

RAJINDER SINGH BEDI

Methun^{*}

HAD THE BAZAAR STRETCHED TO INFINITY or had the business itself hit a slump? To the west, where the street rose steeply, almost hugging the sky, and then swooped down sharply, was the very end of the earth. A person only had to take a leap and be done with this miserable life.

Magan Tikley, the junk dealer, had wandered around practically the whole day but found only two objects: a Florentine statuette and a Jamini Roy painting. Well, some eccentric producer might rent the statuette for a film ... but the painting? All right. He would stash it for now. Who knows, some day it might bring his grandsons and great-grandsons a windfall. After all, now and then one does hear of sudden discoveries of Leonardo da Vinci sketches that sell for millions in the art markets of the West. The thought of millions put a gleam in his eyes—quite forgetting that he was a balding man going on forty and a bachelor to boot. How could he even think of grandsons and great-grandsons? There was little he could do about it.

Magan was just like any other Hindu, heir to a profound spiritual tradition, yet every bit a money-grubber deep down. Outwardly he had nothing but contempt for money; inside however, he lusted after it. In the whole wide world it would be hard to find anyone who worshipped money more than a Hindu. Even today on Divali a shining rupee coin, dipped in milk and dusted with sindoor, could be found under the trough at his place. And on Dashehra his carriage boasted wreaths of evergreens when the whole household, men and women alike, set out for Lakshmi's temple—to worship, of course. A Hindu was not even averse to selling a brother like Joseph or a wife like Padmani if he could get some hard cash out of the deal.

Right across from his shop was Siraja's, an agent for Eve's batteries, partially hidden behind a spread of pipal. There, every morning, flabby Hindus poured out potfuls of water-diluted milk, creating a veritable pool of sludge in the space between the shop and the street. After India was

^{*}“Methun,” from the author's collection, *Hāth Hamārē Qalam Hū'ē* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jāmi'ā, 1974), 91–109.

partitioned, whether he liked it or not, Siraj had to show respect for this custom of the flabby Hindus. Not the mutts though; they had no qualms whatever about raising their hind legs and pissing all day long on the base of the tree about which God said, "I am the pipal among trees." Surely the dogs must have been Muslims in their previous incarnations and were now getting even with the Hindus for slaughtering them during the riots of 1947.

Siraja could always be seen munching on pipal fruit, not because his business was slow or he was starving, but because he wasn't averse to gobbling anything that might help thicken his semen. No surprise there. Such is the wont of these circumcised Muslims: eat, drink and be merry, and top it off with lots and lots of sex. Mentally they're hobos, a bunch of nomads. If they're in India, they never tire of talking about Pakistan; if in Pakistan, "My Lord, call me to Medina." Can't bond with anything. (Magan Tikley thought about this particularly many times.) Their Allah is something else; can't have enough fun and pleasure. But we've got a Bhagwan who never deigns to descend to earth. Perhaps Siraja was unconsciously a Tantrik who worked up an erection but held back the semen as an exercise in higher spirituality. They would lie hard inside a woman, but wouldn't come, wouldn't waste a drop of their precious substance. Those who sought salvation through this utterly selfish practice, who used a woman merely as a means, did they ever give a thought to what this did to the poor woman? How could they attain salvation by leaving her insatiate, writhing in agony? What Supreme Spirit do they hope to find this way? What about the release, the salvation that comes from orgasm, for man, for woman? A raindrop is not a pearl, nor is a seashell. A pearl is born when a shell receives a drop and closes upon it.

Night had suddenly fallen. Outside, that other end of the earth seemed to have crept even closer in the encroaching darkness. Silk merchant Vilayati Ram, the Kashmiri Budsha, and even Chakrpani from Udupi had by now closed for the day, the latter likely because, it being the second Saturday of the month, he had sold out his snacks. Only Siraj's shop was still open. And why not, after all batteries are needed mostly at night. He opened at the crack of dawn, which, in a manner of speaking, is still part of the night, its tail end. Mornings no longer belonged to anyone; they were appropriated by the communists. Likely Siraj was waiting for the tourist agent Michael so they might plan a trip to Agra or Khajuraho to make a quick buck on the side. But no, Siraj didn't go there for money. He went there chasing after those Western women who were fed up with sleeping around and went there to shower their Mumtaz-like love on some local man with the disposition of a Shahjahan, hoping to revive the fiery coital passions of Khajuraho.

“Hello, sweetie pie . . .” Siraj’s voice suddenly jolted Magan Lal out of his reverie.

Siraj was almost illiterate but had picked up a few English expressions schmoozing with tourists. From his tone of voice Magan easily guessed that it must be Kirti.

Indeed it was she—a melancholy young woman, dark and slight, with coarse features and a firm body, and over it, a dark purple dhoti. As she approached, it seemed as if a shard of darkness had somehow taken on a tangible form. She always came when it got dark, as though she wanted to hide herself. Perhaps this was also why Siraju’s shop was still open. As usual, she neither looked at him nor talked to him, and moved along. Siraju, not one to be put off by her indifference, started to whistle roguishly.

But when did Kirti ever talk? If you wanted to get her to open her mouth, you’d better frame your question in a way that didn’t require more than a “yes” or a “no,” or merely a nod or a shake of the head in reply. Siraj’s teasing her didn’t go down well with Magan. In fact, he hated it. This prompted the former to tease the latter now and then: “Magan, you’re not in love with her, are you? A juicy young woman, what are you waiting for, man? Grab her. If you keep hovering around her like some fan-tailed pigeon, she’ll fly away from your perch.” Annoyed, Magan would silence Siraj with a rebuke.

But Magan’s business transactions were riddled with formidable hurdles. Whenever Kirti brought him a piece of woodwork to sell, or a figurine she had crafted, he would find a million faults with it. He would tell her that such items weren’t in much demand these days, or say flat out that the piece didn’t measure up to the standards of art, all of which made poor Kirti even more despondent than when she had walked in. His deprecation was really quite calculated: buy an item dirt-cheap, “season” it, and then sell it at an inflated price.

Kirti hadn’t learned to make art objects at a professional school. Her craftsman father, Narain, had accompanied Bhavji, James Burgess, and others throughout Nepal and God-knows-where-else searching for India’s heritage, a heritage which was instead scattered in the museums of London and the antique shops of New York and Chicago. Hundreds of figurines disappeared from our temples and art centers yearly, only to resurface in curio shops thousands of miles away. Narain, quite fed up with the constant traveling, eventually returned home and started to fashion his own artifacts. With great absorption Kirti watched him work, now and then handing him a needed carving tool or helping with the raw work. Toiling away at home, Narain quite forgot that lost heritage fetched appreciably more than living

heritage, and not just double or quadruple but given the right circumstances, as much as a hundred times more. Perhaps he did know, but he was one of the few who knew the real nature of money and weren't taken in by worldly seductions. He created his artifacts and barely earned enough to survive. And he died working away, trying to make both ends meet.

One day while sculpting a statue of Jagadamba, he accidentally nicked himself with his chisel. Tetanus developed in the cut and he died the miserable death of a stray dog in the nearby cantonment hospital. He hugely deserved a dog's end after all: Whenever sculpting a goddess, he let his hands linger on her bosom, her buttocks, and her thighs for days on end. The breasts of small figurines didn't look like anything more than a pair of spinning tops twirling in space, but on larger sculptures the legs and torso resembled a water-stand. What he was after was actually the two fat pitchers bubbling with delicious milk that rested on the stand—a stand with buttocks like the forehead of a she-elephant sprouting not one but two trunks. He had also made a statue of Durga, who happens to be the most powerful goddess. Fashioning the bodies of such goddesses—what else could be expected for a man like Narain except to die like a wretched dog! Certainly not like us mortals, you and me.

“And what have you brought this time?” Magan Tikley asked Kirti.

Kirti produced a woodcarving from the end of her dhoti and gently placed it before the dealer on the rolltop desk where the light from the ceiling lamp was pooled. Before examining the work he pushed a chair toward her, but Kirti remained standing.

“How is your mother?”

Kirti didn't answer. She turned her face and looked out at where the street dropped sharply. When she next turned to look at Magan, her eyes were moist.

Kirti's mother was in the hospital, the same hospital where her father had died. The old woman had colon cancer. They had inserted a tube in her stomach and connected it to a bottle for the fluids to drain into. The first bottle they had attached wasn't working properly and Kirti needed money to buy a new one. Had she told Magan about it, he might have talked to her differently, but seeing the work he was ticked off.

“What? Same thing again?” he said irritated. “Haven't I told you many times already that nobody buys this kind of stuff anymore. This reclining Vishnu, the Serpent King swaying above and Lakshmi pressing his feet ... huh?!”

Kirti turned her big doleful eyes toward Magan. They seemed to be asking: what else should I make?

“The same ... what people do openly these days.”

“What do they do openly these days?” Kirti finally opened her mouth, but her voice was hardly audible, like a canary. You see the beak move, but don’t hear a sound.

Magan hesitated, fumbling for words, and then said, “Why, you could make a Gandhi, a Nehru ...” And as if he’d made a mistake, he quickly corrected himself, “A nude, for instance.”

“A nude?”

“Yes, people like nudes nowadays.”

Kirti fell silent. Still an unmarried young woman, she could have blushed, felt embarrassed, but all these were luxuries she could ill afford. She only cared to know whether Magan would buy her woodcarving and pay for it. “I don’t know how,” she said haltingly after some thought.

“Come on. Your father made hundreds of them.”

“Those? But they were images of Mother Goddess.”

“What’s the difference?” Magan Tikley said. “A goddess is a woman too. Isn’t she? Make a woman. Just don’t stick this mythology nonsense on her. It’s because of such foolhardy things that your father ended up dying so miserably.”

Kirti cast a look back at her past life. A vague premonition took hold of her and sent a tremor through her body. She felt she could no longer keep standing but still didn’t take the chair; she just leaned on it and stayed on her feet revealing all the beauty of her seductive curves to Magan. What a figure! Not one crafted by a Narain of the higher world, but a Narain who was very much a man of this world. Magan Lal’s mind was in a veritable riot, between will and lack of will, little realizing that a similar turmoil, between hope and hopelessness, was raging inside the girl in front of him. Her mouth ran dry. In what seemed like an attempt to swallow, she said, “I don’t have a model.”

“Model?” Magan said, edging closer to her. “Oh, there are plenty of them around. Just show any chick the glitter of money and she’ll tag right along.”

Even though Kirti didn’t say anything, Magan clearly heard the word “money?” So he said himself, “One needs to spend money to make money. Isn’t that so?”

Magan’s remark made her even more despondent. Her soul began to flutter before this inescapable fact of life. Her eyes slowly moistened—precisely the image of a woman that awakens the feelings of a father or husband in a man. Magan stretched out his hand to draw her close to his bosom, hug her, and say, “My love, don’t worry about that. After all, I’m here ...”

Kirti pushed his hand away. Magan was embarrassed but acted as if nothing had happened. Didn’t he hold the trump card? He picked up the

woodcarving. "Here, it's of no use to me," he said, handing it back to her.

Meanwhile Kirti too had come to a decision. She briefly looked down and then jerked her head up saying resolutely, "Next time I'll bring a nude. For now, keep this."

"Promise?" Magan smiled.

Kirti nodded. Magan was expecting her to smile too, but her face became even more somber. He lifted the rolltop, yanked out a crumpled ten-rupee note and held it out to Kirti. "Here, take this."

"Only ten?"

"Yes. Didn't I tell you, it's of no use to me? I can't give more."

"This won't even buy ..." She couldn't finish. Suddenly words seemed powerless. Still her meaning couldn't have been clearer. Magan understood. "It won't buy the new bottle ... or pay for the medicine ... or food"—some such phrases, he thought, phrases all the helpless and destitute spew out. He looked at her and said, "Bring me a nude and I'll pay good money for it." As he said that he formed a circle with his thumb and index finger and winked a little, the way instrumentalists wink at a dancer in applause.

When Kirti left, her lips were pursed and she was breathing heavily. To avoid an encounter with Siraj, she always took the opposite way home, though it added a mile and a half to her trek. Today she felt a sudden resistance surge up inside and walked right by his shop. Michael was back and the two were eating together when Kirti passed them, her head held high, her nostrils flaring. Siraj made a comment, which Magan failed to catch. What she was experiencing was undoubtedly defiance. Or else she was one of those afflicted people who avoid getting on the wrong side of an enemy just in case they might need their help one day. Perhaps it's something innate in women to keep a man they have nothing to do with dangling just because one obscure day he'd whistled at them or placed his hand on his chest and sighed dramatically.

Siraja must be downing some "aphrodisiac," a dish of goat knuckles Michael had likely brought for him. Who knows, the two might have gone over to visit Magan Tikley and fed him some of their choicest tricks, some surefire maneuvers, but he'd already pulled down the shutters of his shop and, still inside, was looking closely at Kirti's wood sculpture. It was a fine piece. The king cobra's body was of course stunningly beautiful; she had also deftly etched the hood with a sharp tool and layered different colors on it in stripes to give it a life-like effect. The image of Vishnu had everything in it that a devoted woman wishes to see in a man. Only Lakshmi lay heavy and slumped, her features somewhat obscure. Kirti, perhaps, had never known Lakshmi in any of her manifestations, although it would have been easy to turn her into an exquisite beauty, because when a woman

bends down to press someone's feet, her arms move away from her body and everything that makes her a woman comes into full view, drawing a sharp distinction between her ideal and her earthly image, displaying what a man's eyes must see and understand. It isn't right to say that because Kirti was a woman she was primarily interested in the man. No, when it comes to her beauty, in the end a woman is a perfect narcissist. And when her narcissism becomes unbearable, she shoves it away with the help of a man, any man.

Etching the words "*Sidham namah*" on the piece with a knife, he took it into the back room with the dirt floor. After scooping out some dirt, he laid the carving in the pit, took an earlier one out, this too the handiwork of Kirti, dumped the dirt back in and poured some catechu water on top of it. When he brushed the dirt from the old piece he saw that it had developed a web of fissures and looked centuries old. The next day he showed it to some tourists who were very pleased. Magan told them the piece was mentioned in Kalidasa's *Raghuvansh*. A number of similar figures were first discovered in the city of Turkat, founded by Raghujī in the Konkan region. He had some of the images and others were in the possession of Mysore's Chama Raja Wadiar. Magan Tikley sold it for a neat sum of five hundred and fifty rupees, having paid Kirti only five for it.

Within a week Kirti walked in with a nude. She was still quite distraught. Not only was her mother gravely ill, she too had come down with a cold, almost on the verge of pneumonia. She was coughing away and constantly reaching for her throat around which she had wrapped a wad of cotton with a rag.

As usual she placed her sculpture before Magan Tikley. This time she had worked with stone rather than wood. Balanced precariously between hope and despair, she looked at him. If Magan showed disapproval, there couldn't have been a greater lie. He not only liked it, he praised her lavishly. The only objection he had was that it was too small. If only she had made it life-size, it would have benefitted them both tremendously.

He picked up the yakshi and examined it closely. Kirti still hadn't managed to make a real nude. The sylph was covered with a stretch of wet cloth so real that you could still feel water dripping from it. In some places the cloth clung to the body and in others it hung loose, apparently trying to hide the body but revealing it even more in the process.

Magan tore his eyes off the figure and looked at Kirti. "Oh!" the word sort of spilled out of his mouth. An embarrassed Kirti cowered and cringed and quickly began to pull her purple dhoti tightly over her body. Magan

understood: Kirti had crafted the piece by observing her own naked body in the mirror. She must have thrown the wet cloth over herself repeatedly to create the desired effect—which ultimately resulted in her catching a cold, hence the coughing. It wasn't only a matter of money—a woman knows how to show and how to give herself. In spite of his knowledge, Magan feigned ignorance and asked, “How is your mother?”

Kirti suddenly became furious and broke into a coughing fit. It took her some time to regain her composure. Magan was dumbfounded and equally embarrassed. Shaking his head, he asked her a totally absurd question, “So did you find a model?”

Kirti first dropped her eyes to the floor and then looked out at the point where the street rose to meet the sky before taking a nosedive. A desire to grab her in that distracted moment and show her his appreciation in the way she deserved—and perhaps also expected—overwhelmed him, but the fear that it would surely jack up the price of the object held him back. He had decided to give her 100 rupees for the piece. Yes, 100, even if the new bottle and whatever else was needed didn't cost that much. And yet somewhere at the back of his mind he was being haunted by the thought that she might demand more.

“How much shall I pay you for it?” he asked casually.

Kirti glanced at him, but just barely. “This time I won't take less than fifty,” she said.

“Full fifty? Not one bit less?”

“Not one bit.”

An infinitely satisfied Magan lifted the rolltop. Putting forty rupees before Kirti he said, “Whatever you say. Right now, though, I've only got forty. You can collect the other ten later.”

“All right,” she said, picking up the notes.

As she was about to leave Magan stopped her, “Listen.”

She halted in her tracks and started to look at him in a way that seemed to say, “I'm in your hands.” But the gloom on her face didn't dissolve; it became a shade darker.

When Magan Tikley asked, “Will this be enough for your needs?” she nodded and made a gesture with her hand that seemed to convey her sense of utter helplessness. She told him that her mother needed to have surgery, which would require a lot more money. Thousands.

“I say,” she hesitated, “the sooner she dies the better.” She started to scratch the floor with her big toe. “At least that would put an end to her misery.”

When Magan looked at her she no longer appeared to be an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old girl. She looked like a mature woman in her mid-

forties, capable of receiving and withstanding any blow life threw at her.

“Here’s a suggestion,” he said, drawing closer to her. “Make a carving of *methun*, copulation, and I’ll take care of all the expenses for surgery.”

“Copulation?” she shook from head to toe.

“Yes,” he said. “Such carvings are in great demand. Tourists go crazy over them.”

“But ...”

“I know,” he said, shaking his head, “you don’t know much about it. So go to Khajuraho and have a good look. I’m willing to pay you an advance.”

“You,” Kirti looked at him with utter contempt. “Just now you said you were out of money?”

Magan immediately thought up a lie. “I have some put away for the shop’s rent.”

He tried to give her more money which Kirti, in her aggravation, refused to take and walked out in a huff.

Left alone, Magan Tikley carefully examined the yakshi. With a small hammer he first broke off its nose, chipped an arm and knocked out a leg, and then tapped lightly on some of the decorative details on the figure’s head, causing small chips to fly every which way. He went into the back room, tied a string around it and lowered it into a tub of acid. Clouds of smoke swirled upward and Magan pulled on the string, raising the piece, and immersed it in a bucket of clean water. When he took it out, voilà, the yakshi’s features had become blurred and it had acquired tiny holes and fissures. It was now ready to sell for a thousand rupees.

Indeed, on her next visit Kirti did bring him “copulation,” and life-size at that. It was inside a gunnysack carried on a pushcart. Some laborers lifted it, hauled it into Magan Tikley’s shop, collected their wages and left.

Alone with Kirti and breathing somewhat heavily, Magan cut the string from the sack’s mouth and took out the statue, feeling a bit uncertain. It was now in full view. A superb creation! Magan’s mouth went dry. He had imagined that Kirti wouldn’t look at it in his presence. Far from it, she didn’t budge, standing right across from him without the slightest trace of nervousness. The woman in the statue was in the throes of an orgasm while the man holding both her shoulders was completely drowned in rapture. Right now, though, Magan didn’t pay much attention to the statue. He wanted to examine it at his leisure.

“How much do you need for the surgery?” he asked.

“Not for surgery, for myself.”

“For yourself? But your mother ...”

“She died. Two weeks ago.”

Magan made an effort to look sorry, even sad. Kirti was in no mood for commiseration. Her lips were pursed as usual, and she looked as melancholy as ever. Despite this she said resolutely, "I want a thousand rupees for it."

Magan was somewhat stunned. He was stammering slightly when he said, "Who would give a thousand for it?"

"Yes," Kirti said in a firm voice. "I've already talked to someone. I might get even more. But I gave you my word."

"I ... I can't give more than five hundred."

"Absolutely not," she glanced outside to look for a laborer. Magan stopped her, "All right, add another hundred."

"A thousand. Not a bit less."

A dumbfounded Magan gawked at Kirti in disbelief. She looked different. So self-assured! Had she been to Khajuraho?—he wondered—met some tourists? One must always try to keep an artist away from their market, their customers. Well, so be it.

He lifted the rolltop, counted eight hundred and put the notes in front of her. She hurriedly counted them and hurled the whole lot right into his face.

"Didn't I tell you, not one bit less?"

"OK, nine hundred."

"No!"

"Nine-fifty ... nine-seventy-five ..." Then seeing an unmistakable firmness in Kirti's eyes he counted out ten notes each worth a hundred. He stuffed them in her hands and like a drunkard bounded over to "Copulation." Kirti just stood there, as if to receive applause for her artwork.

Magan stared at the woman in the statue. It was again Kirti. But why were there tears in her eyes? Was it from the numbing heaviness of pleasure or from a sense of utter helplessness? Or from the blend of pain and pleasure, torment and comfort which is the substance of Being? He turned to look at the man. He looked gentle on the outside but a real brute in his core. Why, why had Kirti stressed the animal in the man so resolutely? Is this "Copulation"? The kind a man and woman go through? What the hell—it will fetch more money!

Magan Tikley pulled the hanging lamp closer to have a good look at the man again. "Oh, I've seen him somewhere."

Kirti didn't respond.

"You," as if he seemed to have a clue, "you and Siraj ..."

Kirti took a step forward, slapped him in the face, and clutching the notes in her hands, stomped out of the shop. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon