

THROWN TO THE HUNGRY WOLVES

The next morning I again went to Kammo's stall for tea. Her eyes brightened when she saw me. "Namaste," her face lit up in a glowing smile. I felt as though she somehow knew I would be coming. Her eyes gave away that note of expectation. "*Baithiye. Do cup chaye?*" She grinned.

"Yes. Today the second cup after fifteen minutes." I laughed settling down on the rough bench and picked up the local Hindi paper.

In no time she walked up to me with a cup of steaming tea and a plate of rusks. "*Mujhe laga ki aap aaoge.*" She placed a jug of water and a steel glass on a low stool before me. My guess was correct. She had indeed expected me to come.

I was impressed by her efficiency and warmth. I somehow had a hunch she was not just a simple village woman who had come to town to eke out a living. Everything about her told me there was a story behind her. And I wanted to plumb deep into her life to get that story out. I wanted to strike a conversation with her. I was curious to know about her – her village, life back home. She, I was very sure, had not always stood there behind the counter frying omelettes and toasting bread. As she busied herself making a second cup of tea, I could not help noticing her youthful body, liveliness undiminished by the circumstances of her life. She had sharp features, and an unmistakable elegance.

"It seems you have seen a lot," I said taking a big sip of the strong tea. She looked up at me and nodded. "*Ji.*"

Her story began.

Sitting on her chair behind the showcase on which were neatly

arranged a row of glass jars containing biscuits, rusks, tiffin cakes, matthis and ladoos, she started talking, going back in time. It seemed a world – dark and haunted – was opening up with secrets of pain...

Kammo belonged to a small town, very close to the Nepal border. Her father was a carpenter and at times worked as a construction laborer. He would regularly sneak across the border, to a neighboring town, in Nepal, in search of a better job. He did not earn much. At home there was a constant struggle to make ends meet. The man had to provide for a large family – his wife and their seven children. Kammo was the eldest. Poverty loomed over the household. Two square meals a day was a dream. To relieve the burden on their father and support the family, Kammo and her sister Somona started working as domestic helps. After repeated pregnancies and a few miscarriages, their mother's health was completely ruined. Without nourishment and proper medical attention, the poor thing died. She was in her early forties. Kammo, her eldest daughter, was only nineteen.

After his wife's death, Kammo's father took to drinking and became increasingly intolerant towards his children, spending long hours with his friends. These men were disliked by Kammo and her sisters. They resented their father for keeping *bad company*. But they kept quiet.

The frequent presence of her father's friends and their drinking sessions at home created an uneasy situation for Kammo and Somona. Drunk and delinquent, the men leered at them and made bawdy remarks. Still very young – Somona was only fourteen – they became *objects* in the eyes of the men who were their father's age. They were at the receiving end of obscene gestures and lewd looks. And yes, they were also touched inappropriately, every now and then.

One day a man from this group brought a marriage proposal for Kammo. The prospective groom was a man from Punjab, but settled

in Himachal Pradesh, close to Shimla. In a large *haveli* he lived with his parents and brothers. He had a shop of readymade garments in the city. Her father was promised a good amount of money for giving his daughter away in marriage to the 'businessman' groom. The man, down in the dumps and unable to make a fresh start after his wife's death, happily accepted the proposal.

The deal was done, her fate was sealed in an imaginary envelope and Kammo was sold. She surrendered herself to the uncertainties of an indistinct future, determined to help her family as much as she could.

Her marriage was solemnized at her father's place. Perhaps no wedding had been so austere and joyless as hers. No *shamiana* went up in the courtyard, no band played the hit numbers from the Bollywood movies. There was no feast either. Only a few neighbours came, their faces downcast because they knew it was not a happy occasion. The elderly women who had seen Kammo as a child, could not smile and bless her when she touched their feet.

The new bride in a gold-bordered red sari was taken to her husband's ancestral village in Punjab. By the time Kammo got down from the three-wheel van and walked into the *haveli* to confront the derisive looks all around, she knew her status was not that of the *bahu* in the family – for her in-laws she was just a “bought-up bride”.

The welcome she received was curious. Her in-laws' first demand was she must give birth to at least two or three sons. Her father-in-law was a stout and sturdy man in his late fifties. A long handlebar moustache stressed his undiminished manliness. Kammo's husband had three younger brothers – the youngest was a boy in his teens.

What stunned Kammo, on the first night after the wedding ceremony, was her husband's blunt assertion: “I have paid a lot of money to get you as my wife as there are not many girls available in my own area. My family cannot afford to buy one wife for every

male in the household. You have to serve and please them all.” Kammo's heart froze. Her worst fear had come true. Whatever little illusion she had about starting a new life in her man's home disappeared. Her marriage ended even before it began.

After the demonic revelation Kammo's virginity was ripped apart. The first night did not actually turn into a nightmare despite the brute's clumsy ways of hurting her. The pain was not unbearable. He exploited her every part, biting into her gentle flesh, pinching and slapping to heighten his pleasure. She cried and protested but at moments comforted herself that this pain was actually the joy of first-night *excesses*, reward of submission to her *aggressive tiger*. For him it was a contest with invisible rivals. He was determined to prove his manliness, his prowess, his worth as a man. She was not his wife, not even a partner; she was only a medium, a live toy to take out his rage on. It was a game he was playing all alone. She – only part of the bed. He reminded her of a village bullyboy who sadistically would tear away the limbs of a child's favourite doll. *Ah, my man, this my wedding night – what a way to lose my virginity! And this is just the first night...* Kammo bitterly cried once the man fell asleep.

After the ceremonial visit to the family's ancestral village, Kammo and her in-laws came back to their house in a hamlet about twenty kilometers from Shimla. It was a typical house in the hills – a concrete-and-wood structure with mud outhouses.

Living in the terror of being mauled by the menfolk in the household, Kammo was comforted by the fact that the village was on the outskirts of Shimla, a popular tourist centre where people from many places were coming all the time for a holiday. Perhaps she had a hope that the steady flow of vacationers and business spawned by tourism would throw a lifeline to her, let her survive.

Perhaps I can call my father and brothers over here. Will not my man help them get jobs in Shimla? A hope fluttered in her mind: her siblings coming out of the chronic poverty they had been born into. She felt

happy thinking of meeting her sisters again. The distance separated them, as if they were in another country. She missed them. She was almost out of touch with them, except for a few moments she could secretly steal to speak to them from a pay phone in the bazaar once in a long while. Going about her daily chores, she dreamt of getting to see Somona again, talking aimlessly about television shows and neighbours, the two sisters sitting together. Two months had gone by since her marriage.

Then finally, one day Kammo's husband punched the bubble by telling her to forget about meeting again her family on the Nepal border. "The less you're in touch with them, the better. Tell them not to bother you," he said in a rough voice putting his foot down. The illusion of being taken care of evaporated. His rudeness brought her face to face with the reality – that she was a *bought-up bride*, niceties of decorum not for her. "I do not want to shame my family by letting everyone know how wretchedly poor your folk are," he grunted. "Nobody knows I bought you with money. That will be embarrassing. People here would think I am not good enough to find myself a bride from my social circles." He huffed glaring at her. "And, I am no mentor of your family. It's not my job to look after them. I paid a one-time bride price and that's it. I owe them no more. Now don't smuggle those famished beggars into my life."

Kammo hid her face between her knees. Tears welled up. The man, who possessed her body in bed, was turning into a monster. She could not reconcile this beast with the man who had made love to her last night. Her body shook as she cried. Then, at one point she knew she would have to take such setbacks in her stride. *Crying is no solution, I have to fight my way out*, she kept telling herself. *If God wants I will meet my brothers and sisters again.*

She could make out her husband's family did not want her to mix with the neighbours and kept a constant watch on her, practically putting her under purdah. She knew why – so that nobody around got to know about her family, its abject poverty. Her in-laws wanted

to fiercely guard her *lowly origins* in order to protect their own standing in society.

Since her mother's death, Kammo had secretly stoked a desire – of having a daughter who would resemble her *nani*. She decided she would name this child – if she was ever born – *Kamla*. Indeed, she thought, the child would be as pure and beautiful as the lotus. However, considering the obsessive pressure of her in-laws for a boy, she changed her mind and prayed for a son. *This is the only way I can secure my space in this household*, she told herself. In her mind a son equalled respect from the in-laws. And this was, she thought, would be her bribe to them to bring her family to Shimla.

So Kammo went about praying and hoping that sometime soon the seeds dropped by her husband into her would lead the way to a new arrival – of a radiant baby boy. She indulged her husband who never made love, but simply inserted himself into her, for his own brutish pleasure. She ignored the pain and kept her eyes closed bearing with his rampaging ways.

Sometimes he came home drunk and would be more beastly than other nights. She accepted him inside her with the hope that a son would be created soon. Secretly, she sometimes enjoyed the act, the pleasure tickling her insides when he softened a wee bit.

Having been pulverized almost every night by her husband for three months, Kammo was given some nights off, as the man had to go out on a business trip. He had procured a big contract for supplying uniforms for school children in Kullu, Manali and Pathankot. For a small businessman like him it was a windfall. The family rejoiced with feasting. They had sensed money in it.

Kammo's husband, along with his younger brother, left for those places to get specifications for the uniforms and to collect advance payments.

Staying with her in-laws, while her husband was away, was a new

experience. She was married in her mind all over again in her husband's absence.

On the first day Kammo kept herself busy with the household chores – cooking and serving the meal to everybody in the family, washing, cleaning. She had to do everything unquestioningly, for she was the *bought-up bahu*. She really didn't have a voice. That night, with her husband away, she thought she could at least sleep peacefully. However, it actually turned out to be a night of dark demons.

Tired after daylong hard work her eyes closed as soon as she went to bed. Just when she began to move into the realm of sleep, a knock on the door woke her up. Sudden, unexpected, she was actually scared by the knock. She got up and asked who it was, and heard her father-in-law's terse voice asking her to open the door. Frightened, nervous, she opened the door and let him in. She was ordered to close the door and undress. It was clear that the old man did not care if his wife came to know about his escapade. Perhaps this was nothing new for them. Shocked, nervous, Kammo did not know where she stood. Or had she seen it coming? Those glares, ogles, obscenities the men in the family directed at her all the time left no doubts in her mind that for them she was nothing more than a part of the family's cattle herd. Whatever, at the moment she was confused, unsure whether she should listen to the old man's diktat.

The man – her husband's father, his wife sleeping in another part of the same *haveli* – was waiting to perform the most outrageous act of violation. But he was a strong man, volatile by nature. She had seen his wrath, his cruel ways with whoever crossed his path.

“*Kapda utar,*” he barked glowering at her.

Kammo knew she did not have a choice. Silently she began undressing. Defying him would make it worse – physical violence and sexual exploitation. At that point she chose to simply obey him, subduing an impulse to resist him and face the dire consequences. Perhaps she still would have screamed, scratched the latch out of the

room if she was sure, back home from the business trip, her husband would stand by her, defend his wife, her honour. So, she surrendered to him. Undressed and ready to satisfy his hunger. She had a flickering hope that after having spent a night with her, he would soften towards her. His sympathies would be with her from now on.

She lay down, naked, eyes closed as the beast explored his way around her body, nibbling and slapping, pinching and feeling and then thrusting himself in and out of her, grunting in satisfaction. He was truly like an animal. She just lay there imagining better days following soon. That was her first night without her husband; and her second 'first night' with a changed companion who proved to be sturdier. She was the every-night playground for her father-in-law till her husband returned. In her mind it was as though she were now also married to her father-in-law. During the day, she was touched lustfully by her youngest brother-in-law, a teenage schoolboy. As if she was not his elder brother's wife but a beast one could frolic with. Whenever he found her alone, the boy came sneaking in for a little excitement of touching and feeling to satisfy his racing puberty hormones. Then there was her mother-in-law who could not stop ranting about a grandson. She discovered the woman's cunning, manipulative side.