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GIVE ME YOUR SORROWS

RAJINDER SINGH BEDI

*Translated from the original Urdu **Apne Dukh Mujhe De Do,**
by Karen Leonard and G. C. Narang*

ON the night of the wedding things did not happen as Madan had anticipated.

His plump sister-in-law cajolingly pushed Madan into the middle room and Indu was before him, cloaked in a red shawl and distinct from the darkness. Outside, the laughter of Chakli Bhabi,¹ of Daryabadi Phupi,² and of the other women broke the silence of the night like crystal candy slowly dissolving.

These older women had all had their day. The echo of what their lusty husbands had said and meant on that first night no longer came to their ears. They themselves were well-established now and they were intent on establishing one more new sister. To these daughters-of-the-earth man was like a cloud to whom they must look for rain. If there was no rain, then they must entreat, promise gifts, perform magic.

The women all thought that Madan, though he was an adult now, didn't know what was happening—when they had come so late at night and awakened him, he had appeared confused. 'Where, where are you taking me?' he had said. But in fact Madan had been waiting for this moment as he lay in an empty space before his house in this new neighbourhood of Kalkaji. The buffalo of his unlucky neighbour,

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Sabta, was tied near Madan's cot and continually snorted and sniffed at Madan, who tried to keep him away with his hands. At such a time there was no possibility of sleep.

The moon, which guides the waves of the ocean and the blood of women, shone through a window as though it were watching for Madan's next move. He stepped forward from the door, conscious of a roaring within himself, and pulled the cot into the moonlight so that he could see the bride's face. He hesitated, but then he thought, 'Indu is not a strange woman whom I cannot touch; she is my wife.' Looking at the red-wrapped bride, he judged where Indu's face should be, and when he touched the bundle there it was. Madan had thought that she would not easily let him look at her, but she did, as though she had been waiting several years for this moment, and some imagined buffalo's nudgings had kept her too, from sleep. Though her eyes were closed, Madan could see that she had had her share of sleeplessness. He looked at her face. It was round rather than oval, so round that the moonlight made shady caves between the cheeks and lips, seemingly between two blooming hillocks. The forehead was a bit narrow, with curly hair spontaneously rising from it...

Indu freed her face, as though she had granted the privilege of looking only temporarily; there were certain limits imposed by modesty. Madan, a little roughly, tilted the embarrassed bride's face up again, saying in an emotional voice, 'Indu'!

Indu felt slightly afraid. It was the first time in her life that a stranger had called her name in this way, and this stranger was destined to be hers. Indu looked upward for the first time but quickly closed her eyes and said only, 'Yes'. It seemed to her that her voice came from some region under the earth.

Very slowly their conversation began; once started it continued and never seemed to come to a stop. Indu's father, Indu's mother, her brother, Madan's brothers and sister, his father, the father's Railway Mail Service job, the father's temperament, favourite clothes and food habits—all

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were surveyed. In the middle of this, Madan wanted to stop the conversation and do something else but Indu disregarded any such inclination. Helplessly, Madan began a description of his mother who had died of tuberculosis when he was seven years old. 'So long as she lived, the poor woman, medicine bottles were in father's hands. We waited on the hospital steps, and little Pashi waited in the house; we were all tired but sleepless with anxiety. Then finally one day, on the evening of the 28th of March....' and Madan was quiet. He was very close to crying. Frightened, Indu pressed his head to her breast. Thus in a moment Indu's unconscious sympathy achieved Madan's conscious wish! Madan wanted to know more of Indu — but she caught his hands and began to speak.

'I cannot read or write, but I have known my parents, my brothers and sisters-in-law and scores of other people; I understand many things. Now that I am yours, I'd like to ask something of you.'

Madan was like one intoxicated by his emotions. With impatience and quick generosity mixed in his voice he asked, 'What do you ask? I'll give you whatever you wish!'

'Do you promise?'

Madan spoke without hesitation, 'Yes, yes, I promise.' But then doubts rose in his mind. His business, just begun, was still slow; if Indu asked for something beyond his power to give, what would he do?

Taking his rough hands in her soft ones and laying her cheek against them, Indu asked, 'Give me your sorrows.'

Madan was relieved, but he was also surprised at this request. He tried to look again at Indu's face in the moonlight but found no answer to his thoughts. Could this be a memorized sentence taught to her by her mother or a girl friend? Then he felt a warm tear on the back of his hand and he embraced Indu warmly, saying, 'Given!' But all this had taken his desire from him.

The guests one by one took their departures. Chakli Bhabi, her two children firmly in hand, descended the stairway carefully because of her third pregnancy and left for

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her home. Daryabadi Phupi, who, upon losing her precious necklace had wailed so loudly that she fainted and then in the washroom had found it again, took away her dowry share of three garments. And the uncle left, after receiving a wire about his 'Justice of the Peace' appointment; perhaps due to excitement, he had nearly kissed Madan's bride!

The old father and the younger brothers and sister remained in the house. Little Dulari Munni continually snuggled in her sister-in-law's arms. If a neighbourhood woman wanted to see the bride, for any length of time, Dulari was the one to approach. Indu slowly settled into the house, but the people of this new neighbourhood of Kalkaji still made excuses to stop in front of Madan's house while passing by, hoping to see Indu. When she saw them she quickly drew up the edge of her sari, covering her face; what they saw in this brief uncovered second pleased them more than long glimpses without the sari covering.

Madan's business was the selling of crude turpentine. Soon after the marriage, the pine and cedar trees which were the main source of supply were caught in a forest fire and reduced to dust. Turpentine sent from Mysore and Assam was expensive, and people were not prepared to purchase at such a high price. While his income decreased, Madan closed the store and adjoining office early and came home. Reaching the house, he always tried to hurry everyone into bed. At meal time he himself placed the dishes before his father and sister, and after all had eaten he gathered up the utensils and put them by the water-tap. All understood that because of Indu, Madan now found the housework worthy of his attention. Madan was the eldest, Kundan younger than he, and Pashi younger than both. When Kundan, to show his affection for his sister-in-law, insisted on waiting to eat with her, father Dhuni Ram scolded him. 'You go on and eat. She'll get her food.' Then Dhuni Ram surveyed the kitchen. When Bahu³ had finished her food and turned her attention to the pots, Babu⁴ Dhuni Ram stopped her, saying, 'Leave them Bahu, the

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dishes can be done in the morning.'

'No, Babuji, I can do them very quickly now,' she said.

In a trembling voice Babuji replied, 'If Madan's mother were here, daughter, then you would not be doing all this.' And Indu dropped her hands.

Little Pashi was embarrassed in the presence of his sister-in-law, because Chakli Bhabi and the father's sister from Daryabad had performed a ceremony to 'Make the bride's lap green.' They had placed Pashi in Indu's lap; after that she felt that he was not only her husband's younger brother, but her child. Whenever Indu lovingly tried to take Pashi in her arms, he protested and kept a certain distance from her. By coincidence Babuji was always present at such times and he scolded Pashi. 'What is this? Here our sister-in-law loves you. Do you think yourself too grown up for this?' But Dulari couldn't be chased away from her! Her obstinate insistence, 'I'll sleep with Bhabi,'⁵ seemed to awaken some demon in Babuji. One night he slapped Dulari so hard when she said this that she fell upon the uncemented drain in the house. Leaping forward, Indu helped her, her dupatta⁶ falling from her head. Her hair, the red powder in her part, the ornaments in her ears were all revealed.

'Babuji!' Indu caught her breath, catching Dulari and pulling up her dupatta at once, acutely embarrassed. She hugged the motherless child to her breast, making her feel as though she were lying in a bed with nothing but pillows and cushions all around, no hard bed-frame, where nothing at all could hurt her. Indu caressed Dulari's sore spots, paining but also pleasing her. Large, lovely dimples returned to Dulari's cheeks. Seeing these dimples Indu said, 'Oh Munni! May your mother-in-law die! What dimples are in your cheeks!'

Munni looked up, diverted. 'You have dimples too, Bhabi.'

'Yes, Munni,' Indu smiled.

Madan was angered by all this; he was standing nearby and listening. 'She may be a motherless child, but I tell

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you. it's a good thing in some ways.'

'What? Why is it good?' Indu asked quickly.

'It is good. If no bamboo grows, no flutes will make noise; no mother-in-law, no quarrels.'

Indu was angered. 'You may go, — go on to bed. What business is this of yours? If a person is alive then he quarrels sometime, doesn't he?. A quarrel is better than the silence of the burning *ghat*! Go away, what business have you in the kitchen?'

Madan stayed, abashed. The other children had been put to bed by Babu Dhuni Ram. Madan remained standing there. Necessity made him stubborn and shameless. But when Indu reprimanded him again, he left.

Soon Madan was in bed, restless, but thinking of Babuji, he hadn't the courage to call to Indu. His impatience reached its limit when Indu sang a lullaby to help Dulari sleep. 'Come, queen of sleep, you intoxicated one, come...'

This lullaby which put Munni to sleep drove sleep far from Madan. Disgusted with himself, he pulled the cover roughly over his head. With the white cover over him, holding his breath, he suddenly thought of being dead. It seemed to him that he had died and his bride Indu sat near him crying loudly, beating her forearms and breaking her bangles, falling on the floor and rushing, sobbing, into the kitchen to smear ashes from the fire on her hair; then again going outside and raising such a lament that all the people in the lane could hear. 'Neighbours! I've been ruined!' Now she did not care her dupatta, her qamees, the red in her part or the designs and ornaments in her hair. Her thoughts and feelings were distracted.

Tears were flowing rapidly from Madan's eyes. Just then from the kitchen came Indu's laughter. Coming back to the reality of his world Madan wiped away his tears laughing. At a distance Indu too was laughing, but her laughter was suppressed. Out of respect for Babuji she tried not to laugh loudly, as though there were something immoral about laughter. Silence, the dupatta, hushed laughter, the veiled face, this was Indu. Madan imagined

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Indu as present and talked about many things. He loved her as he had never loved her before. He then returned again to his world, with the empty bed next to his bed, and he called in a low voice 'Indu' and was quiet. Sleep, that intoxicated queen, embraced him. He nodded, yet it seemed that Sabta's buffalo of the marriage night was with him, sniffing at his face. He rose in a restless mood, looked towards the kitchen, scratched his head, yawned two or three times and lay down. He slept lightly; when Indu came and her bangles jingled as he smoothed her bed, he awoke and sat up. Rising so hurriedly further sharpened his desire. Madan's whole body burned with an internal fire. He asked excitedly, 'So, you have come?'

'Yes.'

'Has that damned Munni died in her sleep?'

Indu started. 'What are you saying! Why should she die, the only daughter of her parents!'

'Yes, the only husband's sister of her Bhabhi!' Madan assumed a severe authoritative tone. 'Don't encourage the little witch so much.'

'What is the harm in it?'

'Here's the harm,' Madan grew more annoyed. 'She won't leave you alone. Look how she clings, like a leech. She never stops pestering!'

'Yes' Indu sat on the edge of Madan's *charpoi*.⁷ 'But you shouldn't revile your sister this way. She's only a guest, If not today, she leaves tomorrow; if not tomorrow then the next day; one day she must leave this house.' Indu wanted to continue but she couldn't. Before her eyes appeared her mother, father, brother, sister, uncle—all lost to her. Once she had been their *Dulari*;⁸ in the wink of an eye she had become separate and distinct. Suddenly they had begun to discuss her marriage, day and night, as though a cobra's hole had been discovered in the house and no one could relax and sleep until it had been caught and expelled. All sorts of snake charmers and magicians were called, even the legendary *Dhanwantar*.⁹ Finally, one day from the north-west came a colourful marriage procession like a storm. When

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it cleared, a vehicle stood there in which sat a bride dressed in gold and silver embroidery. Behind her, in the house, the monotonous playing of the shehnai¹⁰ sounded like the snake charmer's *been*.¹¹ With one jolt the vehicle left.

Madan's bad temper had not abated. 'You women are so clever. You arrived in this house only yesterday, yet all of its people care more for you than for me?'

'Yes!' Indu affirmed.

'This is all deceit,—they have been tricked!'

'Oh?' Tears came to Indu's eyes. 'So their love is a result of my deceit?' She went to her bed and hiding her face in the pillow began to sob. Madan tried to think what to do, but Indu got up and came to him, catching his hands tightly. She spoke directly. 'You are always making mean remarks...what's wrong with you?'

Madan decided on a display of husbandly dignity. 'Go on, why don't you go to sleep? There's nothing I want from you.'

'You don't need anything from me, but I must take my whole life from you!' She scrambled towards him, like a fish trying to climb the rushing waters of a waterfall instead of going with the current. Pinching, grabbing, crying and laughing she said, 'Will you call me a deceitful woman again?'

'That's how all women are!'

'Just wait... you...'

 Her words were almost inaudible.

'What was that?' Madan demanded. Indu repeated it in an audible voice and Madan guffawed in uncontrollable laughter. Then Indu was in his arms, saying, 'You men, what do you know? When a woman loves a man, she loves his relatives too, even his father, brother or sister.' Her thoughts jumped ahead. 'I'll even arrange Dulari Munni's marriage.'

'This is the limit! Now she's not one length high, and you begin to think of her marriage!'

'You see her one length high?' Indu put her hands over Madan's eyes. 'Close your eyes a bit and then open them.'

He did close his eyes, and after some time Indu said, 'Now, you must open your eyes! In so much time, I'll surely grow old!' When he opened his eyes, he felt for a moment that it was not Indu before him but Munni. Then he was lost in his thoughts.

'Up to now I've put aside four suits of clothes and some cooking utensils for her,' Indu disclosed, and when Madan gave no answer, she shook him anxiously. 'Why are you worried? Don't you remember your promise? You must tell me your sorrows.'

'Eh?' Madan was startled; then his heart lightened as he felt his burdens shared. He hugged Indu to him, and this time it was not only her body but her soul as well.

To Madan, Indu was all soul. She had a body, but somehow it remained invisible to Madan. There was a veil made of dream filaments, coloured by breaths of smoke, dazzling with golden threads of laughter, which always covered Indu. Madan's hands and eyes committed sacrilege, like Duhshasan through the centuries outraging the modesty of Draupadi.¹² Bolts upon bolts and yards upon yards of cloth to cover her nakedness came down from the sky unceasingly. Duhshasan was tired and defeated; he fell to the ground; but Draupadi still stood. Dressed in a pure and chaste white sari she appeared a real goddess. Madan's lusting hands were wet with the sweat of shame and to dry them he raised them, spreading the fingers wide, passing them before the burning pupils of his eyes. Through these twitching fingers he could see the soft pleasantness of Indu's marbled body. For use it was near, but for lusty misuse it was very far. Sometimes when Indu was cornered she would say, 'What are you thinking of? There are young ones in the house, what will they say!'

Madan replied, 'The young ones don't understand; the old ones are indifferent.'

During this period Babu Dhuni Ram was transferred to Saharanpur. There he was made head clerk of the Railway Mail Service Selection Grade. Such a large house

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was assigned to him that eight families could have lived in it, but he stayed there alone. Throughout his life he had never before been separated from his family. He enjoyed family life, and such loneliness at the end of his life distressed him. But it could not be otherwise; the children could not be taken from their school in the middle of the year. They had to stay in Delhi with Madan and Indu. Babuji developed a heart condition.

At last, after Babuji's many letters, the summer vacation came and Madan sent Indu with Kundan, Pashi and Dulari to Saharanpur. Dhuni Ram's world perked up. Before he had been burdened with free time after his office hours; now he had nothing but work! The children, in the way of children, took off their clothes and left them here and there and Babuji picked them up. Far from her Madan, like the slow moving Rati,¹³ Indu grew careless about her clothing too. She behaved in the kitchen as though she were in a dog pound, face turned outward looking for her master. After doing the housework she napped, sometimes lying on a trunk inside the house, sometimes lying outside near a small rose bay or near the mango tree with its hundreds and thousands of hearts.

The month of Sawan¹⁴ gave way to Bhadun¹⁵. In the courtyard young women and newly married girls swung happily and sang, 'Who has put up a swing in the mango grove?' In the spirit of the song they pushed each other on the swing and played hide-and-seek. The middle-aged women stood and watched from the sidelines; it seemed to Indu that she belonged with them. She turned her face away, sighed and went to sleep. Babuji, if he passed nearby, would not try to wake her. Instead he took the opportunity to pick up her discarded shalwar, which she always flung over her mother-in-law's old sandalwood box, and hung it on a peg. While doing this he had to be careful that no one was watching him. Occasionally while picking up the shalwar he would see Bahu's bra lying behind it in the corner. At this sight his courage would fail him, and he would leave the room quickly, as though a young snake had

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come out of a hole. Then from the verandah his voice repeating the Vedic hymn, *Om namo bhagavate, vasudeva...*¹⁶ could be heard.

The tale of Babuji's daughter-in-law's beauty was spread far and wide by the neighbouring women. When some woman spoke in front of Babuji of Bahu's loveliness and well-formed body he responded happily, 'We were so lucky, mother of Ami Chand! Thanks be that a healthy person has come to our house.' Saying this, his thoughts went to his tubercular wife, the bottles of medicine, the hospital steps and the sleepless nights of his children. Then he would think of so many plump children tucked in Bahu's arms, on her thigh, hanging around her neck; and still more coming. Lying on her flanks with her face to the ground and her hips towards the sky, Bahu was releasing children one after another with no difference in their ages or sizes, all alike, twins and more twins. *Om namo bhagavate...*

The neighbours all knew that Indu was Babuji's favourite, and jars of milk and buttermilk began to arrive at Dhuni Ram's house. One time Salam Din Gurjar¹⁷ made a special request to Indu: 'Bibi¹⁸, please have my son made a coolie in the R.N.S., and Allah will reward you.' It wasn't long after Indu's single recommendation that Salam Din's son got the job, and that of a sorter, not a coolie. She helped people and when she could not, it was Fate or there were no more vacancies.

Babuji took special care of Indu's food and health. Indu hated to drink milk. At night Babuji himself prepared milk in a small pot, put it in a glass and brought it to Bahu's cot. Indu pulled herself together, rising and saying, 'Oh no, Babuji! I won't drink it.'

'Even your father-in-law will have to drink it,' he would joke.

'Please, go ahead and drink it,' she laughingly answered,

Babuji retorted with faked anger, 'Do you want to suffer later as your mother-in-law did?'

'Yes, yes,' she said, but she pretended to be hurt by his words. Why not pretend? Only those who have no one to

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console them never pretend to be hurt; here all were ready to console her.

When Indu did not take the glass from Babuji's hand he placed it near the head of the bed. 'Take it from here, drink if you wish.'

Back at his own bed, Dhuni Ram played with Dulari Munki. Dulari rubbed a bare part of Babuji's body with her body, and putting her face to his stomach she made a brrr...ing noise. Darting a look in Bahu's direction, Munki cried out, 'The milk will spoil, Babuji, Bhabi isn't drinking it!'

'She'll drink it, she surely will, daughter.' Babuji hugged Pashi with his free arm. 'Woman can't bear to see anything in the house spoil.'

Hardly was this sentence completed when, 'Shoo, you husband eater'*! came from Bahu. She had discovered a cat coming for the milk, and she quickly gulped it down herself!

Shortly afterwards Kundan came to Babuji, saying, 'Babuji, Bhabi is crying.'

'What?' Babuji tried to look through the darkness towards Bahu's bed. He sat up awhile, then lay down again and told Kundan to go on to sleep.

Lying there, Babu Dhuni Ram could see God's garden through an opening in the sky, and he asked God in his mind, 'Of all those blooming flowers, which is the one for me?' The sky changed and became a river of pain, and he heard the sound of continuous shrieks. Hearing them he said, 'Since the world was made how much man has cried!' And crying, he went to sleep.

Within twenty days of Indu's leaving Madan began to lament her. He wrote: 'I'm sick of always eating bazaar bread, and I've gotten constipated. My kidney is beginning to pain me.' As though he were an office worker needing a leave, he sent a Doctor's certificate with the letter, and also a confirming letter from a friend of Babuji's. This brought no results. Finally he sent an urgent wire with reply pre-paid.

The money for the reply was wasted, but no matter. Indu and the children returned. Madan didn't speak nicely

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to Indu for about two days. His mood affected Indu as well. Finding Madan alone one day, she caught and held him. 'Why are you sulking like this? What have I done?'

Madan was annoyed with her and replied brusquely,

'Leave me, go on—out of sight, you unworthy woman!'

'Did you call me back to say such things to me?'

'Yes!'

'Well, say them now or forget it.'

'Watch out, this is all your fault. If you wanted to come, why did you let Babuji stop you?'

Indu said angrily, 'Come now, you're behaving like a child. How could I say anything? Besides, I think that by calling me you were cruel to your father.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's no mysterious meaning. He was enjoying life very much with his family.'

'And what about my life?'

'Your life? You can be wherever you want,' and she spoke so mischievously, looking sideways towards Madan, that the whole power of his defence crumbled. He had been waiting for a good excuse anyway, and now he caught Indu and held her closely.

'Was Babuji happy with you?'

'Oh yes, One day I awoke and saw him standing by my pillow smiling down at me.'

'That can't be!'

'I swear by my life...'

'Not by your life, swear by mine.'

'I won't swear by your life, even for millions!'⁹

Madan was thinking. 'In books they call it sex.'

'Sekkus? What's that?' Indu didn't know the English word.

'That's what is done between man and woman.'

'Oh Ram!' Catching her breath sharply she backed away. 'What a dirty thing to say! Aren't you ashamed, talking about Babuji like that?'

'Shouldn't Babuji have been ashamed, looking at you like that?' Madan countered.

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‘Why?’ Indu immediately took Babuji’s side. ‘Why shouldn’t he be happy to see his daughter-in-law?’

‘Why not indeed, when the daughter-in-law is like you,’ Madan tried to turn the discussion.

‘Your mind is dirty,’ Indu went on angrily, ‘that’s why your business is crude turpentine. All your books are full of dirt; you and your books can see nothing but sex. When I grew up my father began to love me more, was that also that wretched thing, that word you used?’ She paused and then continued, ‘Why don’t you call Babuji here since he’s not happy alone. He’s sad; doesn’t that make you sad?’

Madan loved his father very much. As the eldest son, he had been profoundly affected by his mother’s death. He remembered her very well. When thoughts of her came to his mind, Madan closed his eyes and began praying *Om namo bhagavate, vasudeva, om namo...* Not only did he love his father, he did not want to be deprived of his protection, especially since his business was not yet established. But in a noncommittal tone he said only, ‘Let Babuji stay there. This is the first chance since our wedding for us to be free with each other.’

After three or four days Babuji’s tear-smearred letter came. ‘My dear Madan...’ Of this salutation the words ‘my dear’ were washed out by salty tears. He wrote, ‘Bahu’s being here brought back the old days for me. When your mother and I were newly married she too was as playful and youthful. She threw her clothes here and there after undressing, in the same way, and my father collected them. The same sandalwood box...the same household chores...I go to the bazaar, come home again, bring groceries and sometimes curds or buttermilk, but now no one is in the house. That place where the sandalwood box stood is empty...’ And again half a line was drowned. Finally he had written, ‘Upon returning home from the office, entering these huge dark rooms, something like dread overcomes me...’ And last, ‘One thought about Bahu,—don’t put her in the care of an inexperienced nurse.’

Indu caught the letter in her hands. With a catch in her breath, her eyes wide and close to tears from embarrassment, she said, ‘I could die! How did Babuji know about

that?’

Madan recaptured the letter. ‘Is Babuji a child? He’s seen the world. He caused the birth of his children.’

‘Yes, but...how many days has it been now?’ Indu cast a hasty glance at her stomach, which had not yet begun to swell. As if Babuji or someone else were looking, she pulled the end of her sari over herself. Her thoughts wandered. Her face glowed and she said softly, ‘Your relatives will send sweets.’

‘My relatives? Oh yes.’ Madan followed her thoughts. ‘But what a shameful thing—only five or six months, and this big fellow is coming!’ He motioned towards her stomach.

‘Is he coming on his own, or did you bring him?’

‘You...it’s all your fault. Just like a woman.’

‘You don’t like it?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Why not?’

‘We should have enjoyed life for a few more days.’

‘Isn’t this an enjoyment of life?’ Indu said in a shocked tone. ‘Why do men and women get married? God has given without our asking, hasn’t He? Ask those women who have no children—what don’t they do? They go to the saints and fakirs, tie their ribbons at tombs and shrines. All modesty leaves them and, naked, they cut reeds along the sides of rivers and raise evil spirits at the burning *ghats*.’²⁰

‘All right,’ Madan stopped her. ‘You’ve begun a long story. Is there such a short life ahead in which to have children?’

‘Then when he’s born,’ Indu’s tone rebuked him and her finger jabbed at him, ‘you can’t even touch his hand! He’ll be mine, not yours. You don’t need him—but your father does, I know that!’

Abashed and shocked at herself, Indu hid her face in her hands. She had thought that the small life within her would provoke sympathy and love from its father, but Madan continued sitting silently. He wouldn’t utter even one word. Indu dropped her hands and looked in Madan’s direction, and in the special voice of a woman in her first pregnancy she

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said, 'Anyway, what we've been talking about will come afterwards. First, I won't survive; I've been afraid of this since my childhood.'

Madan was alarmed. This beautiful thing, who had grown more beautiful with her pregnancy—could she die? He came up behind her and clasped her in his arms. 'Nothing will happen to you, Indu. I'll snatch you even from the jaws of death! It's not Savitri's turn now, but Satyavan's.'²¹ Clinging to Madan Indu forgot that she had any sorrows.

Babuji wrote nothing for a long time. However, a sorter came from Saharanpur and told them that Babuji had begun having heart trouble again and that he had nearly died during one attack. Madan was fearful and Indu began to cry. After the sorter left, Madan closed his eyes and began repeating with all his heart, *Om namo bhagavate...*

The next day Madan wrote his father a letter. 'Babuji, why don't you come home? The children miss you and so does Bahu.' But Babuji could not leave his job. He wrote that he was making arrangements for getting leave. Madan's feelings of guilt grew. 'If I had let Indu stay with Babuji, it wouldn't have hurt me.'

It was one night before Vijaya Dashami²², and Madan, in a state of anguish, was pacing the verandah outside the middle room. Suddenly he heard the sound of an infant crying from inside. He rushed towards the door just as Begum nurse²³ was coming out saying, 'Congratulations Babuji! It's a son!'

'A son?' In a worried voice he continued, 'How is my wife?'

'Perfectly all right! I've told her it was a girl though, for if she were too happy she'd have trouble expelling the afterbirth.'

'Oh...'

Madan blinked his eyes foolishly and started forward to enter the room. The begum stopped him. 'What business have you inside?' She went back in, closing the door firmly.

Madan's legs had not stopped trembling. Now, not

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from fear but from happiness, or perhaps because when someone comes into the world, all the people in his neighbourhood tremble. Madan knew that when a son was born the doors and walls of a house begin to tremble as if afraid that when the boy grew up he might sell them rather than keep them. Madan felt as though the walls truly were shaking....

Chakli Bhabi had not come for the delivery because her own children were so small, but Daryabadi Phupi had arrived. During the delivery she had chanted 'Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram'; now the soft repetition died out.

Never in his life had Madan felt himself to be so superfluous and useless. Just then the door opened again and Phupi came out. In the faint light of the verandah her face seemed that of a ghost, completely milky white. Madan blocked her path. 'Indu's all right, isn't she, Phupi?'

'She's fine, she's fine', Phupi reassured him, placing her trembling hands on Madan's head and kissing him. She moved on past him. She went straight to the room where the other children were sleeping, lovingly placed a hand on each head and murmured something, with her eyes lifted to the roof. Worn out, she lay face down next to Munni. From her trembling shoulders Madan could guess that she was crying. He was astonished, Phupi had seen to many deliveries; why was she so shaken in her soul now?

The smell of burning harmal²⁴ drifted from the inner room, like a cloud of smoke, enveloping Madan. He felt dizzy. The nurse came out with some clothes; lots of blood was on them and a few drops fell on the floor. Madan was dazed. He didn't know where he was. His eyes were open but he perceived nothing. From the distance came a faint cry from Indu and the crying of the baby.

The next three or four days were busy ones. Digging a hole away from the house, Madan buried the afterbirth. He stopped the dogs from digging too, and of what happened after that he remembered almost nothing. It seemed to him that from the moment the scent of the harmal entered his nostrils he had lost consciousness, and he regained it only after losing those four days. Now he was alone in his room

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with Indu...like Nand and Yashoda...and also Nand Lal.²⁵ Indu looked at the child and speculated, 'He resembles you exactly.'

'That may be.' Casting a fleeting glance at the child Madan continued, 'All I can say is thank God you were saved.'

'Yes,' she began, 'I always thought that...'

'Don't say anything inauspicious!' Madan cut in. 'After this experience I won't come near you again!' He pressed his tongue against his teeth in repentance.

'You'd better take that back,' Indu smiled as she said it.

Madan covered his ears with his hands, and Indu began laughing gently.

After the birth of the child, Indu's navel did not return to its proper place for several days. It rambled around looking for the child which had gone out into the world and had forgotten its true mother. But then a readjustment took place and Indu gazed at the world peacefully. She emerged like a goddess, forgiving the sins not only of Madan but of all sinners in the world, and she made offerings of pity and compassion. She became slender after the delivery and seemed to Madan even lovelier than before. As he gazed at her, she suddenly placed her hands on her breasts.

'What is it?' Madan asked.

'Nothing,' Indu said, trying to raise herself a little. 'He's hungry.' She motioned towards the child.

'He? Hungry?' Madan looked first at the child and then at Indu. 'How do you know?'

'Don't you see?' She looked downward. 'It's all wet.' Madan saw the milk oozing through her loose gown and smelled a familiar scent. Indu stretched her arms towards the baby. 'Give him to me.'

Madan reached into the cradle but hesitated momentarily. Mustering his courage he lifted the child as though it were a dead rat and put him in Indu's lap. Indu asked shyly, 'Would you go outside?'

'Why? Why should I go out?'

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'Please go,' Indu pouted and said modestly, 'I can't give the baby milk in front of you.'

'What?' Madan was astonished. 'In front of me—why not?' And shaking his head as though he still did not understand, he went outside. Reaching the door he turned and glanced at Indu. She had never seemed so beautiful as at that moment.

Babu Dhuni Ram came home on leave, but he appeared only a shadow of his former self. When Indu put his grandson in his lap he seemed happy. But he had developed an ulcer which troubled him day and night. If it hadn't been for the child, Babuji's condition would have been far worse. Several treatments were attempted. In the last one the Doctor gave him fifteen to twenty coin-sized pills every day. The first day he perspired so much that he had to change clothes three or four times. Each time Madan took the clothes and squeezed them in a bucket, which was one fourth full from only the perspiration. At night Babuji began to feel nauseous and called out, 'Bahu, bring my toothbrush, the taste is very bad.' Bahu came running, bringing the toothbrush. Babuji sat up, using the toothbrush, when suddenly he doubled over and a torrent of blood came out. Madan helped him lie back on the pillow, but the pupils of his eyes had turned upward and in a moment he had reached the garden of Heaven where he recognized his own flower.

This happened only three weeks after Munna's birth. But Indu scratched her face and beat her head and breasts until they were blue. Before Madan's eyes was the same scene which he had seen in the dream of his own death. The only differences were that Indu took her bangles off instead of breaking them; there were no ashes on her head, but dust from the earth and her tangled hair gave her face a desperate look. And instead of crying, 'Oh neighbours, I've been ruined,' she cried, 'Oh neighbours, we've been ruined!'

Madan did not yet realise how great was the burden of the household which had now fallen on him. He collapsed completely until the next morning. Perhaps he would have

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been lost if he had not stayed outside and lain face down on the dampened earth next to the drain, which somehow consoled him. Mother Earth took her child to her breast and saved him. The children, Kundan, Dulari, Munni and Pashi, were like tiny chicks whose nest was attacked by a hawk; they raised their beaks and cheeped helplessly. If there were any feathers to give them shelter, they were Indu's....

Lying on the side of the drain, Madan thought, 'Now this world is ended for me. Can I go on living? Will I be able to laugh again?' He rose and went into the house.

The bathroom was under the stairs; pushing in and closing the door behind him, he again asked himself this question. 'Will I be able to laugh again?' And he suddenly was laughing loudly, though his father's body was lying very near him in the living room.

Before lighting the funeral pyre, Madan lay prostrate on the ground in front of his father's body. It was his last salutation to the one who had given him life. But he was not crying. Seeing this, the relatives and neighbours joining in the mourning were astonished and silent. According to Hindu law, Madan as the eldest son had to light the pyre, and later break open the burnt skull... The women standing at the edge of the burning *ghat* washed themselves at the well and returned to their homes. When Madan reached home he was trembling. Whatever strength Mother Earth had given to her son changed to fear with the coming of night. He needed support, support stronger than the power of Death. The daughter of Mother Earth, Indu, like Sita coming out of an earthen vessel,²⁶ embraced this Ram in her arms; had Indu not given herself completely to Madan that night, the terrible sadness might have killed him.

Within ten months Indu gave birth to her second son. Having pushed his wife again into the fires of hell, Madan forgot his own sorrow. Sometimes he would think that if he had not called Indu back from Babuji, Babuji would have lived longer—but soon he was busy making up the loss caused by his father's death. His business, nearly closed because of his inattention, now got off to a good start.

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During these days Indu went to her parents' home, the younger baby clinging to her breasts and the older boy left with Madan. Left behind, Munna proved very obstinate, sometimes getting his way, sometimes not. Indu wrote letters: 'I hear the crying of my son. Are you beating him?' This astounded Madan. She was an ignorant, illiterate woman. How could she write a thing like this? Once more he found himself questioning her; had she been tutored?

Years passed. Often there was not enough money for extra pleasures, but there was sufficient for the household needs. The family faced difficulties when a big expense came up, like Kundan's admission fee or the giving of Dulari Munni's engagement presents. On such occasions Madan sat with downcast face. Indu approached him and asked smilingly, 'Why are you worried?'

'Why shouldn't I be worried? You know Kundan's B.A. admittance fee...and Munni's...'

Indu only laughed. 'Come with me.'

Madan followed her like a lamb, to the sandalwood box which no one, not even Madan, had permission to touch. Sometimes this made him angry. He often said, 'When you die you'll take this along, clasped to your breast.'

She always replied, 'Yes, I certainly will.'

Now Indu took from the sandalwood box the necessary amount of money and put it before Madan.

'Where did this come from?'

'From nowhere special...You're concerned with eating the mangoes, not with counting the trees, aren't you?'

'Yes, but...'

'So go along to your work.'

When Madan insisted she only laughed and said, 'I have a rich friend, don't you think that's it?' Madan did not like this joke, though he knew it was a lie. So Indu changed her story, 'I'm a robber, a generous one who steals with one hand and gives to the poor with the other.'

In this way Munni's wedding was financed; Indu sold even her own ornaments. A debt was incurred and paid off. And Kundan's wedding was also celebrated.

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In these weddings Indu took the place of the mother and performed the 'hand-filling' ceremony.²⁷ From the sky Babuji and his wife looked on and threw down flowers which no one could see. But it so happened that these two began to quarrel. Mother said to Babuji, 'You have eaten the food cooked by Bahu and you've had her serve you. I'm so unfortunate that I haven't even seen her!' This argument reached the ears of Vishnu and even Siva. The gods supported the right of the Mother and decided to send her to the world of mortals. She was put in the womb of Indu, and so daughter was born to Madan and Indu.

Indu was scarcely a goddess, for she would even fight with Madan himself about matters of principle or about the children. Angered at this streak of obstinacy Madan called her 'Harischandra's daughter.'²⁸ Whatever the factual differences of opinion, Madan and the others in the family had to submit to Indu since her stand was always based on truth and dharma. Even if the quarrel was prolonged, and Madan was able to reject all her statements with husbandly sureness, in the end he came to Indu and asked her forgiveness.

After Kundan's marriage, a new sister-in-law came to the house. Though she was a wife, Indu was first of all a woman, then a wife; in contrast, the younger Rani was just a wife, although called a woman. Because of Rani the brothers quarrelled, and the household items were divided through the offices of the J.P. uncle. In this division of the joint family, the property left by the parents and Indu's own belongings were indiscriminately mixed. Indu suffered in silence and maintained her calmness. After gaining a separate household, Kundan and Rani were still not happy. But soon in Indu's new house neither happiness nor household goods was lacking.

Indu did not regain her health after the birth of her daughter. The child continually clung to Indu's breasts. While the others looked down on this small lump of flesh, Indu gave her loving attention, but sometimes she, too, became distressed and thrust the child into the cradle. She

scolded her saying, 'Why don't you let me live, "mother"?' and the little girl would cry.

Madan started avoiding Indu. Despite the security and warmth of his marriage, he still felt he had not met the woman he truly desired. The crude turpentine was selling well and Madan could spend many rupees without telling Indu. After Babuji's death there was no one to question him; he was completely free. It was as if his neighbour Sabta's buffalo sniffed at Madan's face once more. The buffalo of that wedding night was sold, but its owner was alive. Madan began to go with Sabta to those places where light and shadow make strange forms. Sometimes a dark triangle in the corner was quickly pierced by a four-cornered wave of light from above. No view seemed complete. It seemed that a pajama came from the armpit and flew towards the sky, or a coat completely covered the observer's face and he struggled for breath. When the square wave of light formed a frame, a figure came and stood in it. The observer stretched out his hands—and the figure crossed to the other side, as if nothing were there. From the rear a dog began to howl, but its voice was drowned in the beat of drums coming from above.

Madan knew the features of his ideal, but every time he thought he had found it the artist had drawn one wrong line, or the sound of the laughter was higher than it should have been. Madan was lost in the search for spotless beauty and perfect art.

One day Sabta was reproached by his wife. She presented Madan to him as the perfect husband; not presented, but threw it in his face. Sabta hit back in the same way, as if with a bloody watermelon whose nerves and fibres stuck in her nose, eyes, and ears. Then shouting countless curses, the Begum took the kernel and marrow from the basket of her memory and threw them into Indu's clean courtyard.

Out of the shock two Indus emerged. One was Indu herself and the other was an angry aggressive personality.

Whenever Madan returned home he came to the house

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to wash, put on clean clothes, and chew a pair of Mughli pan²⁹ with spicy tobacco. On this day when he returned, he found an Indu who looked quite different. She had dabbed powder on her face, rouge on her cheeks and, not having lipstick, bindi³⁰ pigment on her lips. Her hair had been done so beautifully that Madan couldn't stop staring at it.

'What's going on today?' he asked with astonishment.

'Nothing,' she replied, meeting his stare. 'I had some leisure time today, that's all.'

After fifteen years of marriage, Indu had some leisure time for her make-up! During those years wrinkles had come to her face and two or three rolls of flesh showed below her sari blouse. But today she had performed her toilet with such care that not one of these faults was visible. Carefully dressed in a lovely sari, she seemed utterly beautiful.

'This can't be!' Madan thought with a jolt. He turned towards Indu for another look, as a horse trader turns towards a faultless mare. She was an older mare, but she wore a red bridle.... Whatever faulty lines the figure had weren't evident to his intoxicated eyes. Indu was truly beautiful even after fifteen years of marriage; Phulan, Rashidah, Mrs. Roberts, and all the other women were but water carriers compared to Indu! Madan began to feel compassion, and a certain fear.

Though the sky was not cloudy it began to rain. The Ganges of domestic life appeared to be in flood, and its water overflowed the banks and took the whole valley and its inhabitants into its fold. The water flowed with such speed that it seemed even the Himalayas would be drowned. The baby began to cry, as she had never cried before and upon hearing this, Madan closed his eyes; when he opened them, she was standing before him, now a young girl. No, no, it was Indu. Her mother's daughter, or her daughter's mother, who was smiling with the corners of her eyes and seeing from the corners of her lips.

In the room where one day the odour of burning harmal had made Madan dizzy, today the fragrance of khas³¹ confused him. A little rain could be more dangerous than

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heavy downpour; water seeped through the rafters and started dripping between Madan and Indu. But Madan was still lost. In his excitement his eyes shrank and his breathing became abnormally rapid.

'Indu....' His voice was several notes higher than on the wedding night.

Indu, not looking at him, answered, 'Yes,' and her voice was several notes lower. It was *umavas*, the night of no moon.

Before Madan's hands had reached out, she moved to him. He lifted her chin and examined her face, seeing what he had lost—or what he had found. Indu looked once at his darkening face and closed her eyes.

'What's this?' He was startled. 'Your eyes are swollen!'

'It's nothing.' She gestured towards the baby. 'That wretched "Mother" kept me awake all night.'

The baby had been quiet, almost seeming to hold her breath and observe what was happening. The rainfall ceased, — had it truly ceased? Madan looked thoughtfully at Indu's eyes.

'Yes, but ... these tears?'

'They're from happiness. Tonight is mine.' And she clung to Madan laughing shakily.

With a surge of physical pleasure, he gripped her and said, 'Today my deepest wish has been fulfilled, Indu, after so many years, I always wanted...'

'But you didn't tell me — you remember I asked something of you the night of our wedding?'

'Yes. "Give me your sorrows,"' Madan replied.

'But you didn't ask anything of me.'

'I?' The idea was strange to him. 'What could I have asked? Whatever I wished you have given me. You loved my family, looked after the education of my brothers and arranged their marriages, gave birth to my dear children — all these you have given me!'

'I too thought that that was enough,' Indu replied, 'but now I know that it isn't.'

'What do you mean?'

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'Nothing....' she hesitated. Then, 'I kept back one thing.'

'What did you keep?'

She was silent for a time, looking away from him. 'My modesty — my happiness — you should have told me, "give me your happiness," and then I....' she couldn't continue. Finally she added, 'And now I have nothing.'

Madan's hands softened. He felt as though he'd been driven into the ground. This illiterate woman? Was it a tutored speech? But no — this had come from the furnace of life, and the fiery sparks were flying all around them.

After a while Madan spoke, 'I understand, Indu.'

Weeping, Indu and Madan embraced each other. Indu took Madan's hands and led him to that world usually not reached by humans until after death.

NOTES

1. Chubby sister-in-law.
2. Father's sister from Daryabad.
3. Daughter-in-law. The father would use this term rather than her name.
4. Babu, or Babuji: father.
5. Sister-in-law; as in Chakli Bhabi.
6. Dupatta is a long scarf of three piece outfit worn by women mostly in North Western India; the other two pieces being *gamees*, overdress, and *shalwar*, baggy trousers. A woman in the presence of her husband or elders always keeps her head covered with dupatta as a sign of respect and submission. In the presence of men other than her husband she will also veil her face with the dupatta.
7. Indian style rope bed.
8. Dulari means loved one or beloved.
9. The legendary physician of the gods.
10. An oboe-like instrument commonly played at weddings.
11. Snake charmer's pipe.
12. Draupadi was the daughter of Drupada, king of Panchala, and wife of the five Pandu princes. In the great gambling match which the oldest Pandu prince Yudhisthira played against his cousins,

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the Kauravas, he lost his all—even their wife Draupadi. There upon Duhshasan, one of the Kauravas, abused her, tried to disgrace her and tear off her veil and dress, but the god Krishna took compassion upon her, and restored her garments as fast as they were torn. The episode is narrated in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*.

13. The Hindu goddess of sexual pleasures.
14. July-August, first months of monsoon rain in India.
15. August-September, the most pleasant months of the rainy season.
16. 'My salutations, Lord Vasudeva..' A Sanskrit Mantra. Vasudeva is an epithet of Krishna: 'Son of Vasudeva.'
17. One of the milkman castes.
18. 'Lady' or 'Wife,' a term of address.
* A term of abuse.
19. For a wife to swear by her husband's life is a very serious oath. According to popular belief, if such an oath is taken falsely, the husband may die.
20. Various methods believed to bring pregnancy to a barren woman.
21. Savitri's story is mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. She married Satyavan in spite of warning by a seer that he would die after a year. On the fatal day, as Satyavan was cutting wood in the forest, he fell ill and died. When Yama, the god of death, took her husband's spirit away, she followed them through the jungle, and pleaded so well for her husband that Yama, touched by her love and devotion, restored Satyavan to life.
22. A festival celebrating the anniversary of Rama's victory over the demon Ravana; generally falls on the tenth day of a lunar fortnight. Hence called the Vijaya Dashami, 'victorious tenth.'
23. Term of address to Muslim midwife.
24. A disinfectant herbal seed which is put on burning charcoal to purify the air.
25. Nand and Yashoda were the foster parents of Krishna. Allusion here is made to the great care and affection they bestowed on the child Krishna when he was secretly left under their protection to avoid death at the hands of the tyrannical King Kansa. Hence the name Nand Lal, i.e., the son of Nand.
26. Sita was daughter of Janaka, and wife of Rama, the Vaishnava god. According to popular belief she was found in a clay vessel in a field, when Janaka was ploughing; hence referred to as the daughter of the Earth. She was the only wife of Rama, and is considered the embodiment of purity, tenderness, and conjugal affection. Her legend is narrated in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*.
27. Name of a part of the Hindu marriage ceremony where the hands of the bride and bridegroom are joined, usually by the mother of the bride.

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28. Harischandra is a legendary king celebrated for his piety, truthfulness and justice. Stories about him are told in the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*.
29. Kind of pan, betel leaf, especially good.
30. Bindi is the red beauty mark applied mostly by married Hindu women on the forehead.
31. A local perfume.