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Give Me Your Sorrows^{*}

THE WEDDING NIGHT didn't turn out anything like Madan thought it would. When Chikli Bhabhi coaxed Madan and shoved him into the middle room, Indu was in front of him, wrapped in a shawl, cloaking herself with the darkness. Outside, the laughter of Chikli Bhabhi, his father's sister from Daryabad, and the other women was slowly dissolving into the liquid darkness of the night like crystallized candy. The women thought that even though Madan had grown up so much he still didn't know anything because, when he was awakened in the middle of the night, he was mumbling, "Where, where am I being taken?"

The women's own days had long passed. Whatever their mischievous husbands had demanded and conceded on the first night, even its echo had faded from their ears. They had already been fulfilled and now they were bent on getting yet another woman settled. These women of the earth regarded men as if they were wandering clouds towards which they had to lift up their faces in order to receive rain. If it doesn't rain, then one has to make vows, give offerings and perform magic. Nonetheless, Madan had been lying in the open space in front of his home in this new settlement of Kalkaji awaiting this very moment. To make things worse, his neighbor Sibte's buffalo that was tied just next to his cot kept hissing and sniffing at him. He had to lift his hand to try to push it away. In this situation, how could there be any question of sound sleep?

The moon, which directs the paths of the ocean's waves and of women's blood, crept in through the window and watched to see where Madan, now standing near the door, would place his next step. Madan felt a rumbling inside, as though he was an electric pole. If someone had put his ear against Madan's body, he would have heard the current

^{*}"Apnē Dukh Mujhē Dēdō," from the author's eponymous collection, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Nayā Idāra, 1975), 137–167.

whizzing through it. After standing this way for some time he went forward, and grabbing the bed, pulled it into the moonlight so that he might at least be able to see the bride's face. Then he stopped short. In that moment he thought, "Indu is my wife. She's not some strange woman whom I've been taught, ever since childhood, not to touch." Looking at the bride wrapped in the shawl, he imagined that Indu's face must be there. When he stretched out his hand and touched the bundle lying nearby, Indu's face was right there. Madan had thought she wouldn't let him see her so easily, but Indu did nothing of the sort. It was as if she had also been awaiting this very moment for years—and as if the continual sniffing of some imaginary buffalo had also prevented her from falling asleep. In spite of the darkness, he could see the sleeplessness and anguish of the closed eyes behind the fluttering eyelashes. Normally the face becomes elongated as one approaches the chin, but here everything was round. Perhaps because of this, in the moonlight a shady hollow had formed between the cheeks and the lips, like the kind that lies between two lush, verdant hills. The forehead was somewhat narrow, but curly hair sprang from right above.

Just then Indu pulled her face back, as if she had given him permission to look, but not for so long. After all, every woman has her limits. Murmuring, Madan lifted the bride's face again with a gently firm hand and, in an intoxicated voice said, "Indu!" Indu became a bit frightened. It was the first time in her life that a stranger had called her name in such a way. By some divine right, in the darkness of the night, he was becoming her own, the companion of this woman who was alone and helpless. Lifting her gaze for the first time, Indu closed her eyes and said just this much: "*Ji!*" Even to herself, her voice sounded as though it originated from the nethermost regions.

For a while it remained like this, but then the conversation slowly gained momentum. Once it got going, it kept on going—the flow of conversation wouldn't taper off. Indu's father, Indu's mother, Indu's brother, Madan's brother and sister, his father, his father's job in the Railway Mail Service, their temperaments, their taste in clothing, their eating habits—all of these things were scrutinized. In between Madan wanted to break off the conversation and do something else, but Indu ignored him. As a last resort Madan brought up his mother who had died from tuberculosis and left him all alone at the age of seven. "As long as the poor woman was alive," Madan said, "Father's hands were always clutching pill bottles. We slept on the hospital stairs most of the time and little Pashi 'slept on ants' at home. Finally, one day, on the evening of the 28th of March ..." Madan

fell silent. All of a sudden he was in between crying and choking. Indu was flustered and she drew his head to her bosom. In the span of a moment that crying had transported Indu from being a stranger to being one of his own. Madan wanted to know something more about Indu, but Indu clasped his hand and said, "I'm not well educated, but I've known parents, and brothers and sisters-in-law, and scores of other people, so I can understand some things.... I'm yours now. In exchange for myself I ask just one thing from you."

The crying and its aftermath had left a lingering intoxication. In a mixture of impatience and generosity Madan said, "What do you want? I'll give you whatever you say."

"Are you sure?" Indu asked.

Madan said impulsively, "Yes, yes, I said so, I'm sure."

But in between Madan felt a doubt creep in. "My business is already slow. If Indu asks for something that's out of my reach, then what?" But Indu gathered up his rough, open hands in her soft ones and, placing them on her cheek said, "Give me your sorrows."

Madan was astonished. He felt as if a weight was being lifted from his being. He tried to look at Indu's face again in the moonlight, but he couldn't really gauge anything. He thought, this must be some line, well rehearsed by Indu's mother or by some friend, which Indu has blurted out. Just then a burning tear fell on the back of Madan's hand. He held her close and said, "I've given them." But this exchange had stolen his carnal desire away from him.

One by one, the guests departed. Chikli Bhabhi carefully made her way down the stairs holding two children by their hands and bracing herself to support the third she was expecting. The aunt from Daryabad had fallen unconscious from wailing over the loss of her expensive necklace, raised a hue and cry, and then found it in the bathroom. She chose her share of clothes from the bride's gifts and left. Then uncle, who had received a wire notifying him of his promotion to the rank of magistrate, also left, although in his bewilderment he kissed the bride instead of Madan.

Only the elderly father and younger brother and sister remained in the house. Little Dulari stayed by her sister-in-law all the time. She decided which women in the neighborhood got to see the bride and, if so, for how long. Dulari controlled all of this. Finally the novelty began to wear off and, slowly, people became used to Indu. Still, even in this new settlement of Kalkaji, people kept stopping in front of Madan's house and making some excuse or other to come in. Upon seeing them, Indu imme-

diately veiled herself, but whatever they saw in that fleeting moment they never could have seen while she was veiled.

Madan's business was in dirty pine resin. There had been a violent fire in a couple of the supplier's forests, so much so that the pine and deodar trees had been reduced to black dust. Resin imported from Mysore and Assam was expensive and people weren't willing to pay that much. Even though the income had dropped, Madan began to close the store and the attached office and come home early. At home his main effort was to see everyone fed and tucked snugly into their beds. So, at dinnertime, he picked up the plates himself and set them in front of his father and sister, and when they were finished he gathered up the dirty dishes and put them under the tap. Everyone concluded that his wife had whispered some magical words in his ear that made him begin to take interest in the housework.

Madan was the oldest son, Kundan was younger than him and Pashi was the youngest. When Kundan welcomed his sister-in-law by declaring that she should come and sit and eat with everyone, Babu Dhaniram scolded him. "You eat," he would say, "she'll get to eat too." Babu Dhaniram would stand around in the kitchen and, when his daughter-in-law would finish eating and turn her attention toward the dishes, he would stop her and say, "Leave them, they'll get done in the morning."

Indu would say, "No, Babuji, I'll get them done in a flash."

Then, in a shaking voice, Babu Dhaniram would say, "If Madan's mother were here, Bahu, would she let you do all this?" Then Indu would stop washing.

Little Pashi was shy around his brother's wife. Chikli Bhabhi and the aunt from Daryabad had placed Pashi in Indu's lap in a ceremony intended to enhance the bride's fertility. Since then Indu had begun to consider him not as her younger brother-in-law, but as her own son. Whenever she tried to lovingly scoop Pashi up in her arms, he would wiggle away and stand just out of her reach. He would look at her and laugh, but he would neither come closer nor move farther away. By some strange coincidence, Babuji would always turn up just then to scold Pashi saying, "Go on ... Bhabhi loves you. You're not a grown man yet, are you?"

Dulari never left her brother's wife alone. Her insistence that "I won't go to sleep unless I'm with my *bhabhi*" had awakened some demon in Babuji. One night she received a hard slap because of that insistence. She fell into the house drain, which was partly uncemented. Indu's dupatta fell off her head in the rush to grab Dulari. The flowers and ornaments in

her hair, the vermillion in her part, her dangling earrings, all of them were exposed. Catching her breath, Indu said, "Babuji!" Grabbing Dulari and fixing her dupatta at the same time she broke into a sweat. Clasp that motherless child to her bosom, Indu quieted her. Dulari felt as though she were on a soft bed with lots of pillows and without any hard footboard, or frame, or any sharp edge that could harm her. Indu's massaging fingers on Dulari's injured scalp were making the wound hurt, but they also made her feel good.

Dulari had deep, sweet-looking dimples on her cheeks. Inspecting those dimples, Indu said, "Oh Munni, You won't have a mother-in-law. Look at what deep dimples you've got!" Munni spoke in a way that only innocent little girls do and said, "You have dimples too Bhabhi!"

"Yes Munno!" Indu said and took a deep breath. Madan was angry at this. He was standing nearby listening to everything. He said, "I say, in a way, it's best."

"What, why is it good?" Indu asked.

"Well, if there's no bamboo, the bamboo flute can't play. If there's no mother-in-law, there won't be any fighting."

Indu instantly became displeased and said, "Go on, go back to sleep. What do you think of yourself? If a person lives, he fights, doesn't he? Fighting is better than the silence of the cremation grounds. Go away, won't you? What business do you have in the kitchen?"

Madan was irritated, but what could he do? Babu Dhaniram's scolding had already sent the rest of the children to their beds where they lay like sorted letters in the post office, but Madan kept standing right there. Rebelliousness had made him brash and shameless. But now Indu had also scolded him. He became teary-eyed and went inside.

Madan lay in bed tossing and turning for a long time, but out of respect for Babuji, he didn't have the courage to call out to Indu. He reached the limit of his patience when he heard Indu singing a lullaby to put Munni to sleep: "Come queen of sleep, crazy wanton sleep."

The very lullaby that was putting Munni to sleep was chasing Madan's sleepiness away. Fed up with himself, he pulled up the sheet tightly. The act of pulling the sheet over his head and holding his breath unwittingly created the image of a dead body. To Madan it seemed as though he had already died and his bride Indu was sitting next to him beating her head, then smashing her wrists against the wall, breaking her glass bangles. Stumbling, crying, and screaming, she goes into the kitchen, and, taking ashes from the stove, puts them on her head and leaps outside. She lifts up her arms and cries out to the whole neighborhood, "Everyone! I've lost

everything!” Now she has no concern for her dupatta or her blouse. The vermilion in her part, the flowers and ornaments in her hair, everything is exposed. All of her thoughts and emotions have disappeared without a trace....

While tears flowed unchecked from Madan’s eyes, Indu was in the kitchen laughing, unaware of the plunder and subsequent recovery of her happily married state.... When Madan returned to the real world, he wiped away his tears and laughed. Indu continued to laugh, but her laughter was subdued. Out of respect for Babuji, she never laughed out loud, as if peals of laughter were a form of indecency, while silence was a dupatta and subdued laughter a veil. Madan conjured a mental image of Indu and said all kinds of things to it. He made love to it in a way that he had never made love to Indu.... When he returned to his own world, the bed next to him was empty. He called out softly, “Indu,” and fell silent. In this dilemma, that same crazy wanton sleep swept over him. He was nodding off, but at the same time it seemed as if the neighbor Sibte’s buffalo was snorting in his face, just like on his wedding night. Feeling restless, he got up and looked toward the kitchen, then, scratching his head and yawning a couple of times, lay back down and went to sleep. It was as if Madan had left his ears on guard while he slept. When Indu’s bangles clinked while she straightened the sheets, he sat up, confused. Awakening suddenly, a wave of longing surged over him. If a man sleeps without exhausting his passion, and then suddenly wakes up, he feels stifled. Madan’s whole body was aflame with passion, and this was the reason for the anger in his voice when he said, “So, you’ve come.”

“Yes.”

“So, Munni went off and died?”

Indu suddenly straightened up, “Oh God!”

She placed a finger on her nose, then clenched her hands and said, “What are you saying? Why would she die? The only daughter in the family!”

“Right!” Madan said, “Your only sister-in-law.”

Suddenly adopting a dictatorial tone, he said in a controlled voice, “Don’t encourage that witch too much.”

“Why, what’s wrong with it?”

“What’s wrong with it,” Madan replied teasing her, “is that she never leaves you alone. She’s always stuck to you like a leech. She doesn’t know how to get lost.”

“Right.” Seating herself on Madan’s bed she said, “One shouldn’t rebuff sisters and daughters like that. They’re only guests in their homes

for a little while. If not today then tomorrow, if not tomorrow then the next day they'll be gone." Indu wanted to say something else, but she fell silent. Her mother, father, sister, and uncles on her father's side all flashed before her. She had also been their little darling who had become alien in the blink of an eye and then they started talking day and night about how to send her away. It was as if a female snake lived in a hole in the house and, until she was caught and thrown out, no one in the house would be able to sleep peacefully. From far and wide snake charmers and magicians like Dhanvantri and Moti Sagar were called in—those who could capture that snake, pierce its nose, and pull out its teeth.

Finally, one day a red storm, as it were, came from the northwest. When it cleared there was a truck standing there in which sat a bride trimmed in gold and silver. Behind, in the house, the shehnai sounded like a snake charmer's flute playing a tune. Then the truck pulled out with a lurch....

Somewhat angrily, Madan said, "You women are very clever. You've just moved into the house and already everyone else has started loving you more than they love me?"

"Yes!" Indu said firmly.

"It's all a lie ... it just can't be so."

"What you mean is ..."

"It's all for show ... yes."

"Oh, really!" Indu said bringing tears into her eyes. "This is all a show of mine?" Indu got up and went to her own bed. Hiding her face in her pillow, she began to sob. Madan was just going to quiet her when she got up and came over to Madan and, grabbing his hand, said, "What has happened to you that makes you speak with such bitterness all the time?"

So that he could display his husbandly authority, Madan came up with an excuse, "Go away, go to sleep," he said. "I don't want anything from you."

Indu replied, "You don't want anything from me, but I want something from you, for my whole life." She started poking playfully at him. Madan would shake her off and she would cling to him. She was like a fish who, rather than going along with the current, wants to fight its way upstream. She would pinch him, clasp his hand, laugh and cry saying, "Will you call me the one who loves you best?"

"All women love me the best."

"Just wait ... your ..." It seemed as though Indu was about to curse and she murmured something under her breath. Turning, Madan asked, "What did you say?" Indu repeated it in a voice loud enough for him to

hear. Madan burst into laughter. Within a moment Indu was in Madan's arms saying, "What do you men know? We women know all the relatives of our beloved, and they're all dear. What a father, brother, and sister you have!" Then she suddenly gazed far away and said, "I will get Dulari married."

"This is the limit," Madan replied, "She's not even grown and you've already started thinking about her marriage?"

"She seems young to you, doesn't she?" Indu asked and, putting both of her hands over Madan's eyes said, "Just close your eyes and then open them." Madan quickly shut his eyes but then, when he didn't open them right away, Indu said, "Open your eyes, by the time you open them I'll be an old woman!"

Madan opened his eyes at once. For a long moment it seemed to him that it wasn't Indu sitting there, but someone else. He was lost in the moment.

"I've kept aside four sets of shalwar kamiz and some pots and pans for her," Indu said, and when Madan didn't answer she started shaking him and saying, "Why are you so worried? Don't you remember your promise? You've already given all your sorrows to me."

Huh?" Madan said with a start, as if he were lost in sleep. But now when he drew Indu close, she was not just a body, but a spirit joined together with it.

For Madan, Indu was totally ethereal. She had a body, but for some reason it always remained concealed from him. There was a veil—made from the threads of dreams, colored by the mists of sighs, dazzling from the sparkle of her laughter—that always kept her covered. Like the husbands who had played Dushasan for centuries before him, Madan's glances and hands tried to steal away this Draupadi's clothes. This Draupadi is also known as one's wife, for whom bolts upon bolts and yards upon yards of cloth would always fall from the heavens to cover her nakedness. Dushasans were lying in defeat all around, but Draupadi was standing firm—swathed in the white sari of purity and chastity, she looked like a goddess and ...

Madan's retreating hands were moist with the sweat of shame. He lifted them into the air to dry them and then, stretching out his palms all the way, he placed his hands in front of his wide pupils and peered out between his fingers. Indu's marbled body, plump and sweet-smelling, lay before him. Near enough for use, but too far away for fulfillment. Whenever he could pin her down, she would feed him some sort of line.

"Oh! There are so many people in the house, children and grown-

ups. What will they say?"

Madan would reply, "The children don't know what's going on, and the grown-ups can empathize."

During this same period Babu Dhaniram got transferred to Saharanpur where he became the Head Clerk of the Selection Grade in the Railway Mail Service. He was allotted such large quarters that eight families could have lived there. But there was only Babu Dhaniram to fill up all that space. He had never lived away from his family before. He was a total homebody and, this late in life, the loneliness distressed him. But there was no way out. The children were all in school in Delhi and they had to stay with Madan and Indu. It would not be good for their studies to take them out before the end of the school year. Babuji developed a heart problem.

The summer holidays arrived and, after Babuji wrote several times, Madan sent Indu to Saharanpur along with Kundan, Pashi, and Dulari. Babu Dhaniram's world lit up. Whereas before he had nothing but free time when he came home from the office, now he had nothing but work. The children, like all children, would leave their clothes lying around wherever they took them off and Babuji would wander around picking them up. Away from Madan, lovely Indu became careless and neglectful of her appearance. She wandered around the kitchen the way corralled cattle lift their heads and look outside searching for their master. She would finish her work and then, oftentimes, lie down on the boxes inside. Other times she would go near the *kanbar* bush or stand under the mango tree which held a thousand hearts in its fronds.

The rainy, romantic month of Savan began to be washed into the following month. If one opened the small door that led outside from the courtyard, there would be unmarried and newly-married girls swinging and singing, "Who put a swing in the mango orchard?" Then, following along with the song, two girls would swing, and two more would push them. Somewhere else, four girls got together and played hide-and-peek. The middle-aged and old women stood on one side watching them. Indu felt as though she ought to be among them. Then she would turn away, take a deep breath, and go to sleep.

When he passed by, Babuji never made the slightest effort to wake her. Rather, when he got the chance, he would pick up her shalwar, which she had taken to wearing here instead of saris. She would always throw them on her mother-in-law's old sandalwood chest and Babuji would hang them on the clothes-peg. He did all this on the sly. But no sooner had he collected her shalwar and turned away than, from the cor-

ner of his eyes, he would see forbidden parts of his daughter-in-law's body. Then he would feel overcome by emotions and he would hurry out of the room, as if a snake had suddenly popped out of its hole. After that, his voice could be heard from the verandah, chanting, "*Om namo bhagvate vaasudev ...*"

The neighbor women had spread stories about Babuji's daughter-in-law far and wide. When any woman would talk about the loveliness and the shapely body of Babuji's daughter-in-law in front of him, he would flush with happiness and say, "We've been blessed, Amichand's mother! Thankfully, a robust soul has come into our house too." Saying this, his gaze drifted off to spaces infected with tuberculosis and crowded with bottles of medicine, hospital stairs, or ant holes. When he returned from these daydreams, it seemed as though fat babies with dimpled bodies were under his arms, on his thighs, and climbing around his neck—and it seemed as though even more were on the way. At his side, his daughter-in-law's waist was against the earth and her hips were against the roof. She was giving birth one after the other and there was no difference in the age of any of the children. None of them was bigger or smaller than the other; they were all alike: *Om namo bhagvate ...*

Everyone in the area had come to know that Indu was Babuji's beloved daughter-in-law. Accordingly, pots of milk and buttermilk began to arrive at Dhaniram's doorstep, and then, one day, Salaamdin Gujar made a request. Salaamdin said to Indu, "Bibi! Please get my son a menial position in the Railway Mail Service. God will reward you." Not long after Indu began dropping hints, Salaamdin's son got a position, and that too as a sorter, which he could never have aspired to on his own. Anyway, there weren't many menial positions available.

Babuji especially looked after his daughter-in-law's diet and her health. Indu had a strong aversion to drinking milk. At night, Babuji himself would pour the milk into an open dish, whip it, put it in a glass, and take it to Indu's cot. Indu would pull herself together, get up and say, "No Babuji! I can't stand to drink it."

"But you must drink it. I insist," he would say teasing.

"Why don't you drink it, go ahead!" Indu would answer laughing. Babuji would burst out, feigning anger, "Do you want to end up in the same condition as your mother-in-law?"

"Oh ... oh ..." Indu would get fed up with this affection. Why shouldn't she get fed up? Those who don't sulk are those who don't have anyone to bring them around. But here everyone was a cajoler, and Indu the only sulker. When Indu wouldn't take the glass from Babuji's hand, he

would set it near the cot, below the head of the bed. Then he would go out saying, "Anyway, it's sitting here. Drink it if you like, if not, don't."

Back on his bed, Dhaniram would begin to play with little Dulari. She was in the habit of rubbing her body against bare parts of Babuji's body and of putting her face to his stomach and blowing raspberries. Today when Babuji and Munni were playing this game, laughing and making each other laugh, Munni looked in her sister-in-law's direction and said, "The milk will go bad, Babuji. Bhabhi doesn't drink it."

"She'll drink it, she'll definitely drink it," Babuji said drawing Pashi in with his other hand. "Women can't stand to see anything in the house go bad." Babuji had hardly uttered this sentence when from one side was heard, "Hush, husband killer." It seemed that Indu was chasing the cat away ... and then they heard a gulping sound and figured that Bhabhi had drunk the milk. In a little while, Kundan came to Babuji and said, "Boji, Bhabhi is crying."

"Huh?" Babuji would get up and look out into the darkness toward where his daughter-in-law's string bed was. After sitting this way for a while he would lie back down and, understanding, he would say, "Go on ... go to sleep, she'll fall asleep on her own."

Lying back down, Babu Dhaniram would look out into the flowering expanses of the garden of the sky and ask the God of his heart, "In the midst of all those silver flowers opening and closing, where is my flower?" Then the whole sky seemed to become a river of his pain and he would begin to hear continuous screams. Then he would say, "Ever since the world began human beings have cried so much!" After that he would cry himself to sleep.

Less than a month after Indu had left, Madan started making a fuss. He wrote, "I'm fed up with eating bazaar food. I'm constipated and my kidneys hurt." Then, just as people attach a doctor's certificate to their request for time off from work, Madan got a letter written by one of his father's friends attesting to his condition and sent it. When he didn't get any result from that, he sent a double telegram with the reply prepaid.

The money for the reply went to waste, but it was worth it. Indu and the children came back. Madan refused to speak to Indu directly for two days. This sadness, too, was Indu's alone. One day, catching Madan alone, she grabbed him, sat down, and said, "Why are you sitting around with such a long face? What did I do?"

Madan brushed her off and said, "Leave me alone, go away, bitch!"

"Did you call me back from so far away just to say that?"

"Yes!"

“Let it go.”

“Watch out! This is all your doing. If you had wanted to return, could Babuji have stopped you?”

Indu said in utter helplessness, “Oh God, you sound like a child. How could I have said anything to him? If you ask me, you’ve done wrong by Babuji in calling me back here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, he felt very happy with the children around.”

“And what about my feelings?”

“Your feelings? You can feel happy anywhere!” Indu said naughtily and looked at Madan in such a way that all his resistance melted away. He was in search of a good excuse. He clasped Indu, pulled her close and said, “Was Babuji happy with you?”

“Yes!” Indu said, “One day when I woke up, I saw him standing at the head of the bed looking at me!”

“That’s not possible.”

“I swear on myself.”

“Not on yourself, swear on me.”

“I won’t swear on you, whatever happens.”

“Really!” Madan said thinking. “In books they call this ‘sex.’”

“Seks?” Indu asked. “What’s that?”

“That’s what happens between a man and a woman.”

“Oh God!” Indu said drawing back, “Dirty! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for thinking that way about Babuji?”

“Wasn’t Babuji ashamed of himself looking at you?”

“Why?” Indu said taking Babuji’s side. “He must have been feeling happy looking at his daughter-in-law.”

“And why not? When his daughter-in-law looks like you.”

“You have a filthy mind,” Indu said with disgust. “That’s why your business is in filthy pine resin. All your books are filled with filth. You and your books can’t see anything other than filth. So, when I grew up and my father started loving me more was he also—damn!—was he also that thing you just mentioned?” Then Indu said, “Call Babuji here. He doesn’t feel happy there. If he’s sad, won’t you be sad?”

Madan loved his father very much. He remembered very well—because his mother had always been ill. Whenever Madan thought of his father’s death, he would shut his eyes and begin to pray, “*Om namo bhagvate vaasudeva ... om namo ...*” Now he didn’t want to lose the protection and shelter of his father, especially when his own business had not been firmly established. Lacking conviction in his voice he said just

this much, "Let Babuji be for now. This is the first time in our marriage that we can be by ourselves."

On the third or fourth day, Babuji's tear-soaked letter arrived. In the address, "My beloved Madan," the words "my beloved" had been washed away by salty tears. He had written:

Having my daughter-in-law here brought back memories of the old days, the days of your mother. When we were newly married, she was also carefree. She also tossed her clothes here and there and my father would go around picking them up. That same sandalwood chest, the same scores of daily chores. I'm going to the market. If nothing else I'll bring some yogurt and dumplings and sweets. There's no one in the house now. That space, where the sandalwood chest was lying, is empty now....

Then a couple more lines had been washed away. At the end was written: "Coming back from the office at night, going into these big, empty rooms gives me a fright." And then: "Take care of my daughter-in-law. Don't just turn her over to any old midwife."

Indu held the letter with both hands, gasped and opened her eyes wide. Feeling ashamed she said, "I could die. How did Babuji find out?"

Madan took the letter away from her and said, "Is Babuji a child? He's seen the world, he's brought us into the world."

"Yes, but," Indu said, "How far along am I?"

She looked at her stomach intently. It hadn't begun to protrude at all. Then, as if Babuji or someone else was looking at it, she pulled the end of her sari over it and began to think. Her face began to sparkle and she said, "Sweets will arrive from your in-laws' place."

"From my in-laws' place? ... Oh right." Madan got her drift and said, "How embarrassing. We've only been married for six or eight months and already it's come." He pointed at Indu's stomach.

"It's come, or you brought it?"

"You ... this is all your fault. Some women are just like that."

"You're not happy about it."

"Not at all."

"Why?"

"We only get a few days of fun in life."

"This isn't the fun of life?" Indu asked in a sorrowful tone. "Why do men and women get married? God has given us this without asking, hasn't He? Ask those who don't have any children. Then what do those women do? They go to holy people. They go to tombs and pilgrimage

sites and tie threads. They abandon their modesty and go naked to the banks of the river and cut reed stalks, they rouse the spirits at the cremation grounds....”

“Okay! Okay!” Madan said. “You’ve started off with your litany. Isn’t there a whole lifetime to have children?”

“There must be. When he’s born ...,” Indu added rebelliously raising her finger, “don’t touch him. He won’t be yours, just mine. Maybe you don’t need him, but his grandfather does, that much I know.”

Becoming both a little ashamed and sorrowful, Indu hid her face in her hands. She had thought that in regards to the arrival of this little one she would at least get a little sympathy from the father. But Madan kept sitting quietly. He couldn’t manage to utter a single word. Indu lifted one hand away from her face, looked in his direction and, in that special manner of a first-time expectant mother, said, “Anyway, what I’m saying doesn’t matter. In the first place, I won’t survive ... I’ve had a bad feeling about that since childhood.”

Madan became terrified. How could this “beautiful thing,” which had become even more beautiful during pregnancy, die? He hugged Indu from behind and, drawing her into his arms, said, “Nothing will happen to you, Indu. I’ll snatch you away from the jaws of death. It’s not Savitri’s turn now, it’s Satyavan’s....”

Enfolded in Madan’s embrace, Indu forgot that she had any sorrows of her own.

After that Babuji didn’t write again. However, a postal worker came from Saharanpur and told them that Babuji had started having spells again. During one of those fits he had almost died. Madan got scared and Indu started crying. After the employee left Madan closed his eyes like always and started chanting inwardly, “*Om namo bhagvate ...*”

The very next day Madan wrote a letter to his father: “Babuji! Come home. The children miss you, and so does your daughter-in-law....”

But his work was there. It wasn’t under his control. Dhaniram replied that he was arranging for a vacation.... Day by day, Madan’s sense of guilt grew stronger and stronger: “If I had let Indu stay there, how would it have hurt me?”

On the night before the last of Dusshera, Madan was pacing restlessly on the verandah outside the middle room when, at last, he heard the voice of an infant crying. Startled, he jumped towards the door. The midwife came out and said, “Congratulations, sir, it’s a boy.”

“A boy?” Madan said, and then in a worried tone he asked, “How is my wife?”

The midwife answered, "Well, she's fine. So far I've told her that it's a girl. If the newly delivered mother gets too happy, the afterbirth doesn't come out properly, does it?"

"Oh ..." Madan said blinking his eyes like a fool and went toward the room. The midwife stopped him and said, "What business do you have in there?" She suddenly closed the door and dashed inside.

Madan's legs were still shaking, not from fear but from relief, or perhaps because when a new life enters the world it has this effect on everyone nearby. Madan had heard that when a boy is born the very walls of the house tremble, as if they fear whether the boy will keep them or sell them when he grows up. Madan felt as though the walls were actually shaking. Chikli Bhabhi could not come for the delivery because her own child was still a baby, but the aunt from Daryabad had come. At the time of the birth she kept repeating the name of God, Ram-Ram-Ram-Ram ... Even now she was repeating that same name, although more slowly.

Madan had never felt so useless and unnecessary in his whole life. Just then the door opened again and the aunt came out. In the dim light of the verandah her face looked as milky white as a ghost. Stopping her in her tracks, Madan asked, "Indu is all right, isn't she, Auntie?"

"She's fine, she's fine, she's ...," Auntie said three or four times and then, placing her shaking hand on Madan's head, she bent it down, kissed it, and dashed outside.

He could see Auntie going outside onto the verandah. She went into the sitting room where the rest of the children were sleeping. One by one Auntie patted their heads lovingly. Then she lifted her eyes up toward the ceiling and said something under her breath. Tiring, she lay face down next to Munni. From the pulsing of her shoulders, it seemed as though she was crying. Madan was puzzled! Auntie had been through several deliveries before, so why was she shaken to her core?

Then the smell of wild rue drifted in from the room on the other side. A cloud of smoke came and filled Madan's yard. His head swam. Just then the midwife came out carrying a cloth in which something had been wrapped. The cloth was soaked with blood and some drops had fallen on the floor. Madan was beside himself. He didn't know where he was! His eyes were open, but he couldn't see anything. In the midst of this he heard Indu's weak voice, "Haa-ay," and then the sound of the baby crying....

A lot happened in three or four days. Madan dug a pit on one side of the house and buried the afterbirth. He stopped the dogs from coming inside the house. But he didn't remember any of it. It seemed to him it

was only today that he had finally recovered his senses after the wild rue had settled into his brain. He was alone in the room with Indu. They were like Krishna's foster-parents Nand and Jasoda, and between them was Krishna. Indu looked at the baby and, as if trying to find out, said, "He looks just like you!"

"He must," Madan answered, giving the child a passing glance. "I say, it's a blessing that you survived."

"Yes!" Indu said, "I had thought ..."

"Only speak of good things," Madan said cutting her off. "Whatever has happened here ... from now on I won't come near you." Madan bit his tongue.

"Say you're sorry," Indu said.

At that very instant, Madan grabbed his ears with his hands and Indu began to laugh weakly.

For several days after the child was born, Indu's navel didn't come back into its right place. It was searching for the child which had left and gone out into the world forgetting its real mother. Now everything was all right and Indu was gazing at the world peacefully. It seemed as though she had not only forgiven Madan's sins, but had cleansed the wrongs of all of the world's sinners, and now, having become a goddess, she was passing out mercy and compassion. Madan looked at Indu's face and began thinking, "After this bloodbath she's become a bit thinner and even more attractive.... Just then Indu suddenly put both hands on her chest.

"What happened?" Madan asked.

"Nothing," Indu said trying to sit up a little. "He's hungry."

"He's ... hungry?..." Looking first at the baby and then at Indu, Madan said, "How do you know?"

"Can't you see!" Indu said casting her glance downward. "Everything has gotten soaked!"

Madan gazed intently at her loose quilted jacket. Milk was gushing forth and with it, a particular odor. Then Indu stretched her hand toward the child and said, "Give him to me."

Madan reached out toward the cradle and drew in his breath. Then, gathering up his courage, he picked up the baby as if it were a dead rat. Finally, he put him in Indu's lap. Looking in Madan's direction Indu said, "You go ... outside."

"Why? Why should I go outside?" Madan asked.

"Go, won't you ...," Indu said partly stubborn and partly ashamed, "I won't be able to give him milk in front of you."

"Huh!" Madan said amazed. "In front of me ... you won't be able to

give him milk!” With an unbelieving jerk of his head, he turned to go outside. When he got to the door he turned and glanced at Indu ... she had never looked so beautiful before!

When Babu Dhaniram came home on vacation he looked half his previous size, but when Indu put his grandson in his lap he bloomed with happiness. A growth had been found in his stomach which kept him suspended in agony twenty-four hours a day. If Munna had not been there his suffering would have been ten times worse.

Several treatments were tried. For the last one, the doctor gave Babuji pills the size of coins to take fifteen to twenty times a day. On the very first day he sweated so much that he had to change his clothes three or four times. Every time Madan took off Babuji’s clothes, he would wring them out in a bucket. Sweat alone filled a quarter of the bucket. During the night, he began to feel nauseous and he called out, “Bahu! Please give me my neem-twig toothbrush, there’s a bad taste in my mouth.” She came running in with it. Babuji got up and was chewing on the toothbrush when he started to vomit, and with it came a surge of blood. By the time his son laid him back down at the head of the bed, his eyes had rolled back in his head. Within a few moments he had arrived in that garden in the sky—where he spotted his own flower.

When Indu scratched her face and pounded her head and chest until she herself became blue, only twenty or twenty-five days had passed since Munna’s birth. Madan saw before him the very scene he had imagined about his own death. The only difference was that instead of breaking her bangles, Indu took them off and put them away in a drawer. She didn’t put ashes on her head, but the dirt from the floor on her face and the loosening of her hair made her countenance fearsome. Instead of saying, “Everyone! I’ve lost everything,” she started to scream in a heart-rending voice, “Everyone! We’ve lost everything.”

Madan hadn’t yet realized to what extent the burden of supporting the household had now fallen upon his shoulders. By morning his heart was in his throat. He might not have survived, if he hadn’t been able to bring his heart back into place by lying face down on the damp earth at the edge of the gutter outside the house ... but Mother Earth took her child to her breast and saved him. The young children, Kundan, Dulari Munni, and Pashi were screaming like chicks that lift up their beaks and chatter when a hawk attacks their nest. If someone took them under wing, it was Indu.

Lying at the edge of the drain, Madan thought, “The world is finished for me now. What can I do? Will I ever be able to laugh again?” He got up

and went back inside the house.

There was a bathroom below the stairs. Madan went inside, closed the door and asked himself again, "Will I ever be able to laugh again?" ... and then he was laughing out loud, even though his father's dead body was still lying nearby in the sitting room.

Before committing his father to the flames, Madan prostrated himself before the body lying on the pyre. Despite the fact that this was his last farewell to his progenitor, Madan wasn't crying. Seeing this, all the neighbors and relatives who were about to participate in the mourning grew numb.

According to Hindu custom, as the eldest son Madan had to light the funeral pyre and he had to smash the burning skull with the ceremonial cane to release his father's spirit. The women had already washed themselves at the well of the burning ground and returned home. When Madan got home he was shivering. Mother Earth had given her son strength for a little while, but in the enveloping night it was poured out in lust. He needed some kind of support. He needed the support of some emotion stronger than death. At that time Indu, the daughter of Mother Earth like Janak's darling Sita, was born from a clay pot and took that Lord Ram into her arms. Had Indu not surrendered herself to him that night, the great sorrow surely would have drowned Madan.

In less than ten months Indu's second child was born. Having shoved his wife into this hellfire, Madan forgot his own sorrows. From time to time the thought occurred to him that had he not summoned Indu back from Babuji's place maybe his father wouldn't have passed away so soon. But then he got busy making up for the loss of income that had been caused by his father's death. The business, which had dried up earlier because of inattention, took off by necessity.

During those days Indu went to her parents' home, leaving the older child behind with Madan while taking the younger one clasped to her bosom. Back home Munna became stubborn. Sometimes he got his way and sometimes he didn't. Indu's letter arrived at just the right time. "I can hear the sound of my son crying from here. Nobody beats him, do they?..."

Madan was astounded. An ignorant, uneducated woman, how could she write such things? Then he asked himself, "Is this also some well-rehearsed line?"

The years passed by. There was never enough money that they could live in luxury, but there was enough to get by. The difficulty came when they had to face a major expense, such as arranging for Kundan's college

admission, or getting Dulari Munni's engagement gifts sent. Then Madan would sit down hanging his head until Indu would come in from one side smiling and say, "Why are you feeling so sad?" Madan would look at her with eyes filled with hopelessness and say, "Why shouldn't I feel sad? I have to get Kundan admitted in the B.A. course. Munni ..." Indu would laugh and say, "Come with me." Madan would follow her like a lamb and she would go to the sandalwood box which no one else was allowed to touch, including Madan. Sometimes Madan would get angry about this and say, "When you die, put this box on your chest and take it with you." Indu would say, "Yes, I will take it with me." Then Indu would take out the required amount and place it in front of Madan.

"Where did this come from?"

"From somewhere.... Do you care about eating mangoes or ..."

"Still ..."

"Go and get your work done."

When Madan insisted, Indu would say, "I made friends with a rich seth, don't you know!" Then she would start laughing. Even though he knew that it was a lie, Madan didn't like this joke. Then Indu would say, "I'm a bandit, don't you know? A generous highwayman—who steals with one hand and gives to the poor with the other."

Munni's marriage was arranged in the same fashion. The same sort of stolen jewels, Indu's own, were sold. They went into debt and then got out again.

In the same way, Kundan also got married. In both weddings, Indu performed the *bathbhara* ceremony and also played the role of the mother. Babuji and Ma always watched from the heavens and rained down flowers upon them, invisible flowers. Then it happened that Ma and Babuji got into a fight. Ma said to Babuji, "You have come here after tasting your daughter-in-law's cooking and seeing her happiness, but I was doomed by fate and never got to see anything." This dispute was put before Vishnu, Mahesh, and Shiva. They decided the matter in favor of Ma's right, and just like that Ma came out of the world of the dead and fell into her daughter-in-law's womb. Here, Indu gave birth to a daughter.

But then Indu wasn't perfect. In the matter of principles, she always clashed with her husband's sister, his brother, and even Madan himself. Madan got tired of her puppet-like tendency to tow the line and called her the daughter of Harishchandra. Even though Indu's opinions were complicated, they were grounded in truth and dharma, so Madan and the rest of the family kept their eyes lowered before her. No matter how far the dispute might advance, or how much arrogance Madan would display

in rejecting her opinions, in the end, everyone bowed their heads, asked for forgiveness, and sought refuge with her.

A new *bhabhi* entered the household. She was a wife, while Indu was a woman who was called a wife. The younger wife, Rani, was the opposite—a wife who was called a woman. Because of her, the brothers got into a fight and the uncle who was a magistrate arranged for the partition of the household. The parents' property was divided, but in the tussle Indu's own things were also parceled out. It broke her heart, but she said nothing. Even after getting everything and living independently Kundan and Rani could not get settled properly, whereas Indu's house began to sparkle.

After the daughter's birth, Indu's health deteriorated. The baby girl clung to her at every moment. Everyone else ridiculed this lump of flesh. Indu was the only one who held her close and carried her around, but even Indu would get fed up sometimes, throw her in the worn-out crib and burst out, "Will you let me live ... Ma!" The girl would scream and start crying.

Madan began to avoid Indu. From the time of his marriage until now he had still not found that woman for whom he had been searching. Pine resin began to sell well and Madan started hiding money from Indu and spending it on the sly. After Babuji's death, there was no one to ask about it. He was totally free.

It was as if the neighbor Sibte's buffalo had started hissing in his face again, hissing over and over. The buffalo that had bothered him on his wedding night had been sold long ago, but its owner was still alive. Madan started going out with him to places where the light and shadows made forms strange and disorderly. Sometimes a triangle of darkness formed at the corner and then, suddenly, a square of light would come and bisect it. No complete picture ever formed there. It was as if a pair of trousers came from beside you and then flew toward the sky. A coat totally hid the face of the observer and someone began to toss about for breath. Just then a square of light would make a frame and a form would come and stand in it. If the observer stretched out his hand, it slipped far away and there was nothing. From behind, a dog would start crying, but the sound of a drum would drown out its voice....

Madan got the concrete form that he had imagined. But everywhere it seemed as though the artist had made a wrong stroke. Either the sound of laughter was louder than necessary or Madan had gotten lost in the search for a gentler or more measured laughter.

Once when Sibte talked to his wife, she presented Madan as the ideal

husband, in contrast to him. Actually, she hadn't presented him, but had, rather, flung him in Sibte's face. Sibte picked that ideal up and hurled it right back. It seemed as if the flesh and gore of some bloody watermelon had become stuck to Sibte's wife's nose, eyes, and ears. Cursing a million times, she picked up the flesh and seeds from the basket of her memory and scattered them all over Indu's immaculate yard.

Instead of one Indu, two were created. One was Indu herself and the other was a shuddering line that encircled her body but was invisible.

When Madan went anywhere, he would go by way of his house—washed and pressed, wearing nice clothes, and tucking a pair of special Magahi paan with fragrant tobacco in his mouth. Today when Madan came home Indu's appearance was totally different. She had put powder on her face and rubbed rouge on her cheeks. Since she didn't have any lipstick, she had colored her lips with the liquid she used to make bindis on her forehead. She had arranged her hair in such a way that Madan couldn't take his eyes off it.

"What's going on today?" Madan asked astonished.

"Nothing," said Indu avoiding Madan's gaze, "I had some free time today."

After fifteen years of marriage, Indu had found some free time today! That too at a time when her face had become freckled, a raised, black bump had developed on her nose, and underneath her blouse several folds of flesh had begun becoming visible at her waist, near her stomach. Today Indu had arranged herself in such a way that he couldn't detect a single one of those faults. Made up this way she looked incredibly beautiful. "It can't be," Madan thought feeling shocked. He turned again and looked toward Indu the same way a horse dealer looks at a famous horse. The horse was there along with all the trimmings. Whatever faulty lines there were, his intoxicated eyes couldn't make them out. Indu really was beautiful. Even after fifteen years, no Phulan, Rashida, or Mrs. Robert could hold a candle to her.... All at once Madan felt a pang of tenderness and of fear!

There weren't any clouds in the sky to speak of, yet raindrops began to fall. His own holy river Ganges was in flood stage and its water overran the banks, enveloping the plain and all the nearby villages and small towns. It seemed that, at this rate, even Mount Kailash would drown. The baby girl began to cry as she had never cried before. Hearing her voice, Madan closed his eyes. When he opened them the girl was standing in front of him all grown up. No, wait, it was Indu—the daughter of her mother, the mother of her daughter—who was smiling out of the corners

of her eyes and looking out of the corners of her lips.

In that very room where the scent of wild rue had once made his head swim, today grass-scented perfume overpowered him. A light shower is more dangerous than a downpour. Rain from outside began to drip from some metal hook and fell between Indu and Madan, but Madan was becoming like a drunk. In this intoxication, his eyes began to stick together and his breathing became so heavy that it was no longer human breathing.

“Indu ...” Madan said in a voice that was two keys higher than on their wedding night. Looking away Indu replied, “*Ji*,” and her voice was two keys lower ... but then tonight, instead of the full moon, it was the new moon.

Before Madan could stretch out his hand towards Indu, she herself drew close to him. Madan lifted Indu’s chin in his hand and began to look, what had he gained and what had he lost? Indu cast a glance at Madan’s darkening face and closed her eyes.

“What’s this?” he asked taken aback. “Your eyes are swollen!”

“Nothing special,” Indu said motioning toward the little girl. “This wicked mother kept me up all night.”

By now the baby had already quieted down, as if she was holding her breath to see what would happen next. The raindrops had stopped falling. Looking intently at Indu’s eyes, Madan said, “Yes, but ... these tears?”

“They’re tears of joy,” she answered, “this night is mine.” Laughing strangely, she clung to Madan. With a feeling of pleasure Madan said, “After so many years, today my heart’s desire has been fulfilled, Indu! I always wanted that.”

“But you never said so,” Indu said. “Do you remember on our wedding night I asked something from you?”

“Yes!” Madan said: “Give me your sorrows.”

“You didn’t ask for anything from me.”

“Me?” Madan answered astonished. “What could I have asked for? You have given me everything I could have asked for. To love my dear ones, to care for their education, their weddings ... these lovely children ... you gave me everything, Indu.”

“That’s what I used to think,” Indu said, “but now I’ve come to know that it wasn’t like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing ...,” then, hesitating, Indu said, “I held back one thing.”

“What did you hold back?”

Indu remained quiet for a little while and then, turning her head to

the side she replied, “My modesty ... my happiness ... at that time if you had said, ‘Give me your happiness’ then I ...” and her voice broke.

After a little while she said, “Now I have nothing left.”

Madan’s grip on her went slack. He sank into the earth. This uneducated woman?... some well-rehearsed sentence?...

Otherwise ... she had pulled this out from the forge of life. Even now the blows are falling and sparks are flying in every direction.

After a while Madan came back to his senses and said, “I understand, Indu.” With tears in their eyes, Madan and Indu clung to each other. Then Indu clasped Madan’s hand and took him to a realm that human beings can usually reach only after death.... □

—Translated by Holly Donahue Singh

Glossary

Babu: daughter-in-law, young wife/bride; also a term of address.

Bhabbi: elder brother’s wife, sister-in-law, also classificatory wife of elder male relative (cousin, etc.).

Dulari: loved one, beloved, “sweetie”; a nickname.

Dushasan and *Draupadi*: Dushasan was the villain in the epic the *Mahabharata*. He tried to forcibly disrobe the wife of the Pandava brothers, but the god Krishna rescued her by sending bolt after bolt of cloth from the heavens to keep her covered.

Harishchandra: A legendary king remembered for his honesty, piety, and sense of justice. Stories about him are found in the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*.

Hatbbhara: A ceremony performed in Hindu weddings.

Janak, *Sita*, and *Ram*: Sita was Janak’s daughter and the wife of the god Ram, an incarnation of Vishnu. She was found in a clay pot in a field and was therefore known as the daughter of the Earth. The story of Sita and Ram is narrated in the *Ramayana* epic.

Munna: little boy.

Munni: little girl.

Nand, *Jasoda*, and *Nandlal*: Nand and Jasoda were the foster parents of the god Krishna, here known as *Nandlal*, son of Nand.

Savitri and *Satyavan*: Savitri was warned that her husband Satyavan would die after a year of marriage. When he did, she pleaded with the god of death, Yama, so convincingly that her husband was restored to life.