

ZAKIA MASHHADI

The Saga of Jaanki Raman Pandey*

SOMEbody SHOULD HAVE GONE and inquired from this Jaanki Raman Pandey, Advocate, why in the name of God did he have to go to Rasoolpur and die there when he was doing so well in Allahabad? And die, not just figuratively, but literally. The common belief is that the time and place of a person's death are preordained (and also the time and place of some events more important than death, e.g., marriage). So why the fuss if one believes it has to be so? Well, what can one do? There are many wise-crackers around, each smarter than the next. They say, of course, the Lord above has predetermined the time and place of death, but wouldn't you say something must be left for us humans to do too? So whether we dump nine tons of soil on the dead body or douse it with kerosene—by the way, this practice of pouring kerosene on the living and incinerating them has also become quite fashionable these days—or feed it to kites and crows, well, that's our business. But brother, the crux of the matter is that a person only likes beliefs that accord with his own desires and convenience, otherwise he usually picks up a cudgel and goes after the offending ones. At least that's our belief. If you don't want to take my word, just look at how Pandeyji fared.

Pandeyji's whole story was told by K.K. Mama—the K.K. stood for Krishan Kaant, but he was mostly known by just those two initials. He'd given up appending his surname long ago. He used to say that in this *kaljug*, the period of crass inhumanity and unmitigated evil, everyone has thrown all laws of proximity and abstinence overboard. Why, they have even started eating and drinking together. Be it high-caste Brahmin or someone as lowly as a sweeper or tanner, they are all mixing freely. So why should he drag the name of his worthy ancestors through the mud? But Krishan Kaant's disciples knew that all this posturing was merely a façade to hide the real K.K. He was hell-bent against caste differences. So purposely omitting his surname was really a sign of protest.

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K.K. had perhaps no nephew of his own to call him *Mama*, but some wag had added the word *Mama* to his name. That stuck and he became everyone's *Mama*. He had spent quite some time in Lucknow, spoke fine Urdu, and was fond of telling stories. It was as though the spirit of some raconteur of the bazaar had been breathed into him—one time Jaanki Raman Pandey had himself expressed some such idea. Shifting the glob of paan from one cheek to the other with his tongue, and lifting his face up so the messy spittle didn't splatter on his audience, he'd talk in a peculiar, rounded, rolling tone. But what an enchanting storyteller he was! Not one person would even think of getting up to leave while he pulled yarn after yarn from his inexhaustible stock.

His chief audience consisted of the young men from his extended family, one or two neighbors, including Mirza Anwar Beg's wife Nayyara Beg, and perhaps a visitor or two who happened to be around. It seemed like Anwar Beg was the only person who was always pissed off by K.K. *Mama*. Calling him "a damned sissy," he would say, "talks like gossiping women—someone in the family is like this; another one is like that...."

Regardless of what Anwar Beg said, it never made the slightest dent in K.K.'s popularity. A crowd collected around him the minute he arrived, especially in winter when a heap of peanuts and steaming cups of tea would be on hand, a brazier of coals would be lighted, and K.K. *Mama* would sit in front wrapped in a quilt looking every bit the clown. And thereafter, a cornucopia of delights, a paradise of absolute fun!

During one such winter session, he told the story of Jaanki Raman Pandey, the Advocate, who went to Rasoolpur and croaked there, creating quite a crisis. This is how the story went:

"When Pandey was small—and it was a long, long time ago that Pandey was small—his mother, known as Punditayin, passed away. She was the first cousin of my mother's first cousin's sister-in-law's elder brother-in-law. There was, of course, the kinship, but there was also a close bond between the two families."

"Was the bond just as close as the kinship, or more, or less?" Bipin Bhaiya had a habit of butting in, whether during a story or in real life.

"Well now brother, I haven't invented any gadget for measuring closeness of relations. I can only tell you that we were quite close and the kinship was not inconsiderable either. And Mian, back in the old days people used to end their letters with the P.S. 'Regard my brief note as a full letter . . .' And not just brief notes, they even regarded distant kinships as close kinships, and they steadfastly maintained those relationships. We're

like them too,” K.K. said, striking his chest with his hand. Quite a bit of paan-spittle flew about and dissolved in the air. He wiped the edges of his mouth.

“I’m warning you if you ever interrupt again in the middle,” Nayyara Beg scolded Bipin Bhaiya. She seemed to have acquired the right to scold everyone, including Anwar Beg.

“So, *bitiya*, when Pandey’s mother passed away, his father didn’t take long to find himself another wife. Well, that’s what people did in those days, if they felt the need they didn’t even wait for the first wife to die. They went ahead and married again just like that. So if he did, it wasn’t like he had committed some grave sin. And especially when the old ladies in the family kept goading, ‘Oh dear! Pundit, the poor motherless child is wasting away. Why don’t you remarry? How in the world are you going to raise a five-year-old child by yourself?’”

A moment ago, Nayyara Beg had scolded Bipin Bihari for butting in; now she couldn’t hold back and blurted out, “What if the Pundit had somehow died? Would anyone have suggested to Punditayin that she get herself a new groom? Wouldn’t that have easily taken care of all the looking-after Pandey needed? Perhaps nobody gave a moment’s thought to how Pandey would be raised if his widowed mother stayed unmarried”

“But it wasn’t like Pandey was raised by his mother. His father had remarried all right, but the Punditayin he brought home this time was only about a year younger than Pandey’s older married sister Uma.”

“Oh come on Mama! A year older or younger?” Nayyara Beg nudged him again.

“Now, Nayyara Bibi, the fact is that she was a year younger, but if you would rather, then call her a year older,” Mama again pushed the paan from one side of his cheek to the other.

“Mama, next time someone interrupts you give him a good whack,” Kaanti said. She was getting irritated by these constant interruptions of the story.

“Well, brother,” Mama took out another pinch of flavored tobacco from the paan box and stuffed it in one of his cheeks, “I’m too old for whacking? Just listen to what happened later. So, the daughter of Punditji, who had been married in Allahabad, was his eldest child. Actually she was named after the goddess Uma, but all the young men around called her Didda. She was about eighteen. She saw what was happening at her father’s place: how the new wife, with a tika emblazoned on her forehead, moved about everywhere in the house jingling her anklet bells, while her own father either stayed in the men’s quarter of the house or

hung around the new mother rubbing his hands in anticipation of coming pleasures. So, no sooner had she returned home when she took to bed feigning illness and told her husband in no uncertain terms that she was going to have her little brother there with her, no matter what. A brother born after the death of three sisters, and the treatment he was getting from the stepmother! He craved a cup of milk and she wouldn't give him any even though two cows were tethered in the yard.

"When did I ever stop you from bringing him here?" her husband said. "You could just as well have asked in a simple, straightforward way. Why become a second Queen Kekai when you're my only wife?" And so on.

"A beaming Didda went back the very next day and brought Pandey with her to her in-laws' place. The stepmother thought it was better that way; the less junk, the cleaner the place. Her anklet bells began to jingle a bit more.

"Didda called Pandey 'Bhaiyan' out of sheer love but treated him like a son, not a brother. Even after her own children came along, Bhaiyan's status didn't diminish. Those who didn't know the family well thought Bhaiyan was her first-born. Her husband, Onkaar Nath Mishra, also regarded him equally. He considered himself lucky to have found a wife such as Didda: in appearance fair and lustrous like a Brahmin, in honesty and fidelity a Rajput, in maintaining the household accounts and looking after the land and property a Vaisha, and in being ever ready to serve, a veritable Sudra. Onkaar doted on her. He took great care of her brother. Bhaiyan got an absolutely first-rate education.

"Bhaiyan was in his graduating year when, to gratify her own desires, Didda went ahead and arranged his marriage."

K.K. Mama shifted in his seat and also rolled the paan in his mouth over to the other cheek, giving his narration a theatrical air. A respectful audience waited in hushed silence for the denouement to unfold.

"Now, brothers, understand that just after Didda arranged for the wedding, someone came and laid on Bhaiyan that the girl was as dark as one could imagine. Bhaiyan's heart sank. Summoning up his sagging courage he approached Didda. She was sitting on the takht trying to figure out how much she needed to pay the washerman. That's when Bhaiyan, his eyes downcast, twisting the edges of his shirt, walking on tiptoe, stole behind her—behind, so that he might not have to look straight into her eyes and yet say his piece.

"Didda,' he said in a timid voice that was barely audible.

"Heavens, that cursed man broke the buttons again.'

"Bhaiyan was confused. Surely, when he was little, he did chew on the buttons of his shirt and shorts and was scolded by Didda, but now ... had

he broken off another button?

“No, Didda. Where, show me?” He quickly began checking his buttons.

“Oh, it’s you? What are you doing standing there? I was talking about that blasted washerman.’ She resumed counting, ‘Four dhotis, two sheets, one jacket.’

“Didda,’ Bhaiyan breathed a sigh of relief as he scratched his head.

“Yeah, what? Doesn’t even worry about time; descends on you whether it’s morning or evening.’

“Bhaiyan was nervous again.

“All right Didda. I’ll talk to you some other time.’

“Not you, Bhaiyan, I was talking about that accursed washerman. Come sit. Come on. Why are you standing behind me?” She pushed aside the load the washerman had just delivered and made room for Bhaiyan. ‘Just look at his audacity. It’s breakfast time and he shows up. Then just dumps the washing and disappears.’ She mimicked the washerman, ‘Get the account ready; I’ll be back after I’m done with my round of the neighborhood. Anyway, tell me, what do you want?’

“Didda ...’

“Pandey again summoned up his courage and dropped what he thought was a bombshell.

“That girl from Mirjapur, well, people say she’s very dark, yet you went ahead and gave the word?”

“What!’ The pencil and notebook fell from Didda’s hands. She had never in her wildest thoughts expected such shamelessness from Bhaiyan. She stared unbelievably at him, the one she had treated like a child from her own womb. Hadn’t she brought him here when he was hardly five years old? Hadn’t she looked after him? Given him an education? How dare he talk like that?

“Actually Pandey would have never had enough courage to say what he really wanted to. Ever since he’d heard talk of his marriage, a face as bewitching in its beauty as the moon had started flashing before his eyes, but then someone spilled black ink all over this image with the news. The prospect of waking up in the morning to an ugly dark face right in front of him was truly soul crushing. Of course he couldn’t say all this. He could only bring himself to utter just one brief sentence, and even that hid more than it revealed.

“Listen, Bhaiyan,’ Didda said, slapping the pile of clean laundry, ‘It’s a courtesan whose appearance one worries about; if it’s a wife you want to bring into the house, you look at her family. And her family is one in a thousand. No one even eats onions or garlic in their house, let alone meat or fish. They’re nobler than the noblest. Add to this the fact that the young

lady has also graduated from high school. Next Tuesday the girl's people are coming for *barichcha*; the ceremony seals the alliance. But come to think of it, you have an exam coming up so you'd better go and concentrate on your studies. These matters are better left to your elders.'

"Meanwhile Onkaar Nath Mishra, alias Bhaiyan's brother-in-law, wandered in calling for his breakfast. He had overheard all the qualities of Bhaiyan's bride-to-be. Solemnly he advised him, 'Listen, young man. Go for the family now. Later on, when you get the chance, bring in one with a pretty face.'

"Didda immediately drove her large, beautiful, questioning eyes right into her husband's. All the same, Pandey took his brother-in-law's advice to heart and happily, without any further ado, agreed to bring the Black Beauty home.

"A daughter-in-law, jingling her anklet-bells, alighted in Didda's courtyard even before her own first-born had wed.

"Pandey loved Didda, as he ought to have, but he did not care any less for his kind brother-in-law. And rightly so. The man who had sired Pandey had never even once looked back to inquire after him. Whatever he had come from this brother-in-law alone. And because he was a lawyer, he was now giving Pandey a legal education. Bhaiyan would get good training in his own house, he would say. Apprenticeship under an established lawyer would give Pandey's own practice a head start. There was no way he could possibly ignore the word of such a godlike brother-in-law, was there? So, a few years after his law education, when his practice was flourishing and he had become completely independent, he brought home one with a pretty face."

At this point in the story, K.K. Mama paused, heaving a deep sigh, and asked again for some hot tea. He'd made a dramatic pause in the narration, which only caused his audience's interest to soar.

During the pause Bipin Bhai Sahib laughed uproariously, enough to rattle the roof, and said, "Why, we all know that the one with the pretty face was a *musalmanti*. But how and where he had met her, that only Mama will be able to say."

Mama once again rolled the betel glob from one cheek to the other and carefully held up the spittle in his mouth.

"Mama, why don't you go and spit it out?" one listener objected.

"Quiet, you!" he got the answer from another one. "Let the tea come and let Mama freshen up a bit."

It didn't take long for tea to arrive. Nayyara Bibi poured it in all the cups, scowled at Bipin and said to him, "For this *musalmanti* bit, I'll deal with you a little later. For now let me hear Mama's story."

“How many times have I heard that before, Nayyara Bhabi? So forget about your threats of dealing with me,” Bipin challenged. “Haven’t I asked you a hundred times to find me a ravishing *musalmanti* like you? But why would you bother! Now I’m going to fall in love with you. Damn the luck of that son of a gun Anwar! As some old master has said: a houri in the lap of a black-faced monkey ...”

Nayyara sloshed a bit of hot tea on Bipin’s neck, “You wretched *binduchbey*, you!”

After spitting out the glob of paan and rinsing his mouth Mama once again picked up the thread of the story as he slurped his tea. The listeners were sipping their tea too.

“Was there anything the people shied away from saying about her? Even called her a slut. But that wasn’t the case, nor was the Pretty’s family mediocre or lowly. As for *musalmanta* or *musalmanti*, just look at our Nayyara Bibi now and tell me for sure whether she’s a Hindu or a Muslim. Just try. No one goes around wearing his or her religion or caste on their sleeve. And, folks, if it were up to me, I would have all the religions in the world banned. Nothing has created so much dissension and discord among people as ...”

The intensity of passion and anger in his last sentence left everyone stunned for a moment.

Then he calmed down again, as people often do after a flare up.

“Pandey’s brother-in-law Pundit Onkaar Nath Mishra, Advocate, had a faithful and loyal old scribe named Munshi Rajab Ali, just slightly older than Onkaar Nath. Rajab Ali’s father, Imtiaz Ali, had been affiliated with Onkaar Nath’s household ever since his father’s time. He was responsible for looking after their entire property. As a manager, he was scrupulously honest. He got his son educated and so Onkaar Nath took him into his employ as scribe. Didda used to call him Brother Rajab Ali Sahib. Whenever Imtiaz Ali came to visit, she would draw her mantle over her face and touch his feet in a gesture of respect, but she wouldn’t eat at his house. This was the time, folks, when people showed warm affection whether they would eat at the other’s place or not. Nowadays, it’s the opposite: people eat together but their hearts are far apart, devoid of goodwill and affection. What a shame!” Mama took out another folded paan from the betel box.

“The dietary prohibition applied only to cooked foods and liquids. They didn’t extend to uncooked or dry stuff, such as paan, tobacco or fruit, etc. So at Eid time, when the gift tray arrived from Rajab Ali’s, it only contained uncooked vermicelli, spiraling dry vermicelli, dry fruit, sugar, and lo and behold, some crisp bank notes to buy milk along with Eidi

money in small individual envelopes for all the young ones in the family. Everything was placed on a new round copper salver. The food, including the salver, was presented to Didda, prompting her to say every time, 'What, Brother Rajab Ali Sahib, a brand new platter again? We have no prohibition about dishes in which food is neither cooked nor eaten. Go bring an old platter and take this one back.' But Rajab Ali wouldn't even hear of that. After he passed away, Didda often heaved a deep sigh and said wistfully, 'All the platters are lying in the storeroom. Go count them and you'll know how many Eids we spent together.'

"The same Rajab Ali had a much older, widowed sister. Her own daughter had died while still young, leaving a little girl behind. The girl's father remarried. Rajab Ali brought the widowed sister and her granddaughter home. As he had no daughter of his own, he loved the girl very much and married her off with much fanfare. Didda too had sent a gift of clothes and such for the bride. Later it became known that the girl's husband suffered from some mental ailment. Eventually the grief of having to seek divorce for his dear granddaughter killed Rajab Ali prematurely. The girl returned home. A silence had swept over her. The minute Pandey set eyes on her, he went berserk. He felt as if the sun was shining right above his head, melting away his brain. He had gone to Rajab Ali's to offer condolences and the girl had somehow walked straight into his presence—the portrait of a forlorn face, eyes streaked with red. He was getting along in years: many lovely faces had passed by him, but never before had he lost his heart like that.

"Well, Pandey started visiting the house frequently, apparently out of regard for Rajab Ali and his unflinching loyalty. He showered them with gifts of all kinds. Poor Rajab Ali's wife was a simple, naïve woman. The trauma of her husband's untimely demise combined with the misery the poor girl was going through made her almost witless. For some time she had no idea what was happening. And as for Didda, she wouldn't even notice what season of the year it was. By the time she woke up, the water was already well above her head. *Bhagwan, hai Bhagwan!*

"What is all this that I'm hearing, Bhaiyan?" She confronted him.

"Bhaiyan was dead silent, unable to say a word.

"Why don't you open your mouth? In the whole wide world you could only find this one—a Muslim, and a divorcee to boot?"

"And when no response was forthcoming, 'Am I talking to a stone or something?' Didda actually began to cry now.

"Love is known to turn even the smartest people into perfect idiots. When Didda kicked up more fuss, Pandey, who some years ago had very quietly succumbed to his sister's choice and gone through the seven

rounds of the holy fire, was provoked to say—though he spoke very respectfully—‘Didda, you’re like a mother to me. If she were alive today, I couldn’t have given her as much respect as I give you. I saved your face and your good name when you went and made a decision about my life without asking me. I honored it with my heart and soul. My first one is the principal wife; that will not change. But this one is my love; that will also not change.’

“Didda was speechless. Yes indeed, Bhaiyan had answered back to her. That left no room at all for further discussion.”

“Bravo Bhaiyan Sahib! You turned out to be quite gutsy!” clamored someone in the audience. “And what do we have here? Our Bipin Bhaiya. The girl didn’t even belong to another religion; just a different caste. His mother gives a slight rebuke and there he goes running to hide under her mantle.”

“Shame, shame!” a collective cry shot up.

“Go smear dung on the faces of those who talk about the generation gap. Why must anyone malign today’s people? Those older ones weren’t any different.”

Bipin Bhaiya went completely numb, as if a serpent had sniffed him. Observing the doleful look on his face, someone came to his rescue: “OK Mama. Something more must have happened afterward, eh?”

“Whatever happened afterward was all the handiwork of the heavens above—Didda nor Pandey nor the one from Mirjapur had anything to do with it. Before he married his Pretty Face, Pandey already had two daughters, about five or six years old. But within a year of his second marriage, he had a son, followed by another son, while his first wife again gave birth to a girl, their third. Didda couldn’t hold herself back anymore. She went to congratulate her sister-in-law with traditional fanfare, gave her a pair of priceless earrings, a family heirloom, as a gift, and was overjoyed to see the faces of the nephews glowing like the sun and the moon. When their beautiful young mother bowed slightly and raised her hand to greet her, Didda responded with words like ‘May you be blessed with many children and prosper,’ and accepted a roll of betel leaf from her hands—the betel box was always kept ready because of Pandey.

“After Didda returned home she arranged for a puja session in honor of Lord Sat Narayan, customarily held to mark auspicious occasions such as this one. Then, taking along a share of the propitiatory offering, the prashad, she went back to the house of the same sister-in-law who belonged to another religion. She didn’t explain anything, just offered it to her. The young lady smiled and accepted it gracefully in her two cupped hands, the way prashad is taken. (‘Oh, the wretch! How pretty she is! Her hands

look like they're made from silver,' Didda thought to herself.) Then she raised her cupped hands to touch her forehead in a gesture of respect and gratitude and consumed what was in them. (Didda thought, Lord, what a dutiful and respectful girl!) Then after a pause Didda said, 'With Bhaiyan by your side, the two of you look like Ram and Sita. From today, I shall call you Jaanki. You do know, don't you, that Sita's other name was Jaanki? And besides, it is also part of your husband's name.'

"Raushan Aara smiled. ('What's in a name?' Shakespeare declaimed centuries ago. But then some bright spirits subjected his own name to their ingenuity and came up with 'Sheikh Peer.')

"The couple had named their boys Aamir and Saabir. Didda changed them to Amar and Subir and, after incorporating everyone into her family by giving them Hindu names, returned home. Thus she filled up the entire yawning gulf in one minute flat. Even the Lord Hanuman's army wouldn't have built a bridge between Sri Lanka and India in such a short time. However, the fallout from all this activity didn't turn out to be entirely propitious. The 'one with the big family name' whom Didda had brought home with such eagerness felt offended and started to distance herself from her. Now, folks, such mother- and daughter-in-law tiffs are fairly common in every family, though they're kept somewhat hushed in respectable homes."

"Yes, fellows, take the case of Princess Anne and Lady Diana. They never could get along well."

"Bravo! There you go rushing straight off to England! Why forget our native Safdar Jang Road?"

From Pandey, the conversation had drifted to political figures and their relatives. Tea with peanuts and a session of backbiting lasted a long time. (Both give a lot of pleasure in winter, as famously said by Mushtaq Yusufi.) The fun lasted quite some time.

Such sessions still took place, but they had somehow lost their earlier zing. K.K. Mama, at fifty-five (in his own view, the prime of his life) was struck with cancer and two years later was no more. The protagonist of his story hadn't aged much either. Likely he was sixty, or just a little older, but he still had a muscular body. There was no sign that he would croak anytime soon. It didn't look as if a single brick in that stout frame would come loose before he was eighty or eighty-five, let alone the whole edifice crashing down. But yes, Didda had passed away and the girls had grown, so the pressure of Pandey's first wife had increased on him. Even when he went to the Pretty Face's, he didn't stay long and came running

back. But this time when he went to her he made up for all the lost time; settled all his past and future accounts. He died there. Just like that, suddenly. K.K. Mama was no longer around or he would have pontificated, “Now, folks, you never can tell when someone will fall in love, nor is there a fixed time for a dust storm, a wedding or a death. Sometimes all these happen so suddenly it’s hard to believe. Here, try to figure it out: Pandeyji was perfectly fine at home; why the heck did he have to go to Rasoolpur to die? Granted, *she* lived there, his favorite wife. But if he hadn’t gone there at that time, he might not have died. Or he might have died but at least not there.”

When Pandey was making Raushan’s life miserable by insisting that she marry him, she told him one day, “But Pundit (that’s how she addressed him, always), you and I belong to different religions. On top of that, you’re married and the father of two daughters. You may well claim a thousand times to be ready to die for me but ...”

“Oh, religion ... yes,” Pandey took a deep breath and scratched his head. “Granted, about that there’s no doubt: you’re a Muslim, I’m a Hindu. But why drag my being married into it? Your religion allows four wives, doesn’t it?”

Raushan Aara smiled, “And yours puts no ceiling at all. Four or forty.”

Pandey became irritated, “The damned government does now. There was this ancestor of mine who, when there was no such law, married four real sisters, one after another. And when the stock ran out in that family he got himself a courtesan. But there’s no restriction on you.”

Raushan Aara glowered menacingly, “Of course, there is. On me, that is. Not on men of our community. By the way, Pundit, what do you take me to be?”

“Jaan-e Pundit, the love of my life.”

“The Persian genitive, that ‘-e’ does not go well with a typical Hindi word. Like the two of us together. Looks downright awkward, odd.”

“Raushan Aara, keep it up and one of these days you’ll get a fine beating.”

Raushan Aara suddenly tensed and her face became grim, “Oh yes, I’ve been beaten all right, like a poor pawn on life’s chessboard. What do I do now, Pundit?” Without thinking, she began rubbing her hands together. Her voice betrayed a feeling of utter helplessness.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just marry me, without fussing.”

“In that case, you’ll have to change your faith. No court marriage for me. No sir.”

“There will be no court marriage anyway. The one from Mirjapur is at home, isn’t she? How would I deny having married her?”

“So, you’re going to have me as a ‘keep’? Is that it?”

Now it was Pandey’s turn to become deadly serious. Could one possibly pile such disgrace upon the woman he has loved so dearly, so helplessly? For a moment he was speechless.

“Come on, Pundit. Speak up.” Her tone insisted on a categorical answer.

“I will go through the nikah,” he said with certainty.

“You’ll have to change your religion. You know that, eh?”

“So now you’re going to teach a lawyer, Raushan Aara Begum? You, a woman, whose intelligence, as the elders say, resides in her ankle?”

“We’ll decide later whose intelligence resides in the ankle. First, you’d better be aware that the path is pretty rocky. To abandon the religion of one’s ancestors ...”

“To hell with it,” Pandey bit his lips.

“What are you sending to hell—religion or the ancestors?”

“The society that created the religion. But, of course, your religion is descended from the heavens.”

“Right now you’re a Hindu so you may say whatever you like. Once you accept Islam, you’ll not be allowed to show any disrespect.”

That night when he went home and laid down next to his wife, Pandey couldn’t fall asleep. He lit a cigarette and went to sit on the verandah. Didda hadn’t let him move away from her house even after he started making his own money. She only moved him to a newly built, cottage-like bungalow in the empty lot—an extension of her own house—just so that her brother’s ego wouldn’t be wounded and he wouldn’t become the object of people’s gossip on account of living in his sister’s house. The two houses had a joint compound. A trained gardener under Didda’s own supervision made improvements to the garden. Some trees were so beautiful their leaves looked prettier than their blossoms. The breeze filtering through them felt a bit more refreshing. The moon hung like a chandelier in the middle of a clear blue sky. Pandey just sat there smoking cigarettes. The fragrance of *molsiri* hung about him like some magic spell overpowering the odor of tobacco.

There was still some time before dawn. He got up and started walking toward Didda’s house. Huge white *musandas* stood lining one edge of the lawn. The story is told how in one of his incarnations Gautama Buddha was wandering in the forests of Sri Lanka. It was a moonless night and he was groping his way forward when suddenly row upon row of flowers opened and a glow spread through the *musandas*. The whole forest was bathed in a cool luminescence. A milky white light spread all

over—light not of the moon, but of the flowers. Then Gautama Buddha blessed the *musanda* plant. The blessing is still effective: the shrub flowers year-round. God knows whether it is a psychological effect of the story or whether the flowers themselves have some innate quality, but somehow calm descends upon one's mind and heart when looking at them. Could it be the result of Gautama Buddha's blessing? And did the Buddha not pray for the human race to be blessed with common sense? That the dross be eliminated from man's heart? And man cleansed of his innate evil? Spared old age, sickness and the cycle of deaths and rebirths? They all continue to afflict mankind and are still filling man's heart with terror. Mother ... my dear mother.

Pandey's eyes welled up with tears as the thought of his beautiful mother who had died so young came sailing into his mind. An excruciating sigh rose from his heart at this hour of the waning night. Where would Mother have gone after dying? Would she really have to cross the Vaitarini River as the Scriptures say? Were there any other worlds beyond this one? Would Pandey ever be able to see her again after his own death? The mother who always carried her little Jaanki Raman close to her heart when she was alive—would she be yearning for him now? Would the *pind daan*, the ritual charity and puja offered for the peace of the departed souls really bring peace to them? Yes, soul? What is this soul?

(Raushan Aara, too, when she said the *faatiba* for Munshi Rajab Ali, said his soul received peace and reward from this.) What are *gunaab* and *sawaab*, the sin and the reward for virtue? Raushan had never let him kiss her, only allowed him to touch her fingers. "This is sinful" was her favorite expression, which she used time and time again. ("But then, Raushan Bibi, according to your beliefs, meeting me, to even make this attraction between a man and a woman possible, is sinful.") Who had made these standards for sin and for reward? Restless, he had begun walking fast. If he recited the *kalima* and claimed he was a Muslim, would he still remain Jaanki Raman Pandey or would he become someone else? He decided, no, he would remain the same, with all his knowledge, his awareness, his legal hairsplitting, his body, shape, appearance, his feelings and sensations, his thoughts, his wickedness, his defects, all his loves ... The name Jaanki Raman Pandey had everything and then again, nothing.

His loves ...? He had two daughters and a wife. He had never felt the kind of attachment or stormy feelings for his wife as he did for Raushan Aara. What about Didda and his daughters ...? Would his love for them diminish or disappear entirely just because he stuck a new label on himself? "How could that be Jaanki Raman Pandey?" he reproached himself. Then, what was all the fuss about? And whose fuss was it?

The following week he went to Raushan Aara and told her he was ready to recite the *kalima*, to convert.

“But Raushan,” he said to this quiet, bright-faced woman with droopy eyelids, “I am Vishnu’s devotee; I may not be able to pluck him out of my heart. You might as well know that all these names, these conceptions—people have devised them at different times just to answer their own basic questions: Who made this world? Why do people die? Where do they go after dying? What awaits them there? Is there any recompense for all the injustice and suffering in the world? Those whom no law can prosecute, will they get their just deserts somewhere? Is there any reward for those who do good? As it is, Raushan Begum, the world is rife with sin and oppression. If there were no religion, it would be flooded by them. Religion at least sets limits around the devils residing within us; it gives human beings strength and courage during their suffering and crises; it keeps hope alive.

“And this ‘*Insha-Allah*’ you keep repeating so often ... and ‘*Masha-Allah*’ to protect yourself from evil—that Allah of yours Who is merciful and forgiving, Who preserves and cherishes, Who condones sins as well as punishes for them, Who sustains life and promises death—well, my Vishnu has all those attributes too. It’s just that we view Him in three separate forms—Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer. They’re all facets of the same supreme Being.”

He smiled. “Your Allah is the Lord of all the worlds, not merely the Lord of Muslims. So ... in that sense, He is mine as well. He was mine even before, but now I will declare Him openly as mine. And it is through His good offices that I shall be holding your hand. But the manner in which I have been worshipping Him in the past is not going to change. It will remain the same.”

He remained quiet for a short while. Then lowering his eyes a bit he said, “And Raushan Begum ... one other thing: I cannot give up my wife, or daughters, or Didda. My wife, such as she is, I have married her with all the proper rituals. My entire society is behind her. None of them can be made to sacrifice for one relationship.”

He paused again, and this time smiled a little. “And don’t you give me the example of King Edward of Mrs. Simpson fame. He was a king, and a king of England at that. I’m just a common man, a member of the hoi polloi, victim of the most complicated caste-driven landscape of India.”

Holding her beautiful face in the cup of her hands, listening attentively to Pandey’s lecture, Raushan smiled—a painful, troubled smile.

“Pundit, when I was handing over my heart to you, I hadn’t considered that you were Jaanki Raman Pandey and I was Raushan Aara. By the time

I discerned the difference between the names, it was already too late. You may do whatever you like. Only lift your finger and say the *kalima*. I cannot accept any other manner of being with you except after nikah. I won't even ask you to become a nonvegetarian."

Then she spoke with a trace of anger, "Whenever you come here, I'll feed you the fodder for the cows and oxen. And, may I eat pig's meat if I ever contemplate encroaching upon the rights of your wife. About coming here, you may do so whenever you want, and stay only as long as it does not upset your peace of mind."

They were married the next week. Before the nikah, Jaanki Raman Pandey converted to Islam in the presence of a meek-faced, frightened-looking maulvi. At the time of the nikah, Raushan's maternal grandmother, that is, Rajab Ali's wife, was terribly sad and upset. Her concern wasn't that Raushan was marrying a Hindu. What pained her more was how she would now face Onkaar Nath's wife. How she would send the Eid vermicelli to her house. The relationship between the families went back a long way. Was theirs the only house left to burglarize? In any case, Jaanki Raman Pandey was a man, no one was going to say anything to him. And even though it wasn't love-at-first-sight for Raushan, nor did she try to find excuses for him to make repeated visits or try to contact him—as a matter of fact in the beginning she was quite suspicious of his comings and goings—at that time she was passing through a delicate and very painful period. Caution escaped her when she found attention and love. But who would even stop to notice or listen to all of this, or ask for explanations. And, indeed, no one said anything to Jaanki Raman. They all pounced on Raushan.

A harlot. A dissolute woman. Abandoned her first husband. Does anyone ever hit a pretty woman like her? Must be a tramp, that's why she got beaten. And then blamed it all on him for being crazy. She'd never let him come near her, that's why she couldn't even beget a mouse in three years of marriage. And then, as soon as she marries Pandey, out comes a son. Who knows, she might have been carrying on with Pandey the whole time. (Pandey wasn't even remotely aware of her existence in those days.) A whore. Didn't even worry about what is permitted and what is not. She's corrupting a Brahmin's faith; she'll go straight to hell. Who knows, even hell may not find a place for her. Lord knows what she feeds him. Then one day, tired of people's jibes and what she herself thought, the first wife told Pandey, "You eat *there*; separate your pots, pans and dishes from ours. Don't eat here in ours."

Pandey always treated his first wife very courteously. Who knows how he had defended himself in other matters or what shrewd counseling

he had given her, but on this issue of eating, he brought out the Holy *Gita*, put his hand on it and swore, “When I stay there, my food is cooked in separate pots, on a separate stove. During those days, she herself does not eat meat, fish, onion or garlic. It’s a purely vegetarian fare.”

The Mirjapur woman would burn hearing him use the plural, respectful form of “she” for Raushan. But Pandey, swearing with his hand on the *Gita*, looked so pitiful, so innocent, so disarmingly truthful that afterward she gave up squabbling about what was lawful to eat and what wasn’t.

Pandey did swear at that time, but ever since that day, he began feeling troubled in his mind. This was the first time he’d had to go to that extent to prove his honesty. He felt as if he was no longer the lawyer, but the culprit standing in the dock. He was reminded of the episode in the *Ramayana* in which Sita has to go through the trial by fire. He would sit brooding long hours over what this business of *halal*, *haram*, *khadiya*, *akhadiya*, lawful to eat, or unlawful to eat was. One could eat meat, the other couldn’t. One could eat meat, but not pig’s meat or cow’s. Even in vegetarian food, there was a prohibition about onions and garlic, as there was in Pandey’s own house. On the other hand, Didda’s sons had started having onion pakoras fried in their house. Because of the same issue among Didda’s in-laws, they had to separate their cooking. A family that had held together for generations was now split apart.

A melancholy feeling had settled over Didda’s elder brother-in-law because one of his sons had fallen in with bad company and had started eating meat. His wife was the daughter of some naval officer, and so quite upbeat and outgoing. Not only did she not reprimand her husband, she encouraged him. The food already had an excess of onions and garlic in it. At first the matter stayed in restaurants. Later, as restraint relaxed a little, biryani and chicken started arriving in the lunch boxes. Such indignity in the house of a high-ranking Brahmin! Ram! Ram! The two brothers fought openly. The older one was a little orthodox in his views and loved his father dearly. If all of this hadn’t happened while he was alive it might not have mattered that much. So the older one made his younger brother live separately. A huge two-storied home was divided into two households. The parents moved in with the older son and daughter-in-law. After the hearths were separated, all the issues that had been ignored earlier suddenly became contentious. One day, a lighthearted joke turned into a serious argument. “*Bhabhi*,” the younger brother said to the older sister-in-law, “try a chicken drumstick sometime and you’ll start eating whole men, not just chicken.” She screamed so hard that the entire household promptly gathered. The spat became so heated that the division of the estate and property was dragged in. (Actually, the older brother’s wife

had been contemplating the matter of the division of property for some time already. The fight provided a handy excuse to bring it up.)

How stupid man is! How long will he stay that way?

Wasn't Raushan Aara herself saying the other day that her mother never mentioned the word pig? She referred to it as "the bad one" or "*baram*-faced." Her logic was that if one mentioned the word "pig," the angels that brought blessings wouldn't enter one's house.

"And Bibi Raushan Aara, you're the people who eat chicken, goat, cow, buffalo, even camel and horse. Why so much fuss over a poor pig?"

"I never eat camels or horses," Raushan fidgeted a bit. "And beef—that you made me give up."

"But they are considered *halal* at any rate. Aren't they? Baddan Mian, remember, that distant relation of yours? Didn't he slaughter a camel to celebrate the birth of a son born after six daughters? And didn't he send a share of the meat to your house? Poor daughters! No one sacrifices even a measly goat when they're born, much less a whole camel." And Pandey added, "You may go on claiming that a woman's status is very high in Islam, but there's a clash everywhere between the beliefs of religion and society."

"When did I eat camel meat?"

"The same silly argument! It's *halal*, isn't it? Your co-religionists eat it, don't they, whether you personally do or don't?"

"Right now you're the one making silly arguments. You sound like a broken record."

"It's stuck because you never told me why you people fret so much about the pig. Remember, once you even swore that if you ever think of usurping the rights of my wife, you'll eat pig's meat."

"Maybe because it looks so dirty and nauseating."

"It looks the same to me as well. Maybe it does even to others. But why does it occupy such a negative place in your psyche? It's stupid to shy away from it so much. It is *haram*, just as a donkey or a dog is. Maybe because nobody eats a donkey or a dog, but people do eat pigs, that's why the idea has somehow stuck in your brains. What a shame! But when you people are angry, why do you swear by saying 'Eat a pig!' not 'Eat a donkey' or 'Eat a dog'?"

"I've never thought about the logic. You go ahead if you wish." Raushan Aara scowled, "Seems as if you want to kick up a riot inside the house, eh? Haven't you done enough outside?"

Pandey laughed heartily.

Recently, they had escaped a riot by a hair's breadth. Some mischief-maker had thrown a sack of meat into the mosque. No one had it tested

by a lab to find out what kind it was, everyone just assumed it had to be from a pig because it was thrown inside a mosque. Pandey was ahead of everybody in reasoning with the enraged youth and calming them down. He had come to Raushan and was present in Rasoolpur at that time.

“Look, you can’t win over the majority by fighting. An ordinary mistake will cause great harm to your people. Have some patience and don’t let such small things get to you.”

“You call it a small thing?” Raushan had snapped.

“Small in the sense that a person could easily pick up the sack and throw it out, fill up buckets of water and cleanse the floor. End of story. The ones who wanted to benefit by inciting you would then be left to wallow in total embarrassment.”

But it took all his powers of persuasion and a lot of time to make them understand this small thing. Picking up the sack himself, Pandey dumped it in the garbage and made entreaties to the imam of the mosque with folded hands. The situation had become quite volatile. Finally, with tremendous difficulty, he was able to avert a major incident. (How could there be a major incident anyway? Have Muslims got the spunk for it? If they so much as even make a peep, you guys beat them up and knock some sense into their heads. You confiscate their graveyards and threaten to send them to their graves too.) “But we’re not about to pack up and go to Pakistan,” Raushan had commented. The Babri Mosque issue was also pretty hot at the time. Somebody had also scribbled a rhymed couplet on Raushan’s wall: two places left for Mussalmans: the graveyard or Pakistan.

Raushan was in a daze. Her face looked as if she was oblivious to everything around her. And indeed she was. Her long hair, which Pandey had undone the night before and spread over his shoulders, was still in the same disheveled state, now even a bit tangled. Dark circles had appeared under her eyes. It seemed as if someone had filled those eyes, which even now had lost none of their brilliance, with bewilderment—bewilderment at the unexpected that had struck her. Her mind refused to accept it. In one corner of her mind, the scorpion of an idea had been stinging her: why did Pandey have to be with her when death came? (And if he had been at that other place perhaps she would have been jolted by a different shock, the inability to see his face as he lay dying.) God knows what everyone in that other house must be thinking... And then again, both of his sons were here. All the people of the area had gathered too.

Pandey was well liked in the area. Raushan did not know quite how to tell them that her husband was not a Muslim, that his last rites should be

performed according to the Hindu faith. (The whole village was a Muslim settlement. There were just a smattering of Brahmin and Rajput households and a few tanners' huts at the edge of the village.) But could Pandey fit easily into a single category? Which one? And whose?

Once, a long time ago, when he had let Raushan's head rest against his chest while he leaned back moving his fingers through her long curls, she had said, "Pundit, you're such a hypocrite! You even said the *Juma* prayer in the mosque. Tell me truthfully, what did you actually recite, *Gayatri Mantar* or *Hanumaan Chaleesa*?"

Pandey laughed, "I've memorized all seven *kalimas*, and even the *Al-Hamd*. I just recited those, switching them around a few times, and did the standing up and sitting down as the others were doing." Then suddenly he became serious. "Have you ever seen the chicken being spoiled when too many cooks butt in?"

"What makes you think of chicken all of a sudden, Pundit? Like to eat some?"

"Raushan," Pandey was still serious, "I used to be a simple, unpretentious Hindu. I got mixed up with you and became a fake Muslim. Then I didn't even stay a true Hindu. I have become a complete heretic, what you might call an atheist."

Raushan jerked her hair away suddenly and sat up. "Don't talk nonsense. I'm going to serve the food now." She moved toward the kitchen and saw Pundit following her. He came over and stood leaning against the stove.

"Raushan, before, I never felt the need to think much about God and religion. I just figured there was someone who nourished us, so I did my duty toward Him by going through the evening prayer. I'd heard a lot of criticism about the other religions around and I also believed my religion was the best. Then I looked at the world carefully. After meeting you, I tried to understand your faith. I was just a lawyer in the beginning. All I ever knew was the law. Then I developed an interest in religion and studied a lot of subjects—history, sociology, anthropology, religion, and so on. And now Raushan, I've gone beyond all the boundaries, whether overt or covert."

"Listen Pundit," Raushan said as she emptied gourds filled with gram lentils from the pan into a beautiful deep dish, "Don't take my jokes seriously. By God I haven't let your religion bother me at all. You mean everything to me just as you are, a human being who has given me all his love and security."

"I know that Raushan. And I haven't loved you just for your looks either. It's also because of your intelligence, your wit, your deep under-

standing, and your innate nobility. I looked for all these qualities in my wife but couldn't find them. That's what drew me to you.

"But right now I'm in the mood to tell you something. I have a deep sense that in every epoch or age, all the secrets and mysteries of the universe, all the ups and downs of life, like old age, death, suffering and the like, have produced in humans of all races and colors, the conception of a Being that controls the whole of this intricate puzzle we call life. That Being is someone affectionate like a father, above every need. Someone we expect to support truth and oppose falsehood, someone always awake, watching over every creature. Someone from whom we can ask anything and everything. To please him, to avoid his wrath, we also formulate the concepts of *sawaab* and *gunaab*. Basically, *sawaab* are deeds that benefit others and *gunaab* are those that cause them harm."

For a short while he stared at the gas flames flickering on the stove. Then he continued:

"But while doing all this, what we forgot was that it is quite natural for people's conceptions to vary in different regions, in different times, and according to their different ways of life, even though the basic objective is still the same. All religious systems ultimately take a person in the same direction—toward the Omnipotent Being Who created the universe and has control over life and death. But we only consider the system we ourselves follow as correct. We declare everyone who falls outside our own system as fit for beheading. And then we split up the basic *gunaab* and *sawaab* into a hundred different categories that make no sense at all."

Raushan placed the rice dish on the tray with deep sorrow and said, "Among those sins is also the one I have committed: marrying the follower of another religion. Pundit, I know, you agreed to embrace Islam only to make the nikah legally permissible."

"That's correct, Raushan, but I too believe in one God. My ancient Hindu faith tells me the same thing. And I also respect your Prophet immensely. He was a great revolutionary reformer. No person has been born since who could win over such large numbers of people and bring about such tremendous, positive changes in his community."

"And you're still not a Muslim?"

"I just told you, didn't I? I'm not even a Hindu any longer. I'm just a human being who sees God's glory in everything—in the chirping of the sparrows, the fragrance of the flowers, the open spaces, the scattered stars of the galaxy, in the waters of the rivers and the beauty of the rising and setting sun. Perhaps that's why our thinkers and philosophers started to worship the sun and the trees and the rivers. These are all manifestations of God's divine power.

“And I also concede every individual’s right to his own religion and personal beliefs. How he wants to reach his God is his business alone. But it’s also true that no other issue besides religion has resulted in the creation of so many walls and so much iniquity among mankind. After the discovery of America, when the Spaniards arrived in the New World, they didn’t just bring gunpowder and smallpox for the natives, they also brought a new God. Surely, it must have been hard for the natives to adjust to this new God; it must have taken some time for them to forget the souls of their ancestors, whom they had worshipped, and not to grieve over the mass slaughter of their sacred buffaloes. The German tribes used to worship oak trees; the Catholic missionaries had them chopped down.

“And forgive me for saying that there’s a lot of emphasis on missionary work in your religion too. From what I know about Islam, although it wasn’t spread by the sword alone, the Islamic conquests did play an important role. The vanquished have always found safety in adopting the faith of the victor. The cultural and religious influences of the conquerors gradually supplant those of the confused or at least usher in a lot of change.”

“And you Hindus beat up the Buddhists and drove them away, didn’t you? You razed their temples to the ground and gobbled up Mahatma Buddha by assimilating him in the Hindu pantheon of gods as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Nice trick to put an end to the Buddhist faith,” Raushan said in a huff. Then she laughed and added, “But I, a Muslim, have a great reverence for Gautama Buddha. All right, weed-eater, enough sermonizing. Come, your meal is served.”

“Raushan Begum, your Mahatma Buddha vigorously opposed idol-worship, and not just that, *he* also opposed the entire gamut of Hindu ceremonial acts and sacrificial rites. And what did his followers do? They installed idols of him everywhere in the world; they started doing all the things he had opposed. The fact is mankind needs a God, especially one they can see. It’s very difficult to worship an unseen God like the one you have. That requires a profound metaphysical understanding rarely found in human beings. But of course, with a cudgel in hand a person quickly learns how to smash it hard on another’s head and beliefs. To overcome the nasty devil hiding inside man ... now take those magnificent statues at Bamiyan, your Taliban ...”

Now Raushan really got angry, “Why are the Taliban mine? Because they share my religion, is that it? My head sinks in shame when I think of it. No conqueror in Afghanistan ever touched those Buddhas, not even Mahmud, the one famous for being an ‘iconoclast.’ There’s been so much progress, but man hasn’t learned to be human. Why should someone who

is wrong, narrow-minded, an enemy of history be called *mine*?" Sadness mingled with indignation in her voice.

"All religions were originally different than what their followers subsequently made them into. All right, tell me something," Pandey asked, laughing, "when I die, which religion will you follow for my last rites? Oh brother, I'm truly terrified of being buried under the dirt. Those two angels of yours, the Munkar Nakir, will come and torment me in the grave. *You* can take whatever nonsense I say, but they would pick up their maces and start their drubbing right on, *dana dan*."

Raushan's lips formed into a smile and she looked away. Pandey's tongue continued wagging.

"And I'm not even Kabir so that when I die in place of my body flowers will appear, which the two of you might divide among yourselves, half you and the other half my first queen."

Raushan scowled at Pandey. The narrow line of the smile had disappeared.

He laughed again. "OK, Raushan, tell me one other thing. Why do miracles always happen to people in the past, people we haven't seen or known? Why don't they happen to us? Today? Now? By the way, there is one good thing in all this. I'll earn double credit after dying. There will of course be *pind-daan*; and in addition to that, you'll also recite the *faatihah* over me, as you did for your mother and for Uncle Rajab Ali."

Raushan banged the plate down, "Don't talk such gloomy nonsense with food in front of you."

"Raushan, I'm much older than you, so it's almost certain that I'll go first. I added 'almost' just in case you get tired of me and think of ending your life. But you wouldn't do that, would you? You wouldn't go away leaving me alone." He grabbed a handful of her thick tresses and tugged. "Tell me truthfully: what will you do if I die before you? Tell me."

"What *can* I do?" Raushan pushed away the sudden gush of tears. "I'd be resigned to the will of God, as I'm resigned now."

"Resigned to His will," Pandey repeated the words separately and forcefully. "'Wherever Ram keeps me; that's where I'll stay.' The Hindus say Ram is the same, the same Elevated Being to Whom we attribute everything and become free of our responsibilities, the One Who enables us to bear our miseries with patience. This is not Rama, the son of Dasaratha. This is the Brahma of the Vedas. Kabir had the same Ram, so did Gandhi. No matter what religion we adopt, what label we attach, we'll remain the same and perform our duties as humans."

He suddenly became quiet. Then, as if he had remembered something, he added, "I bequeathed half of my property to you and the boys,

and the other half to the daughters. I've given the house where I live to my wife."

"Pundit, I don't need anything. It's enough that you have arranged for us to live here in Rasoolpur. Both boys are well educated. They'll earn enough by themselves. You've given them the greatest wealth they can have. You got them out of here and had them educated in the best schools and colleges. You looked after them very well. What more can you possibly give us now? My head seems ready to burst when I think that man is basically so mean and selfish. And I too have committed a selfish act: I've taken a poor woman's husband from her."

"That woman isn't as poor as you might think, Raushan Begum. I've always been there for her, and I've been there completely. Society has given her much more than I could ever give you. It's terribly lonely living all by yourself cut off from your people. So, if you ask me honestly, I've actually sinned more against you than her. I wouldn't like to add to it by dying and leaving you helpless. My heartfelt wish really is that when I die, I am with you."

Raushan put her soft palm on Pandey's mouth.

If K.K. Mama were alive he would have said, "He always had a black tongue. Whatever evil he uttered came to pass." But K.K. had passed away a long time ago. Those stories of his, those memorable gatherings, were a thing of the past. God's name alone abides—God Who has no beginning or end, Who is invisible beyond comprehension, beyond life and death. (We humans only wish to be beyond death and keep forging other worlds in imagination.)

The noise at the door was getting louder by the minute. People were carrying wooden clubs in their hands, some capped with burnished blades. They were all local residents. Pandey's three sons-in-law, one of their relatives, and people from the family of Didda's older brother-in-law had all come rushing from Allahabad, but two of Didda's own sons had remained aloof from this trouble. Upon hearing the filthy abuses hurled at their mother, Raushan's two sons had opened the door and come out unarmed. Inside, in the courtyard, Raushan stood holding up the Quran in her hands with every one of her limbs trembling.

History was repeating itself again so soon. When Raushan was a young girl, a contest between wrestlers had suddenly acquired communal overtones. Shopkeepers had quickly dropped their shutters. The noise of running feet had shaken Raushan's street. At that time, Raushan's grandmother, hoisting the Quran in her hands in the same way, had come and

stood in the courtyard reciting it loudly. And the maid had covered her head with her mantle and raised her hands to pray: "O Master Ali! Remove this hardship from our lives."

(At the time of his martyrdom, Hazrat Othman was reciting the Quran. His blood had spattered on the Word of God and made it colorful.) What had to happen happened. Raushan's grandfather, who had gone to the village to have the harvest brought home and was on his way back, was murdered along the way. Nothing happened in the city itself.

A distraught Raushan came straight out of the house and stood in front of her boys, shielding them.

"These are your own relatives, Jaanki Raman Pandey's children," she screamed loudly.

"Let's start with the slut. Kill her," someone shouted back from the crowd.

"Please bring the necessary papers and sit with us peacefully. We are willing to relinquish the property that the Pundit had given over to us." Raushan remembered well the argument that had started at Didda's elder brother-in-law's house. What had been a squabble over eating or not eating meat had ultimately led to the division of ancestral property. Pushing the boys behind her, she uttered those few sentences very loudly.

With a premonition that something awful might happen, Onkaar Nath Mishra, over seventy now and practically a recluse after his wife's death, rushed to the scene in his jeep just in time. Having lived through the world's ups and downs, and being well aware of people's ways and dispositions, the thought of the world's impermanence had become etched on his heart. He had heard that Pandey's three sons-in-law had already left for Rasoolpur with the armies of their cronies in tow, all because Pandey had died there. It was confirmed that the proper funeral prayer had been performed for Pandey and he was then interred in the Muslim cemetery there. Onkaar Nath also had some perfunctory knowledge that Pandey had bequeathed half of his property to Raushan and the boys before his death. And rumor had it that because of the national elections just around the corner, ISI agents' activities had moved into high gear in the Rasoolpur area. Considering all that, the situation didn't look at all promising. Holding on to his back with his hands he got up.

Pandey's first wife pulled her mantle over her forehead and came to him. "Brother," she said, "don't let the boys and their mother come to any harm. Raushan Aara never snatched him away from me, and the boys of course are his own flesh and blood. A change of faith does not change the relationship." Her voice became hoarse. "I couldn't stop the sons-in-law."

Even Onkaar Nath felt his eyes becoming moist. It was the first time he had felt like crying since his wife's death. He stood up. After a short pause

he said, “Pray to Bhagwan that nothing untoward happens before I get there.”

His deceased wife was devoted to her brother. It was because of that connection that he had accepted Raushan and the boys, but his own children were siding with Jaanki Raman’s sons-in-law. True, they hadn’t accompanied them, but they hadn’t said anything either. And Onkaar Nath’s nephews had even gone along with the crowd. They had suddenly remembered the kinship that existed between their two families.

The prayers of Jaanki Raman’s dark, gold-hearted wife were answered. Onkaar Nath reached there in the nick of time, otherwise who knows what might have happened. Everything was settled peacefully. Raushan agreed to give up her share of the estate and property—with this promise, and upon some other conditions, the crowd returned home with Pandey’s exhumed body.

This was Onkaar Nath’s first encounter with Raushan. “Chhoti Bahu, please give them your permission,” he had said very gently. “There are only three of you here, but there are many innocents in the village who might lose their lives even though they have nothing to do with this dispute. The atmosphere is not good. Tell them yourself: fine, take it. There’s grace in that. And beside, it will preserve the good will. We cannot fight with them all.”

Such disrespect for the Pundit’s body! Raushan almost fell over, overcome by the shame. How much had she begged her village folk and her own sons to have his body taken to his house in Allahabad? But no one had listened to her.

“Chhoti Bahu, a dead body is never left to rot, neither at home, nor on the road. Everyone knows that.”

After the body was taken away, Onkaar Nath stayed there for some time. “Whether you cremate him or bury him, what does it matter?” he said. “He is gone from this world. The five elements have returned to the five elements: earth to earth, sky to sky, fire to fire, water to water, and air to air. The same process occurs in either case, it just takes longer if the body is interred, but people don’t understand it. The rituals observed after death are all for the solace of the living. I’m an ordinary person; I’m not in a position to say much, but the thinkers and philosophers have called the body clothing for the soul which it keeps changing. The soul itself does not decay. It is immortal. If we accept that, daughter, exhumation of a body already interred makes no sense, but what can I do? Seems Bhagwan has a special love for the ignorant. For they abound in His kingdom. Practice patience.”

“Brother Onkaar Sahib,” Raushan lifted her tear-filled eyes and looked

at him, “The earth stands firm only because there are pious people like you around. Please do me this small favor: take us to Allahabad. Find me a place anywhere there. I have some relatives in Allahabad, though they have all severed contact with me. Grandfather Rajab Ali died a long time ago. Now even Grandmother is gone.” She again began crying inconsolably.

A funeral pyre burning away at the edge of the Ganges, lapped by its gentle waters. Orange flames leaping in the murky darkness. A few stray, spotty clouds sail through the sky. The raucous sound of crickets hiding in the vegetation. The people are all gone. An awesome, eerie silence—eternal, unending, unaffected by the crackling fire, the noise of the frogs and crickets, or the waves—pervades the landscape. There are several other funeral pyres as well, devouring human bodies. Five elements returning to five elements.

River, O river! How many have you seen ablaze? On this edge and on the other? From here to there, where you begin and where you end?

Emerging from behind a clump of trees, she comes forward. The land is a little elevated on one side, hiding a row of eternal, lush green trees. She stands on this elevated ground—a fair woman, tall and slight (and at this time as blanched as white paper). The edge of her fine, white, lace-bordered sari flutters in the wind. She seems to have suddenly overpowered the whole scene.

This man who was offered up to the flames, whose abundant, gorgeous hair was consumed by the blaze in an instant, whose skull, sturdy despite his age, was cracked open with the ritual blow of the cudgel—what was this man to her? Why had she come to the cremation ground where women are not permitted? Who was she? And these people who, forgetting the maggots in the grave and the flames of the pyre, were ready to kill and be killed—who were they?

“Don’t let anything deceive you, Raushan Aara Begum! This concept of the other world ... it is nothing more than a childish fantasy to live forever. Our togetherness will last only as long as we live. And so far as the next world is concerned, well, if it pleases you, say the *faatiba* for me as well.” Then he had laughed mischievously, “But would your *faatiba* reach me, since I’m ...”

Uneasiness, like the smoke from the waning pyre, swirled inside Raushan’s whole being.

“All the heavens, all the hells, we go through them in this world itself. They’re all creations of our own making, the consequences of our own actions.”

“Oh, you talk so much nonsense, Pundit. Be quiet now.” Raushan Aara wiped away her tears with her little finger.

“One of the mantras recited at *pind-daan* says: go and never ever return to this world. I too would like to recite it. ‘Jaanki Raman Pandey, you go now. And don’t you come back. The world isn’t ready for you, not just yet.’”

Raushan Aara wrapped the fluttering hem of her sari tightly around her frail shoulders and, her heart heavy, started slowly retreating backward—forty steps. □

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan and
Muhammad Umar Memon*