



PART TWO

Apradhini*

Chhi, Mummy, Tum Gandhi Ho!**

○ Shivani

Translated from Hindi by Ira Pande

How strange, I thought, that a woman whose name was Janaki had no trace of the goddess she was named after. This Janaki had conspired with her lover to kill her own husband. I awaited her arrival impatiently, although this time I was not alone. The prison's security staff was present and I wondered whether she would be willing to speak freely to me in their presence. After all, when two women exchange confidences, have they ever wished for an audience?

It was the first Navratri of Chaitra, and I had chosen to spend it inside a prison. They say that since this is the first day of the Hindu year, the rest of the year takes its lead from what happens on that day. I had already heard of Janaki's story but was now keen to meet her and hear it from her own lips. She entered silently, and I was startled to see her suddenly loom before me. I gestured that she

should sit down, and my glance swept from her face to the hands placed on her knees. If her face had been covered and I'd only seen those wrists, I would have mistaken them for a young man's muscular hands. One swipe from them could fell someone easily, I thought to myself. But the rest of her was unmistakably feminine: skin like ripe wheat, and a tight, voluptuous body. There was no trace of the pallor so common to other inmates: her face was flushed with a healthy, rosy glow. She kept her glance averted though, and her thick lashes covered the eyes from my gaze. Gandhiji has said that every crime is written on the criminal's face, but this one was firmly shuttered. The expression on her face was carefully neutral: neither joy, nor

sorrow, nor a nervous twitch to give her thoughts away. Our *shastras* say, "*Punyo vai punyain karmana bhavati, papah papaneti*" (Good deeds make a man virtuous and sins make a man a sinner).

What had made her a sinner? What prompted her to lead the man she had married to her lover's hatchet? Why had she conspired to kill her own husband?

I had been told that this young woman, sitting so politely in front of me today, with her eyes downcast modestly, had hidden her young lover for two days in a dark room in her house. The young man had a sharp hatchet ready. She coaxed her husband into the dark room and the two lovers had cut him into little pieces as if he were a stalk of sugarcane. I looked at her shuttered face closely and could find no trace of emotion in that carefully composed face. "I have come to hear your story from your own lips," I smiled at her.

She looked up then and smiled in return. Nothing had prepared me for that smile. I had no idea that the memory that I was trying to uncover would evoke anything like a smile from her. I had been preparing myself for a long sigh, even a burst of tears—but a smile? Her cheeks



Suparna

*Female criminal

**Ugh Mummy you are dirty!

dimpled and a slow animation spread over her shining face. Her teeth flashed briefly at me, and I was charmed by them. How long was it since she smiled like this? When she came here, hounded by the press and her neighbours, her own seven-year-old was reported to have said: “*Chhi, Mummy, tum gandi ho!*” (Ugh, Mummy, you are dirty!).

I wonder what had prompted the little girl’s disgust: had she suddenly woken up to see her father lying in a pool of blood? Or had she seen her mother making a cup of tea for an “uncle” she had once spotted in that dark room?

“Who is he?” she had asked her mother.

“He’s your uncle, child,” the mother had answered calmly.

“No, he’s not!” she had said vehemently: “Ugh, Mummy you are dirty, !”

When I reminded her of her daughter’s words, Janaki’s smile suddenly vanished. She shrank into a shell, and her neck disappeared into her shoulders. So the smile was just a mask, I realized. She had retreated from me once more, and it was futile to proceed with questions about the past, for it was obvious that she had no wish to re-open old wounds. Haunted by the memories of the articles in newspapers, the lawyers and her own family’s accusations, she had decided to become an unfeeling iceberg. She had left all her modesty and guilt outside the walls of the prison, and the smile she flashed at me when we first met was from the persona she had adopted inside the prison to survive.

An oppressive silence filled the room, and both of us were loath to break it. Ultimately, I decided to chip away at the iceberg.

“Do you ever regret what you did, Janaki?” I asked her.



She looked up then, startled and angry, stung like a cobra when the snake charmer provokes it with his nudge to come out from its basket. I almost recoiled at the anger in those eyes. Her eyes were red and fairly sparking with fire by now.

“Regret what, may I ask?” she retorted. “What have I done?”

I felt like asking her if you are so innocent, then what brought you here? A pilgrimage?

But she lowered her head once more and then slowly began to speak.

I watched her face carefully, fascinated by the expressions that were rapidly chasing each other, like the changing colours of a chameleon as it moves along a branch. She was sometimes coy, then she trembled with anger, occasionally she rubbed her hands together in frustration, and beads of perspiration started to collect on her forehead. But never once did she falter – her tongue was like that of a woman possessed, it carried on speaking and her voice rose and fell rhythmically as she recounted her life.

Not many editors would have the stomach to go through her script, I can assure you. And yet, in a sense her story was ageless—a script that the world has heard and rewritten so many times.

She was born in a prosperous farmer’s family in Punjab and reached puberty rather early. Her face was not especially beautiful, but there was a robust health that shone through her young body. Ripe, red lips, sparkling,

merry eyes and a firm, voluptuous body. It was probably all that milk and honey that gave her cheeks that flush, I reflected, even here where roses on cheeks wither within days. Her eyes were not ringed by dark circles, nor did her lips look dry and chapped.

Her calm, unhurried voice proceeded with her story: She

was happy growing up in her father’s home, running through the wheat fields and raiding the mango groves in summer, when she heard that a prospective groom’s family was coming to see her. She was dressed in a clean set of clothes for the occasion and was taken to be shown to the boy’s older brother who had come to assess the new bride for his younger brother. Janaki’s father had made generous arrangements for the emissary: a tall glass of fresh buttermilk, home-made sweets made from the milk of their own buffaloes, and many such homely delicacies had been offered. And then, Janaki was led into the room.

Her brother-in-law’s jaw dropped open at the sight of her fresh, young body and he decided to accept her father’s proposal, not for his younger brother, but for himself. He was a bachelor and had declared he would never marry as long as he lived in a rash moment, but now he was willing to break that vow of celibacy. Although Janaki was just sixteen and he was forty-eight-years old, neither her father nor her mother objected, overjoyed as they were to have such a prosperous man bid for their daughter’s hand. In any case, he did not look a day over forty, they told her. Look at his bushy moustache, and not a grey hair in his head still! Tall, strapping, and handsome, they wished for nothing more for their daughter.

That night, Janaki sobbed into her pillow as she reflected on what lay in

store for her. A man who had cheated his own younger brother, how could she possibly believe that he was honest in other ways? How sacred was that vow of celibacy if he broke it the first time he met an attractive woman? God knows how many other women he would lust for. When she reached her husband's home and was introduced to his younger brother, Janaki was devastated: this was the man she could have married if his older brother had not snatched her away, she thought despairingly. But it was too late to change her life.

Meanwhile, her husband outdid himself in lavishing his attention on his new bride. She had to merely mention a sweet she craved before he produced it. He loaded her with shining new clothes and jewelry—all that he thought would win her heart. However, there was another, darker side to him that Janaki occasionally saw: He had a fearful temper and was jealously possessive about her. If he ever caught her smiling or talking to another man, he became livid, and if Janaki joked or laughed with his younger brother, his eyes turned red with rage and a terrible battle followed.

Naturally, over time, her husband's obsessive jealousy killed their relationship. She had produced three healthy children in these five years and excelled in cooking, sewing, and embroidery. Her house shone like a mirror and she got up at the crack of dawn and finished her chores before waking the children to get ready for school. Yet nothing she did ever brought a smile to her husband's sour face.

"Was he here again yesterday?" he'd ask, and she would stand silently.

How could she lie? Wasn't this his own brother's house and wasn't he free to visit his family when he wanted? Yet she knew that if, for the sake of peace, she lied, she would have to tell many more to cover up one. The servants, the children—after all, how many mouths could she keep shut?

"I've told you a hundred times," her husband yelled, "that bastard must never come here! Why can't you listen to me? Do you want to die one day at my hands?" Little did he know



Suparna

that he would die one day at her hands.

But what was he like, I asked Janaki, this man who defied his brother's anger and came to visit her at his peril? And why did she never put her foot down firmly? After all, she must have realized that her husband did not make idle threats—she herself had told me how many times he had thrashed her and flung the food in her face. The walls would tremble at his rage, she'd told me, and the neighbours would shamelessly eavesdrop, whispering: "There they go again!" to each other when the pots and pans flew in Janaki's house.

She looked up then and started the next chapter of her life.

"He used to live next door to us, *ji*," she began, "he was then in the twelfth class and weak in English. He used to come over to study in peace to our house. He called me *Behenji* (sister) and I called him *Bhaiyya* (brother)."

She fell silent again and I waited for her to go on. I was now a surgeon and she the patient spread before me. My knife hovered over her body. How many so-called sisters have eloped with their "brothers," I

recalled, covering their real feelings behind the socially acceptable relationship of a brother and sister. A school friend of mine used to tie a *rakhi* on a "brother" for years, and he sent her a money order from wherever he was. Then, many years later, I ran into them again. There were three children with them and they called her "brother" daddy!

"Are these your children?" I had asked her and she had blushed.

Anyway, Janaki was not the first girl who had redefined a relationship, I thought. On the one hand

was a jealous, hot-tempered husband, on the other was a gentle, loving youth, closer to her in every respect than the old man she was married to, who came every morning to study and gaze at her lovingly. She made him tea and he smiled sweetly to thank her. She had no idea when her feelings for her brother-in-law changed. Soon he began to learn other lessons from her as well. Then one day, when Janaki's husband returned unexpectedly and saw his wife lovingly brewing tea for his younger brother, he went ballistic. "If I ever catch you in my house again," he told his trembling brother, "I'll shoot you on sight!"

Strangely, this only made the lovers more defiant and they continued to meet slyly. Finally, they decided that this Othello had to be killed. The brother-in-law sharpened his hatchet and showed her how sharp it was by touching it with his finger. Blood immediately sprouted from the cut. See? This is how sharp its mere touch is, he told her. Imagine what will happen if I slice off his neck.

“I hid him in a dark storeroom, *ji*,” Janaki told me. “We had planned to kill him off that night. Then, I don’t know why but the old man wouldn’t settle down: he kept saying, I have a strange feeling, there’s someone hiding here to kill me.” Talk of omens and portents! I have always believed that Death never comes unannounced—only you must know how to read the signs.

“That night,” Janaki’s tale continued: “He wouldn’t let me sleep either. Morning came and he went off to his office. It was the first of the month. Who knows, maybe he lived on to collect another month’s wage?”, she sighed deeply.

“So did your lover spend the night thirsty and hungry in the storeroom?” I asked her.

“Of course not.” she replied. “I had slipped him some dinner and when I gave my children their usual bedtime glass of milk, I gave him one as well. He was nervous in that dark room, so I spent some time with him, giving him courage.”

I was dying to ask what that meant but the plot was too complex by now to go into subplots and details. She continued. “That night when my husband returned, he was roaring drunk. He always got the children lots of sweets and things on pay day, and that day the basket on his cycle was laden with gifts for them.”

“Oh, so he loved them did he?” I couldn’t help interjecting.



“Of course,” she looked up then. “Which father does not love his children? He loved me, too.”

As she said this last, for the first time, I understood the meaning of these lines:

“*Vidhi na nari hridaya gati jani/ Sakal kapat adh avguna khani.*” (No one can fathom a woman’s heart/She is a virtual mine of wiles) I almost blushed in shame for her.

“He’d bought some mutton home that day,” Janaki carried on. “I was furious when he asked me to cook it for dinner. I told him, ‘It is nine o’clock, when will I grind the *masalas* and when will I cook it? I’ve already cooked the dinner for tonight. I’ll cook it tomorrow: in any case, the children have gone to bed.’” But he refused to listen to me. ‘No, cook it now,’ he ordered. I also stuck to my argument and each time he said, ‘Now,’ I would say, ‘Tomorrow.’ Finally, I gave in but I was livid with anger. I cooked the mutton but couldn’t eat it because I was so furious. I wept that night before I went to bed and slept so deeply that I was dead to the world. Then I felt his hand on my shoulder, shaking me awake. ‘What’s happened?’ I asked. ‘Come here,’ he ordered. I did not want to sleep with him but I knew that if I refused him,

he would start to yell and abuse me, the children would wake up, and the neighbours would hear us. So I went. It was well past midnight when I returned to my bed. For a moment I felt I should go and check the storeroom but I didn’t have the nerve. ‘Suppose the old man gets up?’ I thought. ‘Let him sleep for a while and then I’ll go.’

Then she fell silent.

The silence lengthened into something else, and I felt I was watching a play being re-enacted. On the stage was a bed with the head of the household spread-eagled across. It is the first of the month, he has had his favourite dinner of mutton curry and chapattis, made love to his wife, and there is a smile of contentment on his face. On the next bed lies his wife, and between them is their little son, his sleeping form spanning them like a bridge of love. On the third bed are their two daughters. The older one is her father’s favourite, but he loves the little one, too. There is a box of sweets for each of them placed so that they see it first thing in the morning when they wake up. It is the last gift they will ever get from their father.

The only eyewitness to the grisly crime that took place that night was the ceiling fan whirring overhead. When Janaki was sure that her husband was fast asleep, she wondered if she should tiptoe to the storeroom. “Then I felt as if someone was standing over my head,” she said. “I was still a little dazed after the events of the past few hours. I sat up hurriedly and saw him. ‘What are you doing here,’ she whispered. ‘Go! Run quickly. If he gets up he’ll kill both of us!’

‘Who will kill us?’ he grinned, and my blood ran cold. ‘O God, O God,’ I said and looked at the other bed. There was blood everywhere: it had formed a pool under the bed and even splattered the blades of the overhead fan as it must have gushed out like a

fountain when his neck was hacked. I felt his neck was rising from his head, *ji*,” Janaki looked in terror at me, “and I flung my sheet and ran outside. He followed me there.”

“What have you done?” I asked him. “What will happen to us now?”

And he said, “Why worry? We’ll deal whatever happens together. Now listen carefully to me: go and clean the blood quickly and then fetch me a large trunk.”

“A large trunk? Whatever for?” I asked him.

“See that goods train there? It always stands here for about two hours. We’ll heave his body into it and ...”

I was weeping in terror by now. “No, no, I can’t do this,” I said.

“Look,” he told me firmly. “There is no time to waste. You can’t weep and howl now. We have hardly any time left. Go and swab the floor with your *dupatta*, and I’ll go and have a bath and wash off all the

blood. It’s bloody cold,” he muttered as he headed towards our bathroom.

“There is a tap with hot water there,” I told him. “Go and bathe under that: I’ll make us some tea.”

Her husband’s body was still bleeding, and Janaki lit the stove to make some tea. The blood began to congeal on the floor. She cleaned it off and gathered the clots in her *dupatta* while her children—of the same flesh and blood literally—slept peacefully. Then she got her lover a fresh change of clothes from her husband’s cupboard. The clever boy had stripped to his underwear before the murder so that no telltale blood stained clothes gave him away. Neither of them saw the hundreds of

bloodstains that had spattered every part of the room—the walls, the fan, the floor. They stuffed his body into a tin trunk and were on their way to train when the smell of milk burning on the stove woke her elder daughter. “Mummy, did Daddy break your bottle of *bindi* again last night?” she asked. Janaki quickly ran her eye over the room: where had she forgotten to swab the blood? Then the girl spotted a man lurking in the dark kitchen. “Who is that, Mummy?” she asked.

He had covered his face but who was wearing her father’s clothes, and where was her father?



Suparna

“This is your uncle, child” Janaki replied as calmly as she could.

“No!” the child screamed. “He is not my uncle! You are dirty, Mummy!”

Janaki slapped her and shut the door to the kitchen. The two of them tried to complete their unfinished task.

“You go,” Janaki was panicking now as she told her lover. “I’ll deal with this end.”

“No,” he said firmly. “I won’t leave you alone.” But she managed to persuade him and handed him her husband’s bicycle, transistor, wristwatch, and his precious terylene shirts.

“Take these and leave this town immediately,” she instructed him.

“But why did you hand him all that?” I asked.

“The minute news of his death spread, his other brothers would descend on the house and take his things away,” Janaki replied. “I didn’t want that!” She looked at me as if I was foolish to even ask the question that had such an obvious reply! I was completely nonplussed, I have to say. What was she, this woman who bared her whole story to me so innocently? A witch or a child?

Her brother-in-law left but not before he told her what to do. “Open all the doors as you always do in the mornings,” he told her. “Get up at your usual time, neither before nor after. Then scream and faint. Don’t weep, understand? Then people will think it was a dacoit who came and murdered your husband.”

She did exactly as she was told: screamed fainted and then fell silent. Then, three days later they brought

her lover in front of her. He was handcuffed, and she could carry on the charade no longer. She confessed everything.

“I could not stop myself, *ji*,” she apologized to me. And I remembered *Tiriya jal maha aag lagave/Tiriya sukhe naav chalave*. (A woman who can set fire to water is also the same who can row a boat over sand)

This woman did not shed a tear when her husband died and yet she broke down when she saw her lover in chains.

“Don’t cry,” he told her. “I’ve put an end to all your sorrows, haven’t I?”

They are both in adjoining jails now but they have never been further apart, each haunted by their



memories: wheat fields in her father's village, the day her husband came to see her, and then one day, just three days after she had been married, Janaki caught her husband in bed with his elder sister-in-law.

"Shocked are you?" the older woman grinned at her horrified face. "This has been happening since before you were born!"

Yet when she turned for solace to his younger brother, he almost threw her out. Then she remembered her youngest child, the son she adored. "That night he was sleeping between us, *ji*," she recalled. "His palm was turned upwards and it filled up with his father's blood." I almost gagged, but her calm, unhurried voice went on with no change of expression.

We lapsed into a silence once more. And then, the gong that sounds the hours in the jail rang over our heads. It marked each hour, whether day or night, and startled sleeping bodies awake to remember and re-live their past in images: a whirring ceiling fan spattered with blood or a child's innocent fist cupping the blood of his murdered father.

It was time for her to leave. She stood up and folded her hands.

"Do you read the *Ramayana*, Janaki?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, her eyes hidden beneath her lashes once more.

Then one day, I thought to myself, she will come across these lines:

"Pativanchak parpati rati karai/ Raurav narak kalp shat parayi." (A woman who cheats her husband goes to the most terrible hell called Raurava).

"Can I leave now, *ji*?" she repeated. "I nodded and tried to smile but could not frame my lips around one. I watched her retreating back, held upright, and thought there is an eighteen year-old girl still trapped inside that frame. Was it still alive or has it been snuffed out forever, before it could bloom? Or had nature taught it to repeat the lines we used to teach our parrots in our childhood:

"Sundari tain sooli bhali/Birla bache na koi. (A stake is better than a beautiful woman/for no one can survive her wiles). □

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