

THE screech of an eagle pierced the silence and purity of the hills. On the slope, tufts of grass were bent upwards by a steady morning breeze, and they swayed crazily like magical feathers lit by the sun. The scent of wild pear blossom was all around. Garhwal was in spring colours, with deep blue valleys and golden fields, and the peaks of Kedarnath and Gangotri made a dazzling barrier of snow, far away.

A little girl in blue was coming down a path hollowed out through the terraced fields. Her house was perched high on the ridge and, as she turned, she could see the satisfying smoke rising through the tin roof. She had to bring sugar for the rice her mother was cooking. Clutching the precious money in her hand, she skipped and danced down the hill and ran after the butterflies. She was ten, and had a turned-up nose and an independent mind. Her hair, badly tied in a hurriedly made plait, fell on her eyes. Around her waist she had tied a long sash, holding tight her long garhwali skirt and blouse, quite tattered and faded. She was dirty. She was proud. Life was sweet and gentle for her people who never called themselves poor. Their dignity was born not from money but from hard work. She loved this rocky, plentiful country full of springs.

Ram Dei was her name. As the path led her through a cluster of thorny pear trees, she suddenly remembered her mother telling her to hurry back from the shop. Gathering her skirt, she ran down among the white flowers showering their petals, then breathless, she froze — and forgot all about the sugar and the shop.

A monkey lay dead on the grass. Its month old baby was still suckling on one teat, clutching the

STORY

Ram Dei

○ Florence Rastogi

fur, clutching the fur... Ram Dei stared wildly. She felt as if her heart was being torn. Suddenly a great wave of compassion swept her. In a flash, she grabbed the baby and pressed him to her heart. She felt something burst in her mind as the tiny fingers clutched at her. The baby gave a hoarse little cry. Ram Dei held him tighter and ran up the path. A horde of monkeys appeared from nowhere and went after her. All she could think of was to hold the baby tighter, covered in the fold of her skirt as she crouched, bitten by furious old males pouncing again and again. She wouldn't, couldn't let go. The village cobbler saved her. His shouts and well placed

stones soon got rid of the frantic monkeys, and he admonished the child for her foolishness. But she wouldn't let the baby go. She was totally absorbed in a feeling of love and the touch of warm fur, and the little fingers... It was too much! Covered in bites and bleeding, she didn't notice and didn't care. The cobbler took her home, and there also she stood her ground, and didn't let go.

Her parents must have really loved her, to finally allow her to keep this destructive creature in their home. Or maybe, the very fact that they were poor clinched the issue: if they could afford food for three children, they could also feed this tiny baby. They had their pride. Besides, they were amused by it, and liked the originality of being the only house around boasting of a monkey. And their heart did melt a little, looking at the tiny orphan.

Ram Dei's joy was infectious. She, who never had a doll, and never owned anything except pebbles and drift wood, trained the fawn-coloured creature to be her own, constant companion. She, who had never been to school, knew how to hold him, feed him, and cuddle with him in her sleep. He would ride on her shoulder when she did the scrubbing, washing and sweeping around the house. He would scamper along when she took the goats for grazing, and when she searched for wood. She became something of a legend in her village.



SUPARNA

The monkey brought a new dimension to her character. She was a special child already, a bit of a witch child with a keen mind already schooled by life. She knew about the plants that cure. Her father transmitted to her his powers to cure toothache by beating iron for which one must not accept money, he said. From her mother she learnt how to brew *daru* from rice, and sell it to the men sneaking into their home at night. She learnt to be a survivor. She understood many things about human relationships. She could conjure useful lies. Her brothers, older to her, taught her all about surviving men's power games. And, like all those who spend much time alone, while she grazed her goats on the hill, wondering about the impossible questions about life and brooding about her feelings, she became a free-thinker. But now, she was the free-thinker with a monkey and a ringing laugh.

Within one year, the monkey grew in size and foolishness, and became a thorough nuisance, thriving on disaster. He would jump around, break cups, tear all the clothes and calendars of gods and goddesses hung on the walls. He stole, and spilled food, making life a misery, a concert of curses and shouts. Growing into a full-sized male, he started to bite a few neighbours. Ram Dei's father took the monkey one morning and announced that he was taking him far away to return him to the wild.

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We are sitting near the *chulha*, Ram Dei and I, forty years later. She has just told me once again the story of her monkey, and the ending is never the same because for her, truth is a fluid notion. Sometimes she says that she asked her father



Florence with Ram Dei

to take the monkey away. I think her father spared her the sorrow of knowing what he really did with the monkey. I think, deep down, Ram Dei knows... Anyway, her monkey never came back. As her two sons gather around the fire to listen, she shows us once more, gathering her skirt, how she crouched and covered the baby, as the children and I listen with fascination, not to the story but to her golden voice with the special vibrato, and also to the feelings she is unable to express in usual ways. She starts laughing so much that she is unable to finish a sentence. Stammering and stuttering, she is laughing so hard that tears run down her face.

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In the summer of 1995, Ram Dei and I had become friends, by chance. She is a *pahari* lady whose life has been running parallel to mine. I have a few other friends, luminous people scattered around the world, whom I rarely meet. They are like meteors, and the chances of

our paths crossing are remote. So, you'll ask, what's so special about a friendship between a silly Garhwali woman and a silly French woman? No big deal, really. It was not a major starburst that made two meteors' trajectories meet, but a summer of chaos and crisis, that made two ordinary, foolish people cling to a thread of life.

That was the summer I was in a state of shock, the summer which started, for my husband and me, with a major bus accident. It was also the summer Ram Dei was dying. It was the summer miracles kept happening.

Here I must promptly tell you that I don't like miracles, as a rule, especially massive miracles with such heavy stuff as objects that materialise out of thin air, mountains that move, seas that open, persons that appear at three different places simultaneously. Whether I believe or not in miracles is not the point. Those who believe and those who don't believe in such miracles related to "matter" have the same closed mind. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not interested, and I don't like such material miracles, because of what they do: they take you by the hand and lead you straight to what is unimportant. They make the credulous more credulous, and they make the incredulous even more credulous. Take a scientific-minded person, a hardened rationalist, and show him a miracle, and he'll fall apart, he'll fall on his knees and shed tears for God—for the wrong reasons, for all he has been shown is... matter.

On the other hand, I do believe in small, unnoticed miracles: a child's clear eyes, a kind old face, a mother's love, nature's wonders,

life, consciousness, the amazing fact that some people actually strive and the best miracle of all, a good laugh.

Anyway, coming back to that chaotic summer, I used to visit Ram Dei quite often, as she begged me to. I was just a polite neighbour and she called me "Bibiji". She and her family occupied a tiny old farm as *chowkidars*. It was almost a ruin. Ram Dei ill again, as usual. But this time, it was serious. She was losing weight rapidly. Racked by liver pains and constant vomiting, she was unable to eat more than a bite or two. There were ups and downs. At times, she would hungrily devour some plain boiled potatoes or soup I had brought. I would also bring for her regularly a herb tea made of thyme and mint. I called it "Jhari bhooti" and put on a solemn face to ward off her suspicious looks and constant refusals. She consented to drink it only after she and Prem, her husband, had examined a sample of my French thyme. I explained that a thyme of the same family also grows in Himachal. Thyme is a marvellous tonic and a miracle cure for all kinds of ailments, and I use it often myself.

Prem was showing his concern in his simple ways, cooking for her special non-oily, non-spicy food which she hardly touched, complaining it was too bland. Ram Dei was not an easy patient. For her, he took time off from work, which he could ill afford. He brought her lemons to suck, and spent money on costly medicines, which her tortured stomach violently expelled. It

came to the point when even a spoon of glucose, or a glass of water brought her violent bouts of nausea. Prem didn't know what to do.

As for me, I was slowly drawn into their dilemma. Really, I could not do much for Ram Dei, except make her laugh, and force her to walk a little, drink a little, eat a little, and remind her that her children needed her. The two sons were actually the children of Prem's second wife, an extremely dumb, passive lady, but as they had clung to Ram Dei since they were born, they knew she was their real mother. She had fed them, protected them, laughed and wept for them. A great number of neighbours and friends visited Ram Dei, which made me realise what an eminent position she held in their circle.

One day, my husband and I took her to a hospital run by a friend of ours. He took an ultrasound test of

her chest, and we clearly saw on the screen a cluster of big gallbladder stones. The doctor said he could not operate on her in her weakened state, so she must regain some strength first. She could not bear the medicine he gave. She was in terrible pain, and weak with vomiting. It was a hopeless situation.

Then Jagdish and I left with some relatives for a short trip to Kedarnath. Please bear with me a little longer. I am not telling this long story to gloat over my state of shock after a miraculous survival. I am, in fact, attempting to show that in the chaos, there was order. Besides, it heals me to tell the story.

It was the hottest summer ever in the hills. The whole of Garhwal had been burning for two whole weeks, the forests were still smoking and the valleys, right up to Kedarnath itself, were filled with grey smoke. Kedarnath was magnificent, and the snow-covered peaks rose from the grey colour of man's greed and foolishness, like a pure, white lotus, sheltering the ancient temple in its heart, like a seed. Like children, we played in the snow, on the meadows. It was a majestic beginning of a disastrous trip.

On the way back our bus, overcrowded and going too fast, approached a turn at full speed, a little after Deoprayag. Minutes before, I had pointed out to Jagdish the pretty, white sand beaches lining the green river and said, "we must go one day to explore them." I was just dozing off again when I heard Jagdish's odd voice, very quiet, and saw him smiling strangely. "The bus is going to fall." Sliding on a patch of spilled diesel,



Florence and her Vichitra Veena

as in slow motion, the bus gracefully approached the edge and launched itself into emptiness, like in one of those nightmares.

One minute, we were safely seated in our cocoon, the next, the bus turned into a death machine rushing down the steep slope towards the tumultuous Ganga 300 feet below, uprooting a tree and jumping right and left, sliding down the rubble. With a crash, it was stopped by two tiny trees just before the final plunge into the river. All I remember is the feeling of disbelief, the moment of acceptance of death, then the pain, the tremendous noise of crashing metal, and the mighty blow behind my head. Silence.

Opening my eyes, I saw a man jumping out from a window in front of me. I also jumped from the window onto the stony slope, then I realized where I was and came back to peep into the bus. Everyone was on the floor, except for Jagdish who was hanging upside down, and that didn't make any sense. No one moved. Later I realised that, as the bus was tilted, Jagdish was actually lying on a seat with his feet on the back rest, and his head dangling. Thoughts were racing in my muddled mind: "Oh God, they are all dead!" then vague visions of horror and widowhood. I clutched at the only thought that made sense, "I must go and look for help". I heard banging in the back of the bus as I scrambled up the slope in a panic, in a frenzy, slipping repeatedly on the sharp stones which cut and burnt my bare feet, and managed to reach about five meters below the road. There it was too steep, a wall of rubble on which I was sprawled like a spider, clutching at bits of grass to keep from slipping. Then I realised that help was at hand. A group of men tried to reach me with their scarves.



Ram Dei and Prem standing below their new house in 1998

As I tried to climb, I slipped further down and they shouted, "don't move!" One of them, a pilgrim from Rajasthan, unrolled his purple turban. Holding this marvellous umbilical chord, I was hauled up to the road by these smiling strangers.. Buses and cars were stopping and people eyed me curiously as I moved around in a daze, gratefully accepting bottles of water.

In fact, I was of very little help to my fellow travellers. While I collapsed with heat and shock in the shadow of a bus, pouring bottles of water on my head, the passengers of the broken bus down below started coming out one by one. All alive. While I borrowed more water to go and relieve myself a little further away, someone threw a rope and everyone slowly climbed up to the road. Rescuers went down to help the injured climb up, or carried them. Some women had been ejected through the front window and were badly hurt. One young girl came up moaning, her head bleeding I handed her my scarf for a bandage. A man who had been

disturbing her in the bus walked by, with a big gash across his cheek. I suppose that's poetic justice. A kindly old couple had broken collar-bones. Then my brother in law climbed up with his wife and three children, and finally Jagdish, who was the last. He had been helping everybody. Our group was reunited on the burning tar of the road and we spoke of a miracle. We were unable to understand how we were still alive. But a man did die, as we learnt from the newspapers the next day, falling on the road from the roof of the bus. He was a young Nepali coolie going home.

The real miracle was the extraordinary kindness of those people who stopped to help, the doctor who stopped his car to give first aid to all, the good people in the bus taking us down who gave us all their water, gave *chappals* to Jagdish, and stood so that we could sit on the way to Rishikesh. I still cry whenever I remember these people's gestures.

In Rishikesh, we stopped at Sivanand ashram and there, sud-

denly, I was lost. Like a small child. I didn't know where the others had gone and looked for them in vain in the dispensary, in the office, everywhere. For one hour, I experienced being a penniless, barefoot beggar, roaming around *Muni ki Rati* and crying uncontrollably, clutching my only possession, a plastic bottle which I refilled at every tap and emptied continuously on my head, sitting on the ground anywhere, here and there, alone in the crowd. The picture of utter loneliness—your breath comes out in big bellows, you pour water on your head to mingle with your tears, while people pass you by.

Again I set out walking.

My feet were burning on the hot tar. Still no sign of the others. Finally I went to my Guru's *kutir*. He was not there, but a young swami listened patiently to my attempts to talk, in fits of hiccups and tears. I was so incoherent that he finally stopped me : "Mataji, what can I do for you?" I pointed to the *chappals* lying at the door and requested an old pair. He promptly went and brought money and instructed me to buy shoes in the shop across the street, and to have some food. This kindness set me crying ever more furiously. I did as I was told. Still crying, I found my husband and relatives at the dispensary. They had spent all this time at the police station, giving a list of the luggage we had unanimously forgotten in the wretched bus.

We came home and took a long time to recover. Talking helped. Joking helped. It helped that one of our daughters was there to nurse



Statue of Badrinarayan by Florence Rastogi

us, and the other was on the phone. But when we had a *havan* the next day, and when the Pandit and his disciples stood up to shower us all with flowers, it felt like a soothing rain, and we realised how much we needed to heal. We were all black and blue. Our luggage was never returned, but that didn't matter. There was a mental shock. It felt strange to go back to mundane things from the very mouth of death. Workers had been building my music room at the far end of the garden, with a platform for my *vichitra veena*, but I was strangely detached. It felt strange to shout at the workers for having eaten all the litchis. It felt strange to be alive.

Meanwhile, Ram Dei was wasting away, and all I could do for her was to let her comfort me, to promise to visit her every day, and to rack my brains to find some kind of food she could eat. I brought for her *rhy* leaves, and Prem, on my instructions, went to collect nettles

to make light soups. I forced her to walk and exercise, till she could walk no more. She was bed-ridden finally, and I somehow felt, in a kind of desperation, that I must keep her alive. She was clinging to me for her life, literally. Maybe I was clinging to her, for sanity. I was still shaken by the bus accident. At night I would spend hours pacing in the garden, remembering the noise of metal, then I would be suddenly convulsed with horror when another noise, the "aaaaah" let out by fifty throats, came back to me.

The rains had come, and the nights took on their magic, misty quality. I did what I had not done in a long time: sit all night in the

moonlight, the starlight, the luminous mist, and feel the inspiration come over me. All I had to do was to think, "what a useless person I am, what a failure, what a fake I am" - and that is what I am - then the sweetness of the night would enter me, and I knew Ram Dei must live. If you think this doesn't make sense, just think! A really honest, truthful, sincere, quietly matter-of-fact thought is also a naughty thought, the primordial laugh. There is plenty of scope for the sweetness of the night.

One evening I went to Ram Dei's house and found a big gathering of her family and friends. They expected her to die in the night. She was semiconscious and hardly breathing. Prem was sobbing, exhausted and defeated. Lifting my friend's head, I forced into her mouth a little *jhari bhooti*, and quietly left the family to their grieving. That night, the sweetness, the light came upon me so strongly... I had this silly, illogical feeling, this certitude: "let Ram Dei's

sickness come to me, and let her live, I am strong, I can take it." Then I felt a great peace and thought, "if she must die, she must." I gave up the fight.

Early next morning, I found Ram Dei sitting in bed and feeling hungry. Prem told me later that when he took her behind the house, she expelled big white stones, that day and the next day. I was quite frightened by the coincidence. I kept mum about my "sittings" in the moonlight, my certitude, my peace... Neither Ram Dei nor I could have survived the absolute horror, the solemnity of a "miracle." For all I know, she may have just been dehydrated, needing some fluid in her body and I gave her just that—a little *jhari booti* with salt and sugar. Ram Dei is right, truth is a fluid notion. Isn't it ironical that the greatest miracle of all could be a little defecation and a little hunger?

Ram Dei was better, but terribly weak. Finally I did what I should have

done long ago; I told Jagdish that I would sell my paraglider and send her to a hospital. Flying had been one of my dangerous hobbies. Now, Jagdish rose to the occasion and somehow raised the money, though I did sell the paraglider later. Prem carried Ram Dei into the hospital one bright morning. A new ultrasound test showed all the stones gone. Every day I had to visit her to make sure she didn't run away, didn't force Prem to take her home. The Metronidazole and other awful medicines mixed in her glucose drip made her feel sicker even while she was getting better. I pleaded with the doctor to reduce the dose according to her body-weight. Ultimately she got well and came home.

Up to this day, Ram Dei has never missed a chance to embarrass me in front of her visitors dropping by for tea. She is completely sincere, quietly accurate, and totally mischievous as

she relates "her" truth about the care I took of her in hospital. When she inevitably reaches the line "Bibiji is *Bhagwan*, she saved my life," she turns and waits for me to intervene with the next line, "It's the doctor who saved your life." Then Ram Dei says, "Ah yes, but who took me to him?" Then I say, "It is the God up there, who saved your life, and mine too." We smile and of course, she insists on having the last word. She is punishing me mercilessly for putting a burden, a debt on her next life, to be repaid, together with all the *bidis* I have shared with her. This silly dialogue is our little *parampara*. □

Florence Rastogi is a poet, sculptor and musician. She has also worked with leprosy patients. She and her painter husband, Jagdish Rastogi live in Dehradun. These stories are excerpts from her forthcoming book "The Sunny Woman."

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

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