

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

Aunty Scorpion

WHEN I SAW HER for the first time she was seated in the ground-floor window of Rahman Bhai's house cursing and swearing. This window, which looked into our courtyard, was kept closed as a matter of principle since there was always the possibility of coming face to face with women who observed purdah. Rahman Bhai was in the employ of nautch girls. No matter what the function at his house—a circumcision ceremony, *bismillah*, or wedding—Rahman Bhai always succeeded in getting one of these women to dance at the celebration; Waheeda Jan, Mushtari Bai and Anwari were able to grace a poor man's house at least once with their presence.

But he treated the young girls and women in his neighborhood with the utmost respect. His younger brothers, Bundu and Genda, on the other hand, were always getting into trouble because of their philandering ways. Still, his neighbors did not view him favorably. He had established illicit relations with his sister-in-law while his wife lived. This orphaned girl, who had no one in the world to call her own except her sister, had been forced to live in her sister's house. She took care of her sister's children and with the exclusion of nursing them herself, she did everything for them, including cleaning their soiled clothes and washing their filth. And then one day a woman from the neighborhood saw her nursing the baby. The secret was out. People realized that half the children in that household resembled their aunt. Rahman's wife may have castigated her sister in private, but in public she never admitted to any wrongdoing on her part. She always said, "Whoever accuses a virgin of such things will be punished by fate." However, she was on a constant

"Biččhū Phūpi," from her collection *Dō Hāt*^h (Lahore: Šiš Maḥal Kitāb Ghar, 1966), pp. 179–194.

lookout for a groom for her sister. But who would want to have anything to do with the worm-eaten kabob? In one eye she had a white spot the size of a penny, and because one foot was smaller than the other, she walked with a limp.

A strange kind of boycott had come into effect in the neighborhood. If someone needed Rahman Bhai's services he was simply given an order along with, "Haven't we given you permission to continue living here?" And Rahman Bhai quietly submitted because he considered this to be an honor.

That is why she sat in Rahman Bhai's window and delivered lengthy invectives. The others were afraid of Abba; who wanted to tangle with a magistrate?

On that day I discovered that Badshahi Khanum, whom we called Bichu Phupi, was my only real aunt, my father's real sister, and this long-drawn tongue-lashing was aimed at members of our family.

Amma's face was ashen. Cowering, she fearfully sat in her room as if waiting for Bichu Phupi's voice to strike her like a bolt of lightning. Every six months or so Bichu Phupi stationed herself in Rahman Bhai's window and bellowed at us. Reclining in a chair slightly out of her view, Abba would appear totally immersed in the newspaper in his lap during all of this. Occasionally he sent up one of the boys with a message for her, repudiating something she had said. A new burst of temper followed as a result. All of us would abandon our play and congregate in the veranda to hear our dear Bichu Phupi swear and curse. The window at which she sat was filled with the weight and expanse of her body and she resembled Abba so much it seemed it was he up there without his moustache, a *dupattā* covering his head. Unruffled by the force of her diatribe, we calmly continued to stand around and gaze at her. Five feet six inches in height, thick wrists with joints like a lion's, hair white as a heron, large teeth, a voluminous chin, and her voice—God be praised! It was only one note lower than Abba's.

Bichu Phupi always wore white. The day her husband, Masud Phupa, made a play for the cleaning girl, Phupi smashed all her bangles with a stone weight and removed the colored *dupattā* from her head. From that day on she referred to her husband as "late" or "dead." She refused to allow hands and feet that had known the touch of a cleaning woman's body to come into contact with hers.

This unhappy event took place when she was quite young, and she had been suffering "widowhood" since then. Masud Phupa was also my mother's uncle. There was something strange in all this. Before they were

married, my father was my mother's distant uncle. In those days my mother was petrified by my father. When she found out she was about to become engaged to him she sneaked some opium from her grandmother's purse and swallowed it. Since the amount she ingested was very small she recovered after a few days of discomfort. Abba was in college in Aligarh at the time. He was in the middle of exams when he heard what had happened, and dropping everything he dashed to my grandmother's house. My grandfather, who was also Abba's first cousin and good friend, pacified him with great difficulty and tried to convince him to return to college. Hungry and nervous, Abba paced up and down not far from my mother's bed. Through the bed curtains, her eyes half-closed, my mother saw the shadow of his broad, overbearing shoulders shaking with anxiety.

"Umrao Bhai, if something happens to her . . .," the giant's voice broke.

Grandfather laughed loudly. "No, no, dear brother, don't worry, she will be all right."

At that moment my little, innocent mother became a woman; fear of this giantlike man vanished from her heart. For this reason Bichu Phupi used to say, "The woman is a magician, she had relations with my brother, she was pregnant before she was married."

When my mother heard these imprecations being uttered in the presence of her grown children, her face crinkled up and she started crying. At that time we forgot all her harsh treatment of us and felt a gentle fondness for her. But as for Abba, these foul remarks caused little fairies to dance in his eyes. He would send up Nannhe Bhai with an affectionate message for Bichu Phupi:

"Well, Phupi, what did you eat today?"

"Your mother's liver!" she exclaimed, burnt to a cinder with his response.

Abba would send her another message: "Why, Phupi, that's why you have hemorrhoids in your mouth. Take some laxative, I say, some laxative."

She would then begin cursing my older brother with the malediction that his virile body be picked by crows and vultures; she pronounced the curse of widowhood upon his bride-to-be who sat in some room, God knows where, dreaming about her bridegroom-to-be. And through all of this, her fingers stuffed in her ears, my mother would chant the incantation, "You are Might, You are Mighty, rid us of this calamity."

After a short while Abba would give Bichu Phupi another push and Nannhe Bhai would ask, "Badshahi Phupi, is Sweeperess Phupi well?"

And we would wonder fearfully if Phupi might jump at us from the window now.

“Go, you son of a snake! Don’t quibble with me or else I’ll crush your face with my shoe! This old man hiding inside, why is he sending out the boys? If he is a true Mughal I challenge him to come out and face me himself.”

“Rahman Bhai, O Rahman Bhai, why don’t you give this wrinkled old hag some poison?” Scared out of his wits, Nannhe Bhai said what Abba had instructed him to. But he had no reason to be afraid because although he was the speaker, everyone knew the words came from Abba. For this reason the pain of sin would not be Nannhe Bhai’s. Nevertheless, addressing such rude remarks to an aunt who resembled Abba so closely made him break out in a cold sweat.

What a difference there was between my father’s family and my mother’s. My mother’s family lived in Hakimon Gali, while my father’s family held residence in Banon Kathre. My mother’s forefathers traced their roots to Salim Chishti. By awarding him the title of *muršid*, the Mughal emperor had found the way to salvation. They had lived in Hindustan for hundreds of years; their complexions had become darker, their features had lost their sharpness, and their temperaments had mellowed.

My father’s ancestors had arrived with the last of the troops. Mentally they were still riding in battle. There was a fire in their blood, their features bore the sharpness of a sword’s edge, their complexions were fair like those of the British invaders, their statures reminded one of gorillas, their voices thundered like a lion’s roar, and their hands and feet were like boards.

And my mother’s kinsmen—they were of delicate build, of poetic temperament, and soft spoken. By profession they were usually *hakims* or *maulvis*, which is why their street had come to be known as Hakimon Gali. Some of them had begun to take an interest in business and had turned to professions like gold-lace weaving and perfumery. Because most of my father’s relatives held posts in the army, they considered these jobs to be low-class jobs and unsuitable for men. It is true that my mother’s people had not developed an interest in any competitive sports—wrestling, swimming, arm-wrestling, fencing, for example. And Parcheesi, a favorite in my mother’s family, was viewed by my father’s side of the family as a game fit only for eunuchs.

It is said that when a volcano erupts the lava flows into the valley. Perhaps that is why my mother’s family was inevitably drawn to my

father's family. Answers to how and when this connection began can be found in the family records, but I don't really remember much. I know that my paternal grandfather was not born in Hindustan and my grandmothers were both from the same family. But there was one younger sister who was wed into the family of Sheikhs. Maybe my mother's people had cast a spell on my father's family, which is why they gave their daughter to "low class commoners," as Bichu Phupi liked to call them. While she swore at her "late" husband, she also heaped curses on her dead father who had ground the Chughtai name into the mud.

My aunt had three brothers. Two of them were older than her, one younger. Since she was the only sister, she became willful and headstrong, always getting her way, always forcing her three brothers to do her bidding. She was raised like a boy, rode horses, could use the bow and arrow, and was quite adept at fencing. Although her body had expanded to look like a mound, she still stuck out her chest proudly like a wrestler. Of course her chest was the size of four female chests.

Abba used to tease Amma: "Dear, would you like to wrestle with Badshahi?"

"May I be saved from punishment!" Amma would lift her hands to touch her ears, and mutter. But Abba immediately sent off Nannhe Bhai with the challenge.

"Phupi, will you wrestle with my mother?"

"Yes, yes, why not? Go tell your mother to come here, tell her to prepare herself and come right away. If I don't make her look like a fool, don't call me Mirza Karim Beg's daughter! If you are your father's son, bring her to me, bring that daughter of a *maulvi* to me . . ."

Clutching the folds of her wide-legged *šalvār* in one hand, Amma would hastily retreat into a corner.

"Aunt Badshahi, Grandfather was illiterate, wasn't he?"

Perhaps a long time ago Amma's great-grandfather had given Abba's father a few lessons. Abba distorted the facts to provoke Bichu Phupi.

"That man? What could that butt-wiper teach my father? That caretaker who was raised on our crumbs?" This was a reference to the relationship between Salim Chishti and Emperor Akbar. The Chughtais traced their lineage to the family of Emperor Akbar who had endowed Salim Chishti, my mother's ancestor, with the title of spiritual leader. But Phupi said, "Nonsense, utter nonsense! Spiritual leader indeed! He was just a caretaker at the shrine, just a caretaker."

She had three brothers, but she had quarreled with all of them. When she battled with one, she reviled them all. The oldest was a devoutly

religious man; she referred to him as a beggar and a vagrant. My father was a government official, so she called him a traitor and a slave of the British (because the British had put an end to Mughal rule). But for that she would have been in Lal Qila now, drenched in rose perfume, a queen, instead of ending up with her “late” husband whom she accused of belonging to that class of weavers who had a penchant for soupy *dāl*. Her third brother, my youngest uncle, was a scoundrel and a villain. The policeman used to appear at our door nervously to check on his whereabouts because he had committed innumerable thefts and murders and was a drunk and a debauchee. Bichu Phupi referred to him as a dacoit, a title that was rather insipid when viewed against the colorful background of his career.

When she squabbled with her husband, however, she would say, “May your face burn! I’m not helpless and alone, I’m the only sister of three brothers. If they hear of this you will not be able to show your face to the world. As a matter of fact, if my youngest brother finds out he will take out your intestines and slap them into your hands, he’s a dacoit, a dacoit! And should you escape his wrath, my magistrate brother will make you rot in jail, he’ll force you to grind grain for the rest of your life. And if by some chance you slip from his hands, the oldest, who is so pious, will put a curse on your afterlife. Look here, I’m a Mughal woman, not some Sheikhani or a common worker’s daughter like your mother.” But Uncle Masud knew that he had the sympathy of the three brothers, so he listened to the stream of abuse with a smile. It was this very smile that my mother’s relatives had used to torment my father’s family for years.

On every Eid feast day my father went directly from the mosque to Bichu Phupi’s house with his sons to hear her curse and swear. On their arrival she hastily withdrew into the inner room and from there issued insults about my sorceress mother and her villainous brother. She sent out her servant with sweet vermicelli, but with the message, “This is from a neighbor.”

“There is no poison in this, is there?” Abba would tease. And right away my mother and her family would be shredded to pieces. After partaking of the *sevaiyān* Abba gave her *īdī* which she would immediately throw on the floor, saying, “Give this money to your wife’s brothers who have lived on your scraps.” Abba would leave quietly. He knew that as soon as his back was turned she would pick up the money, press it to her eyes, and weep for hours. She sent for her nephews and secretly gave them *īdī*.

“Bastards, if you breathe a word of this to your father or mother I’ll

cut you up into little pieces and feed you to the dogs.” But Abba knew how much she had given the boys. If for some reason Abba was not able to make it to her house on Eid, one message followed after another. “Nusrat Khanum (my mother) is widowed at last . . . good, I’m glad, I’m so relieved.” Insulting messages continued to pour in all day; then in the evening she would make an appearance at Rahman Bhai’s window and start swearing at us from there.

One day while eating *sevaiyān* Abba became nauseated and threw up, probably due to the heat.

“Badshahi Begum, please forgive and forget—my time has come it seems,” he groaned. Without wasting a second, her veil thrown carelessly over her face, beating her chest with her hands, Bichu Phupi was at our door in no time. But when she saw Abba laughing mischievously she turned around and left, leaving behind a trail of insults in her wake as she stormed out of the house.

“Because you are here Badshahi, the angel of death has taken off in fear,” Abba said. “I would certainly have died today if you had not come.”

I cannot tell you what kind of maledictions fell from Bichu Phupi’s lips. As soon as she saw he was out of danger she said, “God willing you will be struck by a bolt of lightning, you’ll take your last breath in the gutter, there won’t be anyone around to carry you to the grave.”

Abba gave her two rupees and teased, “We must pay our family entertainers for their spoofery.”

Momentarily befuddled, Phupi blurted out, “Give the money to your mother and sister!” And immediately thereafter she slapped her face and said, “*Ai* Badshahi, may your face be blackened—you’re digging your own grave?”

Actually Bichu Phupi was at daggers drawn only with Abba. If she met Amma by herself somewhere she would draw her close and hug her and lovingly call her “Nachu, Nachu,” and ask, “are the children well?” She completely forgot that the children she was inquiring about were the offspring of that unfortunate brother whom she had cursed all her life. Amma was also her niece. What a rigmarole it was! By some odd coincidence I was my mother’s distant cousin as well, and by that token my father was also my brother-in-law. There’s no doubt that my mother’s family caused Bichu Phupi’s family much grief, but it was really disastrous when Bichu Phupi’s daughter, Musarrat Khanum, fell in love with my mother’s brother.

This is what happened. My mother’s grandmother, who was also my father’s aunt, fell sick and when she was about to die, members of both

families arrived to tend to her. Uncle Muzaffar, my mother's brother, came to nurse his grandmother, and Musarrat Khanum arrived with her mother who was there to minister to her aunt.

Bichu Phupi had no fear in her heart. She knew that she had trained her children to hate and despise her side of the family, and Musarrat Khanum was too young anyway; only fifteen, she still slept with her mother and as far as Bichu Phupi was concerned she was still a baby.

But when Uncle Muzaffar lifted his brown, liquid eyes and saw Musarrat Khanum's delicate form, he could not tear his gaze away from her.

During the day, when the elders, tired from a full night of waiting hand and foot on my mother's grandmother, slept, the faithful young sat at the sick woman's bedside, keeping less of an eye on her and more on each other. When Musarrat Khanum extended her hand to remove the cold compress from the old lady's forehead, Uncle Muzaffar's hand was already there.

The next day the old woman suddenly opened her eyes. Shaky, using the pillows to lift herself, she slowly sat up and immediately summoned the whole family. "Call a *maulvi*," she ordered.

Everyone was perplexed. No one could understand why she wanted the *maulvi* at this time. Did she want to get married on her deathbed? But not a single person had the courage to question her command.

"Marry these two right away." People were dumbfounded. Who were "these two?" Just then Musarrat Khanum fainted and fell to the floor. Alarmed, Uncle Muzaffar quickly ran out of the room. The thieves were caught. The ceremony took place. Bichu Phupi was stunned.

Although nothing untoward had happened—they had simply held hands briefly—the old woman thought they had exceeded the limits.

And now Bichu Phupi exploded. She attacked without the aid of horse and sword and laid waste to the path before her. Her son-in-law and daughter were banished from the house that very moment. Since they had nowhere to go, Abba brought them to our house. Amma was beside herself with joy to be in the company of such a beautiful sister-in-law, and *valima* celebrations were held with great pomp.

Bichu Phupi didn't see her daughter's face again and announced she would henceforth hide her face from her brother. She was already estranged from her husband and now she turned away from the rest of the world. What was it but a poison that invaded her heart and head; her life threatened her like a viper.

"The old hag played this little game so she could ensnare my

daughter for her grandson,” she kept saying, and she might have been right because the old lady lived for another twenty years after that.

Brother and sister never reconciled. When paralysis struck Abba for the fourth time and the end seemed near, he sent for Bichu Phupi.

“Badshahi, I’m taking my last breath, come now if you want to fulfill your heart’s desire.”

Who knows what arrows were concealed in this message. The brother sent them and they pierced the sister’s heart. Trembling, beating her chest with her hands, Bichu Phupi appeared at the door she had abandoned for a lifetime and thundered into the house like a white volcano.

“Badshahi, your prayers are being answered.” Abba was smiling despite his pain. His eyes still had a youthful look in them.

Although her hair was all white, Bichu Phupi suddenly looked like the little Bichu who used to throw a tantrum and force her brothers to give in to her every request. In her eyes, which were usually vicious like a lion’s, was a fearful, cowering expression; large tears rolled down her marble cheeks.

“Bichu, my dear, scold me,” Abba said lovingly. Between sobs my mother begged Bichu Phupi for curses.

“O God, O God,” she tried to roar, but her voice quivered and broke instead. “O God, bless my brother with my life . . . dear God, in the name of your beloved prophet . . .” She began weeping like a child who is frustrated because she cannot remember a lesson correctly.

Everyone became pale. The earth seemed to slip from under Amma’s feet. O God! Not a single curse fell from Bichu Phupi’s lips that day!

Abba was the only one who was smiling, smiling the way he used to when he heard her swear.

It is true that a sister’s curses cannot harm her brother. They are dipped in mother’s milk.

—*Translated by Tabira Naqvi*