

OUTSIDE the sulphur lamps a long and bare road could be seen. It was getting dark and there was a chill in the air. The police jeep had just gone by making repeated announcements that nobody should be seen in the bazaar. The “shoot-at-sight” orders had come into effect.

There was a tense induced silence. No honking of cars or rickshaw bells ringing. No cries of children, no blaring of film songs, no vendors, not even the usual din of the TV. There were just a few inner sounds: the name of a family member being called from one room to another, the washing of utensils, the cymbals of the evening *puja*.

She stirred her cup of tea while peering out through a half-closed window. All day she had been suffering from a chronic cough. She sipped the *tulsi*-flavoured tea and felt its soothing warmth. She began counting the days. She used the old traditional method. It was now seven days since the new moon and the riots had broken out two days before the new moon. Nine days of curfew: nine days of being closed in, of peering out through half-closed windows, of coughing, of constantly impending despair. She kept her cup on the window sill and watched the bare road outside. It was a road that took her back to 1947, to the riots of Calcutta; to the night-long cries of animosity and rampant blood-thirst, the wailing of women, the lurid flashes of fire and the eyes of the dead. She had thought that those riots were the last ones she would have to see, now that the new country had been formed. But even though new lines had been drawn, old hatreds remained and grew. Now as she looked at the yellowish road she felt only death would relieve her of the sight of all of this again. She hoped that it would not be a very long wait for death, but she knew that she would have to linger on for a few more years.

SHORT STORY

Curfew

Vijay Prakash Singh

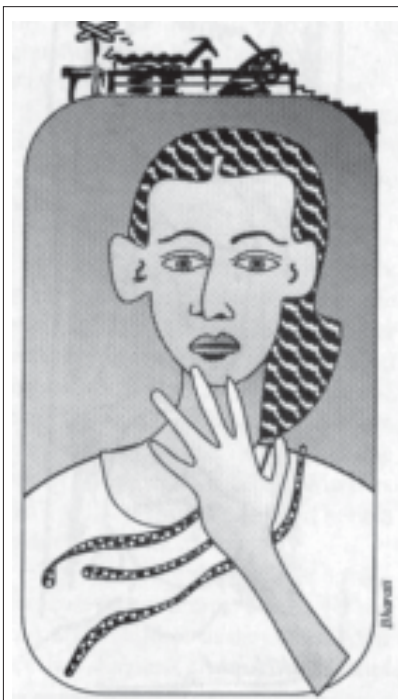
After all, there was the business of living. You had no choice.

She rose heavily and called out to her grandchildren. They were stifled having to stay all day in the house. They had been pestering her for a story and she kept putting them off. The credulity of the child’s world with its fictional shades irritated her at moments like this. The tales of wicked stepmothers and fire-breathing giants made no sense to her. How could the children take such a delight in them? Here was evil of a different order — not the kind that lay in the pages of story-books but lurked murderous at large. It caused whole

cities to be smothered in a pall of gloom, crippled by fear and rigid with hostilities. The children barely understood this. She took them in her lap, closed her eyes and thought of a story . . . but all that came to her mind were the nine-day-old images: shattered pieces of window glass, groups of *lathi*-wielding young men, the gaping red of wounds. The children waited. Then she heard her daughter-in-law calling them for their meal but they refused to go. She promised them a story some other time and they reluctantly left her.

She thought of her son Shyam on the terrace of the house, his head swathed in his father’s turban cloth. None of these modern men wore turbans except when they were out to kill. Thinking of the impunity with which he had taken the turban cloth, she turned cold. It seemed a sacrilege to her that any part of her husband’s clothing, which had been so carefully preserved all these years after his death, should be used while shedding blood. As a girl in her father’s house, she had been brought up in a humane religion and she felt privileged to have been married to a like-minded man. So why had she given away the turban cloth without a murmur? Maybe because if she hadn’t, Shyam would have thought she was being unduly possessive.

So there he was with the faded white turban cloth clumsily wrapped around his head, unshaven for days,



with a gun inside his woolen shawl. He lay flat on the terrace. He would only come down for his meals. Shyam was young and it was exciting for him. "No one is safe," he would say if his wife protested, and with a heroic air he would sling his gun on his shoulder and leave them with the children.

Nine days ago he had been actually involved as an instigator. He was out in the bazaar with the Yuva Mandali shouting himself hoarse with stones in his hand. Strangely, as she looked at him she thought of Mangal Pandey. Yet she knew there was no comparison. That was more than a century ago when the enemy was from outside, foreigners. Today there was a different sort of cry — not that of rebellion against injustice, but of old, half-smothered hatreds. It was like the painful cry of a man whose wounds, in the process of healing, had suddenly begun to turn malignant.

Now it was very dark outside but soon the moon, barely half-sized, would come up. She calculated the date of the full moon and then shut the window. The police jeep again came by warning everybody to stay indoors. The warnings were repeated, intensifying the sense of threat. Anybody seen in the bazaar would be shot.

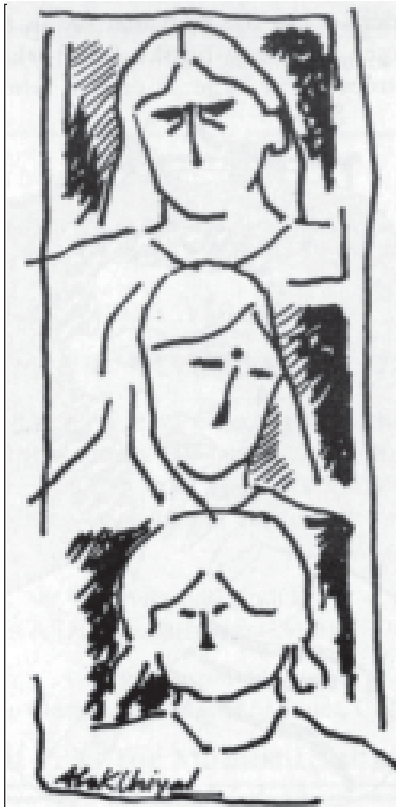
She joined her daughter-in-law, Leela, for the day's last meal. The young woman was distraught. The thought of her gun-wielding husband spending the whole day on the terrace made her nervous. Besides, there were confidences exchanged between husband and wife about the trouble in the city which made her even more anxious. Shyam gave his wife the latest news, which Leela always tried to hide from her mother-in-law to prevent her from also getting nervous.

But sometimes she overheard things. Shyam told Leela about how many people had been killed in another part of the city by a bomb-blast. His



wife would be skeptical at first, dismissing his reports as rumours. "Just look at tomorrow's newspapers," he would say, forgetting that there were no newspapers to be found.

She would be amused at the confidentiality between her son and his wife. They forgot that she had seen worse. After their evening meal they would all tune in to the TV or the transistor for the local news. More often than they expected, Shyam's reports were exaggerated, sometimes entirely rumours. He would be disappointed at



this for he thrived on the excitement of calamity. It was one of the symptoms of the modern age, she thought Leela, on the other hand, was nervous for other reasons. The provisions in the house were running out.

Shyam began to keep vigil at nights and some of the rumours even began to come true. At the end of the bazaar lane where the slums began there was a stabbing incident. Out of the now familiar silence of the night, a long wail, frenzied and insane, woke her up. Her heart was beating fast and the long echo of that wail seemed to resonate in her ears. It was more bestial than human. There was something ghastly and ominous about it.

Where was Shyam? She went to the courtyard to see if he was on the terrace but she couldn't find him. Then she went to the living room and opened the balcony door. She peered out to see if there were any police patrolling. Then bending over the balcony railing, she looked down at the deadly quiet bazaar. A lame dog sidled along the shops. There was an abandoned wheel-cart with bottles strewn around it and on the edge of the drain was a bloodstained cloth. She drew back from the sight and looked up at the sky. There were no stars. A few fragments of cloud partly covered the moon. Then she heard the sudden roar of wheels. She ducked down and heard the same announcements. Would they actually shoot her if they saw her standing in the balcony? She thought that she might as well stand up and look, but the cramp in her feet was pulling her down. She sat down on the floor and took her feet in her hands gently massaging them. Then her coughing broke out and she began to get breathless. By now the jeep was far away but as she rose she saw her son from above. His head wrapped in a turban, he looked defiant and rebellious. As he looked down at her she saw his eyes wild with rage.

“Get in Amma,” he hissed. “Do you want to be killed?”

“I came out to find you. Why don’t you come down? You are mad to stay up there. Don’t you need any sleep?” He did not understand; he just wanted to hustle her in. “If they see you lurking around at this time of the night they may shoot — you know the police. They have their job to do,” he warned her. She was a bit dazed at his panic. He needed the drama. It was strange that the predator was so afraid of becoming prey himself.

“I’m tired of being closed in. I want some fresh air,” she persisted.

“Get in, Amma. Don’t create trouble for all of us,” he went on, his voice edging towards impatience. She withdrew indoors without another word but she couldn’t sleep the rest of the night.

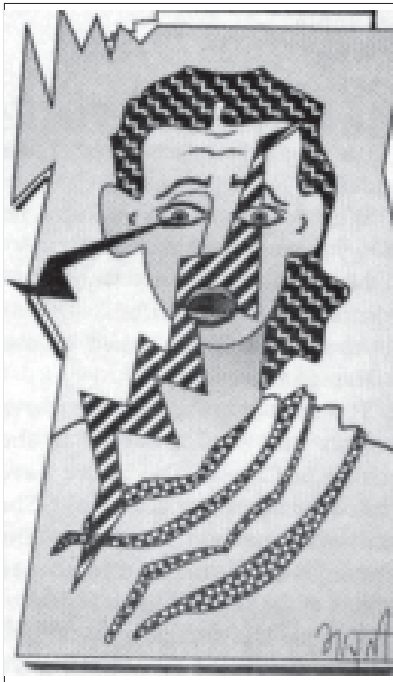
The night vigils continued. She became a mute, helpless spectator. The police sirens like prowling hyenas would jolt her out of her light sleep every night. Their neighbour, Ganeshi Lal, told Shyam that the police had actually shot at some prowlers in the slums one night for defying prohibitory orders. She became worried about Shyam. Then early one morning Leela burst into her room breathless with panic.

“Amma, he’s not on the terrace. Where has he gone?” she cried.

Her own mouth went dry but she grasped Leela’s hand and tried to speak. She could barely form the words in a hoarse voice, “Did you look for him on the terrace?”

“Yes I did. He comes down at five or five-thirty for his tea. When he didn’t come I went up there, but he wasn’t there.”

She held the young woman’s hand helplessly. She had gone through many crises in her long life. There was the panic and pain of her own husband’s death which she could never forget. She could imagine how



Leela felt. She herself might die tomorrow but Leela had a whole life to live. She thought of her grandchildren and her feet turned cold. Then some power took hold of her. He will come back soon.

“Come, let us have tea. Are the children sleeping?” Leela nodded to say yes. Together they had their tea, grateful for its steaming warmth. Then they heard footsteps. It was Shyam.

“Where have you been?” Leela cried.

“They’ve relaxed curfew for two hours in the morning,” he said.

“So?”

“The Mandali met for taking stock of the situation. To decide our future plan of action.” Leela looked at her mother-in-law who remained impassive. It is futile to respond, she thought. These young men, after all, have wills of granite. They have the fire of revolt in their blood. Mothers can’t shake them. She finished her tea and left them alone.

The first thing she did after having her tea every morning was to go and look at the children as they slept. After

her own sleepless nights it was a relief to her to see them sleeping peacefully. Today she went to them with a heavy mind. She sat on the edge of their bed and caressed the little girl’s face, then the boy’s. For the first time during this whole period of fear and tension, she began to cry. It was those innocent faces. What have they done wrong, she thought?

The duration of the curfew-relaxation gradually increased so people could obtain provisions, but for her and Leela the tension grew because the Yuva Mandali met for longer hours on each successive day. They began to have secret meetings even during curfew hours. There were whole nights when Shyam did not return home during curfew until the morning. It was as if time had frozen and the incessant ticking of the old clock in her room was a meaningless sound that had nothing to do with the passage of time. It was as if the riots of 1947 in Calcutta had never stopped but had gone on with a vengeance. Was she in her son’s house at Rampur or still in her father’s house at Alipore? Her mind was in limbo. She thought of her dead husband with envy these days. For someone as old as her, death must be the supreme release. She hoped that she would die before seeing any calamity fall upon her grandchildren. She began to lose whatever little appetite she had. She would now will herself to die.

Yet she lived to see worse. The very next day she saw some printed copies of an inflammatory speech entitled “Manifesto” to be read out by the President of the Yuva Mandali. To her horror Shyam’s name was listed as President. When he did not turn up that night, she began to worry but she had hidden the paper from Leela and so she had to bear the anxiety alone. He was going to read that speech that very day, going by its date. What if that paper was seized by the police? She grew numb with fear. To distract

herself, she read the children a story but as she read the words made no sense to her. The incendiary words of that speech kept returning to haunt her. As she read on she looked at the faces of Varun and Sanjana and she felt that their child's wisdom could read her mind.

Early the next morning as she was having her tea with Leela, who was deeply anxious because Shyam had still not returned, she heard an urgent voice calling them from the neighbours. Was it old Ganeshi Lal or his son, Madho? Leela jumped up in panic. She put a hand on her shoulder and made her sit down. Her hands were trembling but the urgency of the neighbour's voice made her hasten. Her mind conjured up all sorts of macabre images as she went out to the balcony. Madho was standing in his own balcony with anxiety strewn across his face.

"Ammaji, have you heard?" he asked softly.

"What?"

"Where is Shyam bhai?"

"He is out."

"Isn't he a member of the Yuva Mandali?"

"Why do you ask? You know he is. Do you want to shame me?"

"No, Ammaji. I just wanted to confirm. Rumours are rife."

"About what?" she asked, as she was living in a dream.

"It was a member of the Yuva Mandali who was involved in the stabbing last week. The police have arrested the whole gang," he said. She didn't want to hear any more. She turned away from Madho to see Sanjana at the door of the balcony.

"Whom has the police caught, Dadi?" she asked. She took the girl's face in her hands and smiled. "Just some bad men," she said. She had to

put on a face for her granddaughter but Ranjana may have overheard or guessed. She wasn't a child whom you could console.

She came in to find Leela frozen in her chair with her tea cup in her hand. Varun had also gotten up and was standing beside her, sleepy-eyed. She looked Leela straight in the eye and told her. Then she went into her own room and bolted the door from inside. Instinctively she opened her cupboard and found her husband's framed photo on the inner side of the door. She saw his neatly folded *dhoti-kurtas* and began to cry. Like a child she sobbed, her lined face creased with shame more than grief. "Who are these bad men?" she could hear Sanjana asking her mother. □

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WOMEN BHAKTA 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, vermillion 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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