

A Silent Wish

○ Daleep Kaur Tiwana

Translated from the original in Punjabi by Rana Nayar



On hearing of her transfer to Ambala, Gita found the thought of moving to a city most comforting. She had hoped that people of the city would be different. Her experience with those in the village hadn't been a particularly happy one. Although her neighbours knew everything, they never tired of shooting the same set of questions at her: "Bibi, are you married? Why don't you wear your bridal jewellery then? What does your husband do? It's rather mean of him not to ever bother to know how you are. What's the matter? Have you separated?" Then, even before she could think of a reply, someone within the group would pipe up "Now you can't really expect any sensible man to go trailing after his working wife, can you?"

Gita would often try and convince herself that she needn't feel bad, as she was not the one to blame in the least. Yet, each time anyone raked up the issue, she felt a fresh stab of pain, deep inside her. Choking over her tears, she would break into a sudden, cold sweat. But nothing would ever deter those women. It appeared as though they took perverse pleasure in repeating the questions, which they knew very well she would never be able to answer.

Slowly, what the people in the village often said about her had begun to sink in. "Who knows what kind of woman she is that her husband has deserted her? What can she teach our children, when her own life is in such

a mess? The less said about such women the better. They have only to start earning to become headstrong!" — this and so much more would crash about her ears. And each time she heard those remarks, numbness seized her.

And the next thing she knew, the village men had begun to eye her hungrily. Almost as hungrily as one eyes the full-blown crop swaying in the fields. Cowering under their gaze, she often felt a cold shiver run down her spine.

Once, around midnight, there was a loud thumping at her door. Of course, she didn't open the door to find out who it was. But she couldn't go back to sleep either. Dazed and

sweating, she had sat up in her bed the whole night long, mumbling her prayers. Next day too the thumping had been equally hard and insistent. She hadn't yet gone off to sleep. Her heart missed a beat as she rose to her feet. Summoning all her strength, she had pushed a heavy trunk against the door, and put a couple of chairs on the top of the trunk, her hands trembling all the while. It was well past midnight when she finally decided to switch off the light and turn in. Hardly had she slept for a few minutes when she got up with a start. This time, it was a dream in which she saw a huge, thick-set man break open the door and force himself into her room. He leapt towards her, his murderous eyes glaring. She felt as though he would pounce upon her, tear off her clothes and maul her. Breathing heavily, sweat breaking out all over her body, she had pulled herself up on the bed, alarmed. Again, she had spent the whole night sitting up in her bed with a silent prayer on her lips.



All these years, she had never felt the absence of a man in her life. She didn't even know what it meant to be admired by a husband in honeyed tones. Nor had she ever felt the tingling sensation of a man's sensuous breath over her body. No one had ever put his strong, sinewy arms around her, holding her in a warm, reassuring embrace. There wasn't even a trace of a single memory that she could either cling to or find comfort in.

All she had was a vague and bitter memory of a handsome young man from a very affluent family, whom her father had chosen to be her husband. Seeing that his family had a sound financial status, with two trucks, a

flour mill and two magnificent houses, and that the young man was a graduate, her father had rushed into the alliance, without bothering to make any inquiries.

But, apparently, this alliance didn't enjoy the sanction of God. A few weeks before the wedding, her father died of pneumonia. It was as if all hell had broken loose in the house. After an interval of a few months, when her brother approached the boy's family to fix up another date for the wedding, they had simply backtracked. All they said was, "Look here, our commitment was to your father. Now that he is no more, we don't feel obliged to honour it." Fearing social disgrace, her brother had literally begged them to accept her. And with great difficulty, somehow, he had managed to bring them around.

A fresh date was drawn up. Since her family was still recovering from the shock of her father's death, they hadn't been able to make the necessary arrangements to the best of their ability. It was as if the boy's family was simply waiting to take advantage of such an opportunity. At the time of the wedding, they let loose a barrage of complaints: 'The marriage party was not well looked after'; 'The wrist watch given in dowry is substandard'; 'The girl looks rather pale and sickly.' At one point, they had even threatened to leave without performing the *phasas*.

It had left everyone stunned. Withdrawing into the seclusion of the kitchen, her mother had burst into tears. The members of the *panchayat* had then interceded. It had taken them a good deal of cajoling to make the boy's parents agree to accept the bride. A few days later, when she had come to visit her parents, they had returned everything in her dowry, saying, "There are hardly any gold

ornaments worth mentioning here. What do they think, they can get this ugly duckling off their backs for so small a price? We refuse to accept her in such rags and tatters!"

Thereafter, no one had come to take her back. Then she learnt that they had married their son off to a contractor's daughter, someone with a squint in her left eye, which they had conveniently overlooked, overawed by the blinding glitter of the dowry she had brought with her.

After this incident, stricken with both shame and embarrassment, Gita hadn't stirred out of the house for quite a few months. During this period, she had found herself reflecting more and more on the barbs her *bhabis* casually dropped, or the care-worn, furrowed faces of her brothers, as also the uncertain future that lay ahead of her. Finally, she had made up her mind to seek readmission to a school.

She had already studied up to class eight. Within a year, she sat for the matriculation examination and cleared it. And hadn't she thanked her stars when a very close friend of her father's had helped her find a job, too!

On being posted to the village, she had hired a room, much in the manner of her other colleagues. Most often, she would cook only once a day, and that too, in the morning, heating up the food again, to serve herself the same dishes twice. A few girl students were always at hand, either for tuition or for learning sewing and knitting.

Now when she visited her family, it was different. She would go loaded with gifts for everyone: toys, frocks, cardigans and sweaters for her nephews and nieces, and *duppattas*, bangles, colourful *bindis* and silk scarves for her *bhabis*. Her *bhabis* would welcome her smilingly, their

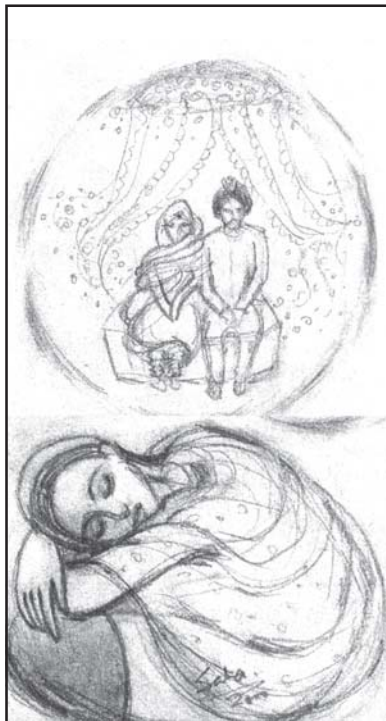
faces aglow with good cheer. They would take pains to cook special delicacies for her, and, at night, spread out the best bed linen as well. On her return journey, her *bhabis* would walk with her for a mile or two. Geeta found all this very amusing.

Though life had not really given her enough reason to be unusually optimistic, it simply wasn't her habit to brood or despair unnecessarily. Over the years, she had come to learn the virtues of acquiescence.

People often looked at her searchingly, eager to read her face. But none had ever been rewarded with so much as a fleeting trace of sadness, there. An empty, deadpan expression was all one could see, not engaging enough to hold one's attention. So Gita had walked through life with a thick veil of silence thrown across her face.

But the midnight knock had become over insistent. Gita had begun to feel anxious and restive during the day, as well. At night, unable to focus on anything, her mind would simply wander off. She would feel the absence of strong, sinewy arms around her or a loving touch that could wash away all her fears in soft whispers, "Darling, just go off to sleep. Don't worry, I'm with you..." If only she could sail on such a reassurance and drift back into sleep, unconcerned! When such thoughts hit her, she would end up chastising herself, telling herself that it was sinful on her part to even entertain such ideas.

This transfer to Ambala could certainly not have come at a better time in her life. It made her feel as if a long-suppressed desire had unexpectedly been fulfilled. When it was time for her to leave, a group of women from the neighbourhood, some school children and a few



colleagues had come to the bus-stand to see her off. One of them said, "Bibi, we feel sad, now that you are going away. You really did set our children right. Otherwise, they would have got so used to wasting their time and roaming about in the streets."

"Even my son sits up long hours now, poring over those thick volumes," added another awe-struck mother.

"Next time whenever you happen to come this way, don't forget to look us up," the unusual insistence in the headmistress' voice had left her totally surprised. "I wish everyone had the good fortune to be blessed with a daughter as virtuous as you. You were here for more than a year, but caused no trouble whatsoever. God will reward your patience, my child. May you enjoy marital bliss too."

Fatoh, the sweeper woman, had gushed in a moment of maternal solicitude, "Oh yes, they say, there is a famous Gurdwara in Ambala, which is believed to have sprung out

of the bowels of the earth. If you pray and make a wish there, it's always granted, so they say. Do pray for a boon..." She had trailed off.

Gita's face fell instantly. Pulling herself together, she somehow managed to curve her lips into a smile at the time of farewell. Casting an affectionate glance at the children, she had heaved herself up into the *tonga*. Even when the *tonga* started moving, she had kept staring at the sad faces of all the women and children left behind. As a trail of dust blew into her face, she looked up. A vast sky hung overhead. First, her vacant gaze rested momentarily upon the green fields, spreading out on either side and, then, blended with the crimson glow on the horizon.



"They say, all your wishes are granted there," she repeated, as if in a daze.

"What should I wish for...and why? A husband? That's hardly wishing anything for myself. That is more like snatching away a man who is now someone else's. God would never want me to do that, I'm sure!..Money? What will I do with more money? My salary is more than enough to keep my body and soul together. What should I wish for? Why wish for a boon at all?" And it seemed as though this last thought had somehow got stuck in her mind.

As the *tonga* hip-hopped at an even pace towards Ambala, her thoughts raced up and down. "Why despair for a man like him? There are other men, too, in this world." Irritation was slowly creeping in.

A motorcycle sputtered past her. Riding the pillion was a young girl, her hand resting securely upon the shoulder of the driver. Gita's eyes kept following them till they were lost to her, a mere blur in the dust haze behind them.

"Strange are the ways of God, and stranger still the workings of the

human heart. Didn't the king of England renounce his throne for the sake of a woman? And people think I'm still attractive." In a bid to enthuse her jaded spirits, she had flattered herself.

"No, no, I shouldn't harbour such thoughts. A well-bred girl shouldn't even think like that. After all, what will people say? And my family?" her mind remonstrated with her.

"But do these family members or other people ever think of sharing your sorrows? Do they even spare a thought for you? Why do you always think of what 'they' might have to say?" a voice within protested in sarcasm.

Frightened, she had started looking around aimlessly. Nestling under a *peepul* tree, next to a well, stood a cow, busy licking her calf all over. On seeing this, momentarily Gita's eyes were glazed. Further down, in the fields, a shepherd was herding his sheep towards town, hollering away. The sheep bleated raucously. Gita indulged her fancy — "Perhaps, they're anxious to get back to their young ones, left behind in some far-off place."

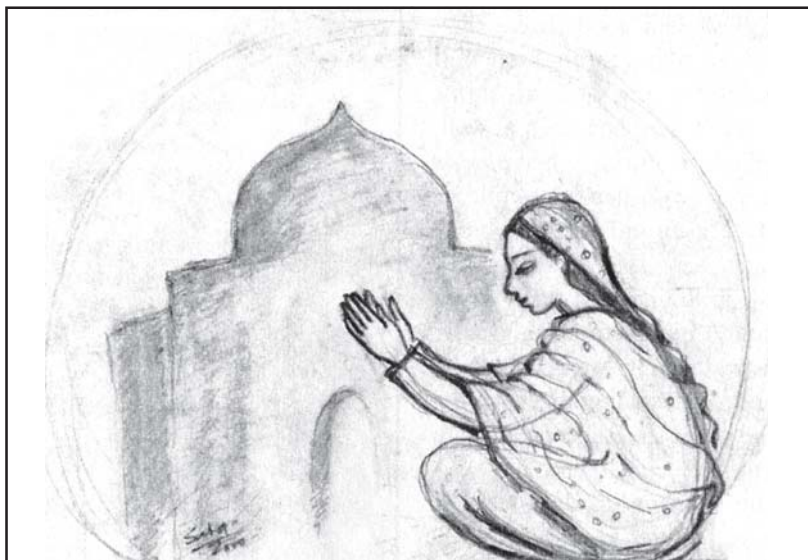
The *tonga* kept hip-hopping, apace. As she wasn't in too much of a hurry, she didn't even once ask the driver to pick up speed. Why only this time, she hadn't ever shown much of a hurry in anything she did!

"Bibiji, do we go to the Gurudwara first or head straight for the school?" queried the *tonga*-driver.

"The Gurudwara" she replied, as if in a trance.

"*Hanh*, Bibiji, everyone who comes to this town, first goes to the Gurudwara for *darshan*. It is believed that this Gurudwara sprang out of the bowels of the earth. No wonder, all kinds of wishes are granted here," he elaborated.

"All right, then. Let's go to the Gurudwara first," she reiterated, rather mechanically.



Bringing the *tonga* to a sudden halt outside the Gurudwara, the driver said, "I'd rather wait here. You go and pay your respects."

While walking towards the Gurudwara, Gita was contemplating the same question again, "What should I wish for? Which boon to seek?"

Feeling the cold, marble steps under her feet, a strange sensation of relief swept through her whole being. Descending the steps, gingerly, she was wondering, all to herself "What should I ask for?"

Looking up, she saw the main gate of the Gurudwara loom ahead. She took out a one rupee note from her purse and after turning it around, started examining it, still undecided about her wish.

In a room illumined by the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, Guruji's portrait against the wall radiated a red glow. She felt as though the compassion in Guruji's eyes had slowly begun to seep into her soul. A faint smile appeared on her lips as she bent down, muttering softly, "O Guruji, you know everyone's secret. You know exactly what I have had to live through. Yet, you expect me to say it in so many words...But don't worry, I won't ask for anything that..."

Bowing her head, she closed her eyes, her hands folded in reverence. All of a sudden, a totally alien and unfamiliar word sprang to her conscious mind, "Peace!" Stretching out her hands in the manner of a beggar, she made a fervent appeal, "O God, grant me peace!"

She walked back and took her seat in the *tonga*. This time around, she appeared to be less troubled and more composed. Her face was a perfect picture of contentment. She had this satisfaction that, at least, she hadn't put God to any inconvenience. Hers was the most ordinary of all wishes, and she was confident that it would be granted one day. □

WE REGRET

We are very sorry that the September-October, 2000, issue has been delayed due to our computers being infected by a series of viruses. We not only lost a lot of edited material, but also a number of articles, poems and stories submitted to us over several months. In addition, a lot of emails disappeared. We request our readers, who had sent us articles or other material, to send the material again if they have not received any response from us so far.

Editor