them far from his heart. He takes the word as Mem-saab's greeting, and does not realize I mean "move out of the way, my Mem-saab is coming." If the Embassy-walla forgets to speak Hindi I cannot help her, and they stand for long minutes, smiling.

At Jorbagh market, I keep her from the tooting of the three-wheeled scooter-rickshaws and tell her the prices the fruit-seller asks. When she turns her face away so that she cannot read my lips anymore, it is my signal to tell the fruit- seller that is her rock-bottom price. She takes very little money with her - just a few notes tied in the corner of her *dupatta*, so that Balvir and Jai will inherit more of their father's wealth. Even so, she always gives me a little to buy an offering of marigold garlands at the Hindu temple and she waits outside in the shade while I ring the bell before Ganesh and ask him to smile upon my distant children. When I emerge she offers a gentle chide, "Amma, Vaheguru also answers old women's prayers."



Later, when she has put color on her cheeks and her lips are hibiscus-red, she is ready to receive relatives. Ever since she lost her ears, Sardar and Sardarni Gulab Singh, Sardar and Sardarni Buta Singh - people her husband helped when a Partition refugee's application lay between them and the begging bowl - are the only ones who still come to pay her respect.

They touch her feet in greeting - she represents her husband for them, it reassures them they come from a good family. It's been a long time since Balvir or Jai touched her feet - or mine.

"Amma," they say. It gives them status to call me Amma - old servants are rare these days - only good families have them. Today *Khansama*'s white uniform jacket is crumpled and he wears its nehru collar insolently unhooked, but Mem-saab does not order him to change it before he wheels in the brass trolley-cart crowned with a wobbling tea cosy. She talks to her relatives in English about his 'stealing' - as always she says she will send him and his family back to his village.

She is ashamed to tell her relatives about the lock on her husband's room, and the suitcase that says Balvir is staying for as long as it takes to break her again.

●

I have made sweet white *rasgullas*

to serve after dinner, but I should have made Balvir eat them before the meal to sweeten his words.

"You are getting so old, you cannot make up your mind about anything," he tells Mem-saab. He remembers to speak slowly, but it is always difficult for her to lip-read men with mustaches and beards.

I leave out the part about being old, when I repeat for her - she is younger than I, after all.

Mem-saab gestures for me to offer him more of *Khansama*'s curry.

"Your father told me never to move from this house," she says. "You know, we built it together, selling the jewelry we escaped with during Partition. I can still see him walking with me through these rooms the first time, telling me this house would replace all we had lost. Perhaps you are right that I cannot decide anything, Balvir, but you know..." with an apologetic smile,"...your father always decided everything for me."

Balvir scrapes the serving spoon around the bowl. He is too old for me to tell him not to be greedy.

"If your business is not doing well, Balvir, I can give you money. What more do you and Jai need?"

As always she is too mild with her youngest.

Balvir rocks back in his father's chair, taking her measure through half- closed eyes. Then, he lets its legs thump to the carpet and he shifts. A mongrel, kicked away once, will attack afresh. And from behind.

He mouths without sound, so that I too have to lip-read his words, "Today, I made arrangements with a construction company. Tomorrow they will begin building two bedrooms on the terrace for Kiran and Manu and myself to move here and live with you."

Mem-saab looks at me; I shake my head as if I have not understood. He repeats it, mouthing clearly so she cannot mistake his words.

She gestures for me to offer him a *chappati*.

"Why?" she asks, wary.

Balvir's strong dark hands close around the softness of the *chappati*. He tears a small piece from its slack circle. Then another and another. Intent as a counterfeit yogi, he tears every piece smaller and smaller.

"I will take care of you in your old age, Mama," he says.

She reads the words from his lips. They are what she wants to read, and she cannot hear the threat that vibrates in the promise.

Her breath comes faster. "It will be nice to have company; I have felt so alone since your father left us."

White shreds of *chappati* grow to

a pile before Balvir. The handles of a silver salver I hold out to him feel as though they will burn through my serving cloth. I come level with his eyes. They are grey-white of peeled lichees with beetle-back brown stones at their core.

Dinner is over.

I return the salver to the sideboard with a clatter. I think I will give the *rasgullas* to *Khansama*, instead.

●

The next morning Jai calls from abroad. I answer the phone and tell him Mem-saab is well. I say this though she breathed through the night as though a grateful child might emerge in the morning.

I have always had a sleeping mat on the floor in Mem-saab's room at night, but since the anti-Sikh riots two rains ago, she is afraid she will not hear a mob of Hindus breaking down the gates, so I sleep closer now, on a woolen foot-carpet beside her bed.

In the evening, Sardar and Sardarni Gulab Singh come to the gates and they find them closed, though I have made Mem-saab beautiful and she is waiting upstairs. I hear *Khansama* tell them Mem-saab went to tea at the Delhi Golf Club with her son Balvir - and I start down the stairs to correct him.

"How nice of him, he is looking after his mother. Such a fine son." I hear Sardar Gulab Singh say. Helpless, I watch his Bajaj scooter putt-putt away, with Sardarni Gulab Singh seated erect and side-saddle behind.

Khansama smiles as he turns from the gate, and I see him look at a new watch on his wrist; Balvir does not like poor relatons.

"He's always been a generous boy." Mem-saab says of the wristwatch. "What a misunderstanding. I'll tell Balvir he must phone them to apologize. Put on the TV, Amma - tell me what other mothers and their sons are doing."

I watch Balvir for three days, but he does not call Sardar Gulab Singh to apologize.

●

The construction men pound above us. The walls on the terrace rise higher and higher.

A fine grey cement dust settles on the furniture and I tell *Khansama* to dust the painting of Balvir's father above the mantle twice a day. I am still hoping the old man's steady gaze will shame his son and his daughter-in-law, but last night, when Balvir was drunk enough, and he thought no one

was listening, he raised his glass to his father and said, "What does a widow need with all that money?"

I heard him.

Not once since Kiran and Manu arrived has the family sat at table with my Mem-saab. *Khansama* has orders to serve Balvir and Kiran morning tea in 'their' bedroom. Kiran says she cannot accompany Mem-saab for shopping because her taste is so different. Instead, she orders Mem-saab's car and driver almost everyday - to visit her friends, she says. Mem-saab gives the driver money for petrol and tells him to treat Kiran with respect. And she even admonishes me, though gently, as Kiran squeals I broke all the plastic half-circles in her brassieres when I washed them.

Every day at tea time, Balvir tells her they are too busy to sit with her and talk. He's not too busy to to talk all day on the phone to Bombay - when the phone bill comes Mem-saab says nothing, but takes a taxi to Grindlays Bank to get the money to pay it.

He's not too busy to entertain every evening, buying whisky in cases on his mother's account at the market. Every night Balvir makes *Khansama* bring them Mem-saab's best crystal and all of them put their feet up on Mem-saab's polished teak tables and her sofas. He and Kiran sit in Mem-saab's drawing room with their raucous white friends - he calls them 'buyers' - long after decent people have gone to bed. Once he made a buyer stay two hours longer just because Kiran gave a bad-luck sneeze as the man rose to leave.

Mem-saab sits in her bedroom for long hours at a time. Before her is the picture of the Sikh guru executed by Aurangzeb for his defence of the right of all Hindus to worship - Guru Tegh Bahadur. The Guru's tortured bleeding trunk straddles a white steed, carrying his severed head aloft in defiance. Her lips move, soundless, before the martyr's image. I think even Sikhs sometimes need images to witness their tears.

"Shall I bring oil for your massage?" It is all I have to offer.

"Not today, Amma. My chest is hurting."

When Kiran breaks a glass bangle, Balvir buys her a new gold one saying, "You mustn't bring bad luck to me by breaking bangles." I begin to notice the disappearance of things familiar. Fine vases have found their way to 'their' room, a china rose that Mem-saab brought back from abroad

is no longer in the sideboard. A set of silver candlesticks vanishes. A mirror with a golden frame is replaced by a cheap Rajasthani silk painting smelling of the street-hawker's bundle. An ivory miniature departs in gift paper for Kiran's mother.

When I tell Mem-saab, she says it must be *Khansama*, stealing again. Then she turns her head away so she cannot read my answer.

"Go away, Amma," she says. "I am going to write to Jai."

●

Once, I rejoiced with Mem-saab when Balvir called from Bombay to tell us he'd had a son. At Manu's naming, I took him in my arms and I showed him proudly through the gates, to my Shiv. I had expected Mem-saab to send me to Bombay so I could massage his baby limbs or feed him gripe water, but Kiran was poo modern for that.

Visiting Mem-saab, he fell once - as children do - and I'd swabbed Dettol on his wound. Direct from the bottle, just as I always had for his father and Jai. Kiran confronted me, bottle in hand, scolding I would kill him with pain, and didn't I know Dettol must be diluted with water? How would I have known - the directions were written on the white label in English. She'd taken Manu from me to sit before the TV.

And here the boy sits - as though he'd never moved, just grown so a sky-blue turban bobs above the sun-bleached gold silk sofa. A strange boy, still beardless, who needs video-boxes from the market to tell him stories of men and women pale as the Embassy-walla downstairs.

He does not rise as she enters her own drawing-room.

"Manu," she says. "Go tell the driver to bring my car."

He shouts, facing her so she reads him, "Amma, tell Driver to bring the car."

Mem-saab says gently, "No, Manu, dear. You go and tell the driver to bring my car. The video can wait."

The boy turns his head, but he does not move.

"You can't order me around. Daddy says you're nobody."

Offspring of a snake! I stand silent with shock.

Mem-saab looks at me, "What... what did he say?"

I turn to her and speak the words slowly, just as the boy said them.

She comes around to face Manu. A small hand grips his arm above the

elbow.

"I said, go and tell the driver to bring my car. Amma has to prepare to go with me."

The boy shakes off her hand, but he goes.

In the car Mem-saab says, "Amma, we are going to meet a lady-lawyer."

●

The lady-lawyer has an office in the one-car garage attached to her home. She wears a starched white tie dangling lop-sided on a soiled string, above the plunge of her sari-blouse neckline. Her skin would spring to the touch, like my Leela's - she seems too young to have read all the maroon books that line the walls of the garage.

The lady-lawyer listens to Mem-saab with weary though gentle respect; too many women must have cried before her. I sit on the floor while they sit in chairs, and I massage Mem-saab's leg through her salwar as she speaks, so she will know there is someone who cares.

Mem-saab speaks in Punjabi, as she does when there are private matters to be said. She ignores my usual signal to lower the strength of her voice and her outrage assaults us, drowning the rattle of the straining air-conditioner. I content myself with interjecting a word or two in Hindi occasionally, for the lady-lawyer.

Though I am still her ears, Mem-saab has seen much that I - and maybe Balvir too - had thought she denied.

When Mem-saab has no words left, the lady-lawyer sees Mem-saab's embroidered hanky has turned to a useless wet ball and she offers her own. She tells me to tell her, "Be strong, I will try to help you."

Mem-saab's hand seeks mine and grips it. Her fingers are cold despite the close heat.

Now the lady-lawyer talks directly to Mem-saab. She tries to speak slowly, but I have to repeat her words sometimes for Mem-saab to read them from my lips.

"You say your son now owns twenty-five percent of your house?"

Mem-saab looks at her from beneath her black penciled arches, expecting reproach.

"Yes."

"Then, legally, he can occupy the premises."

That is not what she wishes to read, so I have to repeat it.

The lady-lawyer continues,"We can charge that he gained his rights by putting you under duress. And if you wish to stop him from building, we can ask the court to do that."

"Nothing more?" says Mem-saab.

I want to tell the lady-lawyer to make Balvir and Kiran and Manu evaporate like the first monsoon rain on a hot tar road, but I am just a pair of ears for my Mem-saab and this is her family matter, and now our triangular exchange has faltered.

Nothing more.

Mem-saab writes a check and signs a Vakalatnama appointing the lady lawyer to begin her *mukadma*. She leans heavily on my arm as I lead her back to car.

●

Mem-saab is lying on her bed. The effort of getting dressed seems to have exhausted her today.

Balvir is angry. Through the keyhole, I see him waving the papers that the lady-lawyer caused to be sent him.

"This is the thanks I get for giving up my business in Bombay, for moving my family to Delhi to live with you. How could three people live in Sardarji's old room? If you didn't want me to build, you should have just told me so."

I have locked Mem-saab's bedroom door and he rages outside.

"I'll never try to help you again, Mama. You just wait and see. I'm going to have to defend this case and *you'll* be the one to be sorry."

"*Khansama*," I call. "Mem-saab will take breakfast in her room."

Now I see Balvir swallow hard, changing course, "Amma, tell her she has made a mistake, bringing this kind of money-hungry woman into our private business." He means the lady-lawyer.

I mouth his words for her, without sound.

She turns her head away; there is refuge in deafness. Sometimes I think the old custom of burning widows on their husbands' funeral pyres spared widows like Mem-saab from the dangers of living unprotected.

She is breathing fast and hard again. Time is not on our side of the locked bedroom door.

●

At the court hearing, the lady-lawyer wears a black robe that covers the swirl of her sherbet-pink sari and her voice, in English, is shrill and indignant for Mem-saab. I sit beside Mem-saab on a chair, though keeping my distance so everyone will know her to be born high on the ladder of Karma.

The judge is called Milord, just like in the Hindi movies we watch on Sundays, but the people in his court are not respectfully absorbed in the proceedings as they are in the films... I think the judge listens more attentively to Balvir's lawyer, a ponderous man with spectacles and plenty of uniformed peons to bring him notes and files.

I count eighteen fans humming on long slender stems, flowers twirled between unseen fingers, cooling the crowd in the high-ceilinged room. Mem-saab is waiting for Balvir to come to her, put his arms around her, say he will really look after her, say he and Kiran will be kind... but Balvir's turban never tilts toward her once; no one can churn butter from soured milk.

Afterwards, the lady-lawyer comes to my Mem-saab and takes her hands.

"The judge has decreed there will

be a stay order. Status Quo."

Mem-saab looks at me but I don't know how to say the English words. She turns back to the lady-lawyer and offers her a slip-pad and pencil so she can write them down.

Mem-saab reads the English writing and draws her eyebrows together. The lady-lawyer writes some more. Mem-saab repeats the words aloud, in Hindi, "He cannot build the rooms but I cannot tell him to go back to Bombay?"

The lady-lawyer nods. "His lawyer said he had no place to live in Bombay. Balvir said hat you gave him part of your house as a gift to entice him to Delhi - to 'look after' you."

Mem-saab puts the slip-pad back into her purse. She shakes her head slowly. She does not have enough breath today to discuss Balvir's lies.

"What has been gained?" I ask.

"Time," says the lady-lawyer.

She helps my Mem-saab to rise. I follow them out to the car, Mem-saab's pashmina shawl on my forearm. There is some satisfaction in knowing Balvir will have to take a taxi.

●

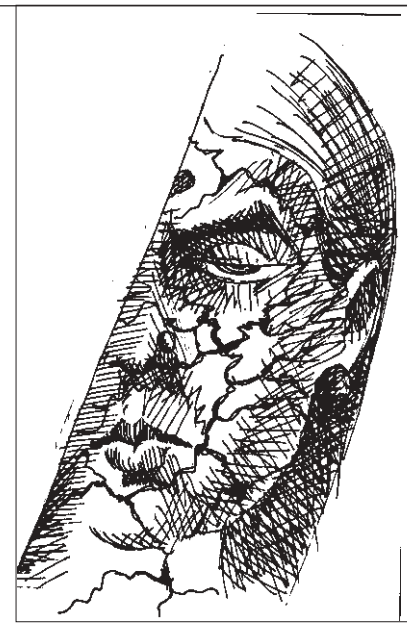
Every day, Mem-saab asks if there is a letter from Jai.

"No," I say, "no letter." And since that call the day after Balvir arrived, no phone call either. Now I am sorry I told him Mem-saab was well.

The Embassy-walla sends Mem-saab a note, asking if he may come to tea. She sends me to him with a note saying yes. I tell *Khansama* to make cake and *jalebis*, and by now I know this means Balvir and Kiran will be notified as well.

It takes her most of the morning to dress and prepare, she rests often to ease the pain in her chest. All afternoon, she sits waiting for tea as though the Embassy-walla were one of the relatives who no longer visit.

Khansama wheels the trolley in as usual, but he doesn't leave the room



afterwards. He has to report back to Balvir. The Embassy-walla asks for tea without milk. Since he says it in English, I do not tell Mem-saab, and she pours it in his tea anyway. He should repeat himself often, and in Hindi, if he wants me to help him converse.

"As you know," says the Embassy-walla, "my lease is till the end of this month."

Mem-saab bows her elegant head and smiles. His lease has been till the end of each month for four rains now.

"I have been told I will be posted back to Washington after that."

Mem-saab smiles again. "How nice."

She has not understood.

"Posted back to abroad?" I ask.

He looks at me, then. "Yes. Tell her - I will be posted back to Washington - say, to America - after this month."

I mouth his words to her again. She smiles at him, but this smile is tinged with dread.

"I see," she says, quiet.

He accepts a piece of dry sponge cake, and declines the *jalebis* - crisp tubes oozing their red-gold sugar water; *Khansama* will give them to his children tonight.

Now who will stop Balvir - or Jai - from putting their belongings or padlocks downstairs? The judge said everything should remain the same, but some changes cannot be decreed away. Four rains ago, Mem-saab could ask her English-speaking sons to place an advertisement in *The Statesman* saying "foreign embassy people desired" so she didn't have to lease to an Indian tenant. It takes a generation to oust Indian tenants, and they can never afford to pay. But now ...? Who will listen to Amma if I ask them to write in their English newspaper that Mem-saab doesn't want an Indian for a tenant?

●

Mem-saab receives a note from the lady-lawyer: she reads it to me and begins to cry. The lady-lawyer says Balvir requested the court to restrain her from renting the downstairs "until a family understanding has been arrived at." The judge has granted his request.

"What will I live on?" she weeps.

I remind her, "You are a rich woman, Mem-saab. You have money at Grindlays."

"But that is family wealth - *stridhan* - just mine on paper for my lifetime. I use just a little for my needs, Amma."

I agree she keeps her needs to a minimum. She has always had a strong sense of duty, my Mem-saab. It is the reason we understand one another. We were taught that widows such as we cannot claim our men's wealth. That our *kismet* dictates if our men be kind. But these are the days of *Kalyug*, and her men have forgotten their duty to be kind to their mother - or to me, who also raised them.

So I tell her, "Your husband would not want you to live in poverty. That is for women like your Amma, we are accustomed to it. Besides... " and here I perform a joker's mock pout like

Amitabh Bachhan in the movies, "I don't want to go back to Jagadri just yet."

She manages a smile, and she says in Punjabi so the words sound sweeter, more intimate, "Don't worry, Amma. It is my duty to look after you." I bring my palms together and raise them high to my forehead. I call on all my Gods to bless her, and now she laughs.

This is my role in the movie of her life.

●

A Krishna-blue night shares his sky with the moon. I wrap them away behind curtains; the deaf must banish all light to find sleep.

The heat coils round us and the fan is stilled by another municipality power cut. Still Mem-saab complains she is cold - so cold. She says a train is roaring through her head but we both know that is impossible. She cannot hear Balvir or Kiran's party laughter or the tumult in her candle-lit drawing room. I bring her sleeping pills and shawls and then blankets, but there is no rest, no peace.

At dawn, I bring her a glass of warm lemon-juice and honey, as I did for her sons when they had fevers.

She asks for more pills and I bring her the old *mithai*-tin with its picture of Vishnudevi, the many-armed, many-weaponed goddess astride a tiger.

When she takes her pills she tears at their plastic wrapping, trying to find the kernel. She looks at them carefully, holding them in her palm, examining their red, pink and white granules in the capsule skin as though trying to fathom their power. She takes one to her mouth, sets it delicately within the fold of her lower lip.

She turns to me and asks for water, and I offer the silver glass. I watch the kernel pass her throat, then another and another, her head swung upwards, eyes closed as though in prayer. I have never seen her taking so many pills, but then she has never been so sick.

When the pills are gone, we wait a moment, together.

She hands the silver glass back to me and drops the capsule peels in my upturned hands. Discarded silver foil and plastic with English writing on the back. Letters that sit squat, round and comfortable, unlike our letters that hang from tired arms like rows of ragged *kameezes* fluttering upon a clothes-line. It is my left, my unclean hand, that has learned to make Hindi letters and so I only make them when I have to write something for Mem-saab.

She lies back and closes her eyes.

"Shall I bring oil for your massage, Mem-saab?"

"Not today, Amma. Stay with me."

I am too old for such sleepless nights; she cannot hear the cracking of my joints as I take my place on the floor on her foot-carpet. I take her soft hand in my calloused ugly ones and I begin to rub gently, "I am with you, Mem-saab, Amma is here. I am with you, na. I am here. Amma is here."

A dying fragrance from the kitchen recalls the turmeric I rubbed on my Leela's arms before I gave her to her husband. She has given me grandchildren, but I cannot recall their faces. Sleep-summoned images dance across my inner eye: Shiv's long lashes or were those Jai's? Sardarji's haughty

gaze, Balvir's eyes downcast before it. Fragments of soft chappati fall from Balvir's hands and shrivel before I can reach them. My tongue seems afire with hot chillies. I cannot speak - and if I speak, who will listen to Amma?

People's voices in my ears. Balvir, shouting, "Amma, tell her..." Kiran shrieking I am a fool because I cannot read English. The lady-lawyer, "Be strong. I will try to help you." Manu's voice, "Daddy says you are nobody..." *Khansama*, "You too are becoming deaf..."

I am becoming deaf, too.

There is silence. Inert, static silence - a constant silence I thought only Mem-saab had ever known.

I stop massaging. Her arm droops heavy over the curve of the bed. I put my hands to my ears. I shake my head. I hear no sound. There is no sound.

No breath, no sound.

I rise, and the peels of Mem-saab's pills scatter from my lap. I discover I am weeping. I must not weep. Amma, you must not weep!

Ganesh, Krishna, Vaishnudevi, Vaheguru, Guru Tegh Bahadur... an old woman begs you, give me strength.

I bring her *kajal* pencils and I draw her eyebrows dark above her eyes. I bring color for her cheeks and lip-stick to make her lips hibiscus-red. I take her hair in my hands, hair the color of spent fire-coals, and I braid it for her though she is a widow.

When she is beautiful, I cover her face.

Outside her room, the empty drawing-room echoes the taunting revelry of the evening past. I go to the kitchen. *Khansama* must still be sleeping in the servant's quarter; his new wrist watch never brings him too early to work. I take a sharp knife and return to Mem-saab's room.

"Be strong, Mem-saab." I say. There is always the revenge of the powerless.

I cut her wrist slowly - as though I

cut my own. I massage her arm from armpit to wrist with deep, powerful strokes of both hands to fill her silver water glass full of blood. She will not need it now.

In the drawing room, I struggle to climb on a low table. I manage to stand, with the glass in my hands.

Then I whirl. Round, with the silver glass aloft, I am a Kathakali dance-girl of twenty. Blood spatters on the gold silk sofa. On crystal. On fine Kashmiri carpets. On white walls, on the raw-silk shimmer of curtains. I bend and I twist in soundless fury, till there is only a little of her blood left in the glass.

Then, suddenly, I am tired.

I slump to my knees. I climb off the table.

At the door to Mem-saab's room, I dip the index finger of my unclean hand in what is left. I squat again. I paint slowly - for this important - slowly I paint a *rangoli* design in my Mem-saab's blood on the white chip-marble floor.

The design that always says, "Welcome to this house and may you be happy."

Balvir, Kiran and Manu still sleep when I finish.

I wash my hands using water sparingly from Mem-saab's bathroom, till I remember she doesn't need water anymore. And she no longer needs a pair of ears.

Down the stairs to the cement driveway. I strain at the double gates. They open for me. As I walk through, I picture Balvir and Kiran waking, finding their treasure soiled and cursed. One woman will tell her God and this one - dark, quiet old Amma - will now tell anyone who has ears to hear.

At Jorbagh market, morning ripens from a mango-blush sky. The narrow caverns of shop stalls are still closed, their rippling silver garage doors padlocked to the ground. The only open shop is the one that sells marigold garlands for worshipers to offer at the temple before work, but today I pass it by.

I climb into the back seat of a scooter-rickshaw, shaking its dozing driver. Weary again now, I settle back in my chariot, Arjun returning from battle. The scooter driver stretches and yawns. He takes his time pouring a libation of oil into the tank. Then he winds a scarf about his neck with a flourish like Amitabh Bachhan and steadies the eager bounce of the scooter's green plastic-tassled handles.

Where are you gong, Amma?" he shouts over the engine.

"To the railway station," I say.

"Luggage?"

"No luggage," I say. Just a pair of ears and a very long memory.

Leela will be surprised to see me.❐

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