

GHULAM ABBAS

In the Winter Moonlight*

WITHIN THE DISTRICTS OF PUNJAB there are many small townships where the population is not more than a few hundred. Even so, such places can boast of having a railway station. Usually these stations look deserted because express and mail trains can't lower themselves to stop there and they pass through like a stormy gust. However, slow passenger trains arrive at four or five hour intervals and brighten up the platform for a few minutes. But as soon as they're gone, the platform once again appears desolate.

Jamalpura is one such railway station. It is four o'clock in the afternoon in the month of May. At exactly forty-seven minutes past the hour an inbound passenger train is due to arrive. The platform is coming alive. The station clerk, who had disappeared for quite some time to God knows where, can be seen going in and out of his room. Travelers from nearby villages who had arrived at the station hours ahead of time and were lying around on the station's portico or near the ticket window, are now up and stretching. Clustered around the station's water tap, they are busy, leisurely washing their hands and faces in a style typical of rural folks. A hawker is walking up and down calling out his wares. A skinny, mangy dog is following along behind the hawker, dodging his swinging strap. When the hawker sets up his table, the dog settles down a yard or two away.

In front of the station master's office, two women have grabbed the platform's only bench. One of them is middle-aged and the other young. The older woman is resting with a bundle under her head for a pillow and the younger is sitting near her feet. The middle-aged woman with her

*"Barda-Farōsh," from the author's collection *Jāṛē kī Čāndnī* (Karachi: Sajjād Kāmṛān, 1960), pp. 106–25.

simple clothes and plain appearance looks like a villager, but the younger one is dressed like a low-class town girl spruced up for a wedding or festival. She has henna on her hands and feet. Her shalwar-kamiz is imprinted with large purple flowers, and on her head there is a red *mulmul* dupatta edged with imitation gold lace. In her nose there is a gold stud and she's wearing silver earrings. Her lips are tinged a dark maroon red with *missi*. Her features are sharp and there is a brazen, naughty look in her eyes. Sexuality is oozing from every inch of her body. Arms akimbo, palms cradling the nape of her neck, she is leaning back against the bench scrutinizing every passerby. Since there are only a few travelers on the platform, the stray dogs and crows eventually become the focus of her attention.

With a cigarette between his lips, and his hair plastered with oil slicked down on both sides of his face, the station clerk emerged from his room. Throwing a cursory glance at the girl, he began to pace the platform. Noticing him, the girl got up from the bench and came up to him smiling awkwardly: "Babu Sahib, give me just *one* cigarette."

The clerk looked around nervously to see if anyone was within earshot.

"Go away, I don't have cigarettes."

"Come now, Babu Sahib, I just woke up a minute ago and I swear to God I have such a craving."

The clerk did not reply and walked swiftly to the far end of the platform. The girl followed somewhat clumsily; along the way she saw the dog lying on the ground and playfully stepped on its tail. Caught unawares, the dog began barking and the girl almost collided with the hawker. In a moment she was talking with the vendor: "What do you have man?"

"Fritters and sesame candy made with molasses."

"Hunh!"

"Jujubes."

"Hunh"

"Peanuts and sweetened chickpeas."

"Give me an anna's worth of peanuts."

She asked him to put the peanuts in the folds of her dupatta and walked off.

"Bibi, where's the money?"

"What money?"

"I just gave you an anna's worth of peanuts."

"I don't have an anna."

"I can give you change for a rupee."

"I don't have a rupee."

"Then give back the peanuts."

"Hah—I'm not going to return those."

The hawker had reached the end of his patience and was about to create a scene when the middle-aged woman who was with the girl arrived on the spot and guessed what was wrong at once.

"Don't worry *bhaiyya*, how much is it?"

"Four paisas."

"Here, take this." And, grabbing the girl by her arm, she took her away.

"Reshma," she chided affectionately, "how many times have I told you not to buy things when you don't have money."

"Unh," Reshma responded thoughtlessly, "the vendors do get paid, Mai Jammi."

After an hour or so the two women were traveling in a "third class" compartment. The coach was crowded with people, but they somehow managed to find a seat in a corner. Putting their heads together they were talking in whispers. Mai Jammi was saying, "And Reshma, this Chowdhury, he's well-off. He has loads of jewelry from his first wife which he has hidden somewhere. You'll have to shed your naiveté to win his heart. Talk to him of love and ardor, keep his hookah fresh, and press his feet at bedtime. Once he starts trusting you, he'll give you the keys to the house. This way, in a couple of months you'll have everything under your control and then I'll come and get you away from there."

"But this is what you said about that dried up old stick Karam Din—that he's a miser but loaded with money. I couldn't even find a pin in his house!"

"We were *deceived*, he was a cheat and a trickster. Luckily, I was able to get you out of his house quickly."

"That rascal was always on my back. He had alerted the neighbors as well, and even hired an old woman to keep an eye on me. One day, after he became suspicious of my intentions, he took me inside a closed room and brandished a carving knife in front of me warning me that if I tried to escape he would cut me to pieces. I hated him from that day."

"Anyway, God helped you get free from his clutches. Now, this Chowdhury is a *namazi* and a God fearing man. Ever since his wife died he has been anxious to find a companion and make a home again."

"I hope he's not too old?"

"No, not really."

“Now what is his age?”

“Maybe fifty or fifty-five.”

It was close to midnight when the train stopped at the rural station where those women were headed. They got off and went to the waiting room where they spent the remainder of the night. Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mai Jammi took away Reshma's red dupatta and gave her a white chador instead so that she would look like a proper village woman. After all, they were in a new village and caution was called for. The less noticeable they were, the better it would be. Both women arranged their chadors to form oversized hoods to conceal their faces and then walked towards the village.

Reshma had been living at Chowdhury Gulab's house for fifteen or twenty days, but was still unsure how to behave in this new place. On the first day, her heart was beating madly. She had no idea what to expect, for who knew exactly what kind of a man Chowdhury was. Maybe he was brutal like Karam Din. Would he make her do a lot of work? What if he beat her? Who would be watching her? What kind of unpleasant duties would sleeping with him entail? And would she be able to keep up her facade yet again? In the space of a few days all her fears were allayed. And once again she became her naturally vivacious, youthful self.

Chowdhury Gulab was a simple, harmless man of few words. He was at least sixty years old but, like many rustic zamindars, he was tall, broad shouldered and strong of limb. However, it was true that he had reached an age when passions begin to cool and a special effort is needed to arouse those feelings. The will to act is replaced by complacency and contentment, and if there's something lacking in physical pleasure, it is compensated for through imagination.

Then again, because he was mindful of performing the namaz and observing religious restraints, he always smelled clean. Reshma never noticed the slightest odor from his clothes or body. He had a long white beard that he combed every day. Only a few strands of hair remained on his head and he religiously applied surma to his eyes morning and evening. There was a strange innocence in his ways that made him a very cute, endearing old man. From his first wife he had two daughters who had been married off long ago. He had no son and still longed for one.

Reshma would often ask him in her naive way, “Chowdhury, what do you ask God for after namaz?” And Chowdhury would smile.

“Do you pray for a son?” And Chowdhury would laugh.

“Do ask God for a long life for Reshma.” And in reply to that Chowdhury would pinch her cheek lovingly.

Reshma had no other chores except preparing meals twice a day. Sweeping, making dung cakes, feeding and milking the buffalos, etc., was all taken care of by an old village woman. She had been employed by Chowdhury to do this work in exchange for grain and vegetables from his farm. Then there were several farmhands that worked in the fields. Chowdhury himself stayed out in the fields all day. From the very first day he had given Reshma charge of the household. Once the meals were cooked, Reshma would lie in bed and order the old woman around.

There was a world of difference between Karam Din’s place and this house. There she was like a slave who had been bought. And here she was the mistress of the house. There she felt demeaned, and here everyone respected her. So much so that even Chowdhury treated her with respect.

Reshma had been five years old when she was kidnapped from her neighborhood in her hometown. She grew up moving around from one village to another until finally she reached the age when girls are married and a woman, pretending to be her aunt, sold her to a well-to-do family for a good price. The first man she was wedded to was young, but he was so wild that no father would have given his daughter in marriage to him. He was cruel as well as wild, and, whenever it possessed him, he would beat Reshma for no reason. Once he was strangling her so hard that her eyes were bulging and she would have died but for a servant woman who saw it, raised an alarm, and scared him off.

In due course, Reshma devised a way of protecting herself from this crazy man. Whenever she sensed that something was amiss, she would begin to act demented and fling at him whatever she could lay her hands on in the kitchen. This usually had the desired effect and he would back off. Four years passed this way. But how long can one go on living like that: forever fearful? So she began to think of ways to escape. She befriended an old woman who had connections with a gang of traffickers. This woman helped Reshma escape and then sold her to Mai Jammi.

Four years with a wild man had made Reshma half crazed. She had lost her sense of equilibrium. Mai Jammi showered her with affection, plied her with good food and, in the space of three or four months, tamed her with love. Then she began to train her to follow in her own profession.

Mai Jammi’s style of trafficking girls was unique. It was almost like an art. She always searched for older men who were especially eager for young girls and willing to pay a generous amount to get one. That way,

when the girl ran away with money and jewels they were too embarrassed to talk about it. They feared being ridiculed and they also lacked the energy to chase after the girl. So in a few months the whole incident would be forgotten and Mai Jammi would begin looking all over again for another victim in some distant place.

Having spent most of her life with criminals, Reshma had begun to perceive it as a dangerous game in which a player's life was always at risk and where, eventually, a day would come when the player's time ran out. Reshma actually liked this game; it suited her unruly disposition and gave her an opportunity to get back at men. Unfortunately, so far, only tribulations had come her way and she hadn't experienced any of the thrills that make this dangerous game worthwhile. Living in Chowdhury Gulab's house she became aware of the significance of life for the first time. There was safety within this house, and all sorts of dangers lurking without. The livid faces of the people she had duped sailed by in front of her eyes. Often she would mistake strangers for one of "them," she would become startled for no reason, and scream in her sleep.

Days went by. It was now three months since Reshma had come to live with Chowdhury Gulab. She had become more used to comfort and safety than ever before. Chowdhury was becoming fonder of her by the day. Now and then he would bring her odd bits of jewelry.

One day when she was alone in the house an old woman came begging. As Reshma was about to put a fistful of flour in the woman's cloth bag, she whispered: "Do you remember me? Mai Jammi sent me. Tell me, when do you want to leave?"

Reshma recognized the old woman and shivered apprehensively. She turned pale but quickly recovered and said, "Tell Mai Jammi I'm not ready yet. I still don't know where the jewels are, ask her to wait another month."

The beggar woman went away muttering to herself.

Another month passed. This time Mai Jammi came herself and arrived at the house in the morning when Chowdhury was at home. He was under the impression that Mai Jammi was Reshma's maternal aunt and was so poverty stricken that she had been forced to sell her dead sister's daughter, her only child. Chowdhury welcomed Mai Jammi, courteously inquired after her health, and then left to work on the farm, leaving the two women alone together.

"Any news of the jewelry?" Mai Jammi asked.

"Oh, I don't have to dig it out of him, he's giving it to me bit by bit himself. Look!"

“You call these earrings and these rings jewelry? You fool, jewelry is necklaces with seven strands, long necklaces, bracelets, hair ornaments, chokers, anyway, forget it, we don’t want that now. I’ve come to get you. I’ve arranged for a horse.”

“No Mai Jammi, I’m not ready yet.” Then she added in a voice tinged with a mixture of fear and bashfulness, “I don’t want to leave, I have so many comforts here.”

“Ah! So that’s it. Kammo told me that you seemed changed but I didn’t believe her.” Then Mai Jammi said in a stern voice, “Look my girl, don’t be silly, you have to go with me and it’s got to be tonight. I’ve found a rich policeman as a customer for you. He’ll cover you with gold from head to toe. I’ve finalized the deal with him.”

“Mai Jammi,” Reshma pleaded timidly, “I beg of you, please let me stay here. I’ll give you all the jewelry. Whatever Chowdhury gives me will be yours. But please leave me here.”

A bitter smile played on Mai Jammi’s lips.

“*Arri*, you haven’t seen anything yet. Why fall for an old man. If you want to enjoy life’s pleasures, go for a young man. What does this old man have anyway?”

“No! No, I don’t want any man. I don’t want this old man either. I just want to lead a comfortable life.”

“Look Reshma,” Mai said gravely, “you’ll never get what you want. And if you won’t listen to me now, I have other ways of making you listen. You know, don’t you, that Karam Din is still looking for you and he still has that scythe. He doesn’t know that I helped you run away. I can go to him and give him your address.”

Mai Jammi had barely uttered these words when it seemed as if a tornado touched down. Reshma grabbed Mai like an angry lioness. She scratched Mai’s face with her nails, drawing blood. She kicked her in the stomach several times and the old woman practically stopped breathing.

“You witch, you bastard, whore, thief, get out of this house or I’ll wring your neck.” And saying this, Reshma spat angrily on Mai’s face.

Reshma looked so wild that it seemed entirely possible she would do just as she threatened. Mai had been so taken aback by her abuses that she didn’t try to defend herself. She got up, dusted off her clothes, and wiped her face with a corner of her chador, a face that was now repulsively contorted with hatred. She left without a word. After she had gone Reshma threw herself on the bed and wept loudly. When Chowdhury returned for lunch she got up, as strong as ever, and headed towards the kitchen to serve him his food.

“Your aunt left?” Chowdhury inquired.

“Yes.”

“You should have asked her to eat.”

“She developed a stomachache and had to go get medicine from a hakim in her village.”

A week went by after this incident during which Reshma had lost her peace of mind. At the slightest sound she imagined she heard footsteps and repeatedly ran to the door, only to turn back. Within two days her eyes had dark rings around them and her skin had a sickly pallor, as if she had suddenly been struck by a fatal illness. If she wanted to speak with Chowdhury she could barely get the words out, and when he spoke to her she hardly heard him. Chowdhury often had to repeat himself many times. He noticed the change in her and said, “You’re not well, come, let me take you to a hakim.”

“No, I’m fine,” she replied, “sometimes I get like this, it’s been this way since I was a child, but it goes away by itself in a few days.”

Many days passed but there was no change in her condition. Sometimes she felt she should make a clean breast of it to Chowdhury, tell him everything and then be at his mercy. But the self-esteem that Chowdhury’s kindness had awakened in her prevented her from doing so. How could she admit that she was a liar and a thief? That every moment of the past four months that she had spent in his house was imbued with duplicity. And where was the guarantee that upon hearing she belonged to a criminal gang that had robbed several households and would have robbed him in the near future, Chowdhury wouldn’t insult her and throw her out of his house? So she decided it was prudent to keep quiet and leave the rest to fate.

She wasn’t sorry that she had behaved so cruelly with Mai Jammi. If she had been wily she could have held Mai off for a few more months. But to live in hope and fear was against her wild temperament. For her, death was preferable to such an existence. She simply wanted to get it over with. And she was happy that she had extracted her revenge. So she waited for the inevitable and she didn’t have to wait long, the crucial moment did arrive.

It was evening. Lamps were lit in the houses. She was sitting near the stove serving supper to Chowdhury when one of the farmhands, announcing his presence with a cough, stepped into the courtyard. “Chowdhury Sahib,” he said, “someone is here to see you.”

“Who is it?”

“Some zamindar, old, white haired, didn’t tell me his name. Says it’s important, he has traveled many miles to get here.”

“Alright, ask him to have a seat and bring a fresh hookah for him. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Reshma was suddenly dizzy. She leaned towards the floor using her arm for support. But it was only a momentary weakness. She soon got a grip on herself and sat silently watching Chowdhury eat. She was slowly coming to a firm resolution. She felt she could face any eventuality.

After finishing his supper Chowdhury rinsed his mouth, smoothed his moustache and beard and, wiping his mouth with a corner of his tehmad, he went outside.

One minute, two minutes, five minutes, fifteen minutes went by and Chowdhury did not come back. Reshma could hear the regular gurgling sound coming from the hookah and concluded that they were still exchanging pleasantries and had not broached the real reason for the stranger’s visit.

Eventually, after half an hour, Chowdhury returned. He looked extremely agitated. His eyes were pinched, his hands shook and his beard was dotted with spittle.

“You there,” he said in a shaken voice, “do you know Karam Din?”

And in a similar tone, a little above a whisper, Reshma replied, “Yes.”

“Then whatever he says is true?”

Expressing no desire to find out what had been said, she answered, “Yes.”

And having said that she felt as if a load had been lifted off her chest.

“You shameless, low-class woman.”

These were the first harsh words she had ever heard Chowdhury Gulab say to her. Yet in a strange way these words did not harm her new-found self-esteem. In fact she rather enjoyed hearing them; a faint smile played on her lips.

Chowdhury stamped his foot in anger, went into his room, and paced the courtyard as if he felt at a loss as to what to do. Eventually he went outside.

Reshma now felt as free and bold as she did before. She felt released from all restraints: manners, self-respect, self-esteem and so on. She had bound herself with these restraints for no reason but now she was happily anticipating the scenes that would follow even though the outcome could well be tragic for her.

With slow steps she crossed the courtyard and stood behind the door eavesdropping. The two men were sitting across from one another on the

string-bed. Chowdhury Gulab was saying heatedly, "Filing claims and going to court is for impotent men. Real men have other ways; if you agree we can decide the matter right away."

"I agree," Karam Din replied angrily, "I'm not a jackal either."

Shortly afterward, Chowdhury Gulab, Karam Din and Reshma could be seen walking on the narrow paths between fields, going towards the far end of the village which was forested and uninhabited. It was the last week of January, and very cold. There was a full moon that night, or perhaps it was a day short, and, as the moon rose higher, the night became frostier. They had wrapped themselves in thick unbleached cotton sheets. The two men walked in front and Reshma followed behind them. Silently they walked until they reached the forest. But they didn't stop there, they went on walking in the light of the moon that filtered through the treetops and dappled the narrow path. Eventually they came out of the forest at a spot surrounded by low mounds on which thorny bushes grew and the bones of dead animals were littered about. This place was so desolate that no human would pass this way in daylight, much less at night. Selecting a raised, clear and level piece of ground, Chowdhury halted, "This place looks right," he said. These were the first words any of them had uttered during the past two hours of travel.

"As you wish," Karam Din replied.

Both men's faces were taut and their eyebrows stretched tight. They removed their turbans, unwrapped their cloaks and put them on the ground to one side. Pulling up their tehmad they tucked the ends between their legs in a langot-like fashion and then their scythes gleamed in the moonlight as they got ready to duel.

Reshma was tired of walking so she seated herself on a rock, a supercilious smile playing on her lips. She watched their duel with interest. She had never witnessed such a scene before. There was no trace of fear in her heart or any concern as to who would win and become the master of her fate. With a mischievous joy she watched the old men fight, she was like a child watching a show of bears wrestling.

For several minutes the two men, scythes drawn, stood facing one another. Then they lunged, their bald pates gleamed in the moonlight and their white beards, whiter in this light, fluttered.

For a quarter of an hour they kept posturing, and their scythes did not graze against flesh. Chowdhury Gulab's scythe clashed with Karam Din's just once. At this they both leapt back immediately, already panting from their exertion.

Soon Reshma began to get bored with this spectacle and started yawning. She was also feeling cold. She started looking into the distance beyond the knolls. It seemed there was a stream flowing at some distance and she found its gentle hum very comforting in this desolate place.

Suddenly Karam Din signaled his opponent to pause. The corner of the tehmad that he had tucked up like a langot had come loose. Seeing him tucking his tehmad up with one hand while holding his scythe with the other tickled Reshma so much that she could no longer contain herself and she burst into laughter. At this, the two men turned and glared at her. Reshma went on laughing; she knew that laughter was inappropriate and even dangerous at such a delicate moment, but she didn't care.

"If I live," Karam Din said in an irritated tone, "the first thing I'll do is cut this whore into pieces."

"I won't take this shameless woman back with me either," Chowdhury Gulab said, "I'll chop off her nose and let her go."

"Then why don't we settle that score first. We're fools to risk our lives for this cheap woman. She has no morals. Tomorrow she'll warm someone else's bed."

Chowdhury Gulab said nothing. Assuming his silence meant acquiescence, Karam Din abruptly leapt towards Reshma, but in his haste his foot became caught in a heap of clothing and Reshma got a chance to run. She raced up a knoll but Karam Din pursued her. Seeing him come up, she took off again with Karam Din right on her heels. They kept going up and down the hills. Karam Din was badly out of breath, but he refused to give up because the desire for revenge had made him crazy. After half an hour of running Reshma's dress became tangled in a thorny bush and, in that one moment, Karam Din grabbed her braided hair and dragged her down the hill. Reshma bit his hand repeatedly, drawing blood, but he didn't let go of her braid.

They reached the spot where Chowdhury was waiting. He had gotten dressed in the meantime because his body had become stiff with cold from being without clothes for so long. But now, wrapped snugly in his thick cotton sheet, he seemed contented.

Karam Din said, "This shameless one wanted to get away, but I would have pursued her to the gates of hell. Anyway, Chowdhury, shall I strike first?"

Saying that, he picked up his scythe, but before Chowdhury could reply another voice resounded from amongst the hills: "Stop, Chowdhury stop."

This was Mai Jammi who had followed them from the village and had hid in a ditch watching the spectacle.

“You trafficker of girls, you witch! Where have you appeared from,” Karam Din was beside himself with rage, “this is all your doing, let me rid the world of you as well.”

In a trice Mai stood in front of him. “Go on kill me,” she said fearlessly pushing her chest forward, “remember that you’ll hang by the neck for this crime. My relatives will inform the police and they’ll come to arrest you at once.”

“What nonsense, you bitch!” Chowdhury spoke at last. He had been silent so far but Mai Jammi’s inflammatory speech made the affair intolerable for him.

There was silence for a few moments, then Mai Jammi loosened her tongue again, albeit in a more circumspect tone this time.

“Listen,” she said, “if you get back all the money you spent on her, will you return her to me?”

Both men thought for a while, then Karam Din said, “If I can get back my four hundred rupees then I don’t care, she can go to hell.”

“Forget the four hundred, I’ll give you five hundred. And Chowdhury Gulab, what do you say?”

“If Karam Din has no objection, then I feel the same way.” He responded in a low voice.

“You’ll get your seven hundred Chowdhury. You see, there’s a policeman who lives ten or so miles from here. He’s willing to pay two thousand for a girl like Reshma. Just grant me one day’s time. Reshma will stay with you, tomorrow when I return your money you hand her over to me.”

Reshma lifted her head, looked at Mai Jammi and shivered involuntarily. Chowdhury Gulab said nothing. Mai Jammi did not need a reply. His silence was enough for her.

Karam Din was dressed and ready to leave. The four of them set off just as before with the two men in front and the women behind. The cold was more intense now and that prompted them to walk faster. For a while they walked in silence, eventually Karam Din said to Chowdhury, “It’s been a very dry winter this year. My crops are ruined, how are things here?”

“We haven’t had a drop of rain,” Chowdhury replied, “and this dry cold weather brings sickness with it, especially for cattle. One of my buffaloes was affected by the frost and died.”

“Ohh.” Again there was silence.

“What is the price of rice here?” Karam Din asked one more time.

“The *begami* sells at two and a quarter seer for a rupee.” Chowdhury replied.

“Two and half seer, at my village,” Karam Din said.

Reshma was walking in the winter moonlight in a dreamlike trance, she didn't see or hear anything, nor did she care where she stepped. □

—*Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi*