

PROLOGUE

VISHNU HAD A feeling they were not going to make it. The five-carriage train lay stretched like a shadowy giant reptile across the dawn at the single-platform Puranapur station. Its steam engine huffed and puffed like a chained wild beast. Vishnu, too, was gasping, desperate to get onto the train. Out of breath after running along the village path, he was nervous about the uncertain trip. ‘Hurry, Didi. We must not miss the train,’ the boy said crossly, pulling his big sister Meenakshi’s hand. It was all her fault. First, she wouldn’t wake up, and now, she was walking like a tortoise. Although he knew that their father had sent word last night to stationmaster Nanda to expect them, Vishnu was sure that the train was about to chug out leaving them behind. This fear was eating into him. This was one train ride Vishnu was not going to miss at any cost. It was a birthday treat. He had turned ten today, and their father was taking them to Ambarsar for a visit to the famed Golden Temple.

‘Didi...!’ he groaned. ‘Couldn’t she walk a little faster? ‘... Did you eat opium last night?’

‘Yes, Vishnu. That’s what I do every night. Don’t you know?’ Meenakshi said irritably.

Aware of the turmoil in his son's mind, Jyoti Prasad took his children's hands in his and made them run. They sprinted the rest of the path – a good two hundred yards of darkness – and were panting by the time they arrived at the station. It was the last stop on the thirty-mile line from Amritsar.

Stationmaster Nanda presided over the deserted platform, his hands clasped behind his back. The vermilion mark on his creased forehead acknowledged Lord Krishna as his family deity. Vishnu noticed the tilak and then the sad look around his face. The stationmaster was unhappy; the train should have left seven minutes ago.

‘Prasadji! I know it's now India, but still...’

‘Sorry, Nandaji, sorry,’ Jyoti intoned.

‘You are going to get me the boot. Sure as day is day and night is night. Now get in. In, in, in...’

As the man and his two children clambered into the only second-class compartment, the guard appeared from nowhere. He folded his hands in a namaste to Jyoti Prasad and waved the green side of his lantern towards the engine. A shrill scream tore open the sweet and sleepy dawn, frightening the jackals into silence in the wheat fields on both sides of the track. A light jolt and... Phew! Vishnu began to breathe again.

The second-class compartment was roomy with long, padded and plastic-covered seats. The other coaches were all third-class; there was an Inter Class compartment too. Even though it was pitch dark inside, Vishnu knew the seat colour – moss-green; he knew that on each seat was embossed NWR. There were only two other passengers in the car, both wrapped up in cotton sheets spread out like crocodiles on the long seats. The couple greeted his father warmly. Vishnu noticed that the man had a heavy, tired voice, but his wife's was sharp and shrill. Soon, the man dozed

off. His wife, however, went on talking.

She was not talking, really – just complaining about the ‘murder in the market’. This was not actually about any blood spilling; she was pointing to the spikes of inflation. The sharp rise in prices was practically *slitting throats*. To make things worse, the woman complained, items had suddenly begun to disappear from the market. ‘Hardly anything will be available anytime soon, given the present climate.’ Couldn’t she talk of something a little less mundane? Vishnu knew that the elderly chant God’s name early in the morning. Not complain about prices. Put off, he huddled next to his sister and fell asleep.

There was light all around when Vishnu awoke – cool, diffused half-light. The train made a loud thudding noise, and the woman was still rabbiting on, now about the real mayhem going on all around. Put off again, Vishnu nearly went back to sleep, but decided to give her a glance; he could just about see. When he saw her, he was shocked, like the slap of an electric current: the woman had a bushy beard and was wearing a fez!

Vishnu nudged Meenakshi; she was fast asleep. Taking his mouth close to her ear, he whispered excitedly: ‘Didi, do you know what happened? The woman sleeping on the berth last night has turned into a man! Really, a man with a flowing beard!’ Unable to suppress his excitement, Vishnu shook his sister. They were near Vatala Junction. That meant the train had run a distance of seven miles.

Meenakshi, sixteen, older and more mature than her brother, heard his rasping voice. She rubbed her eyes and looked around. Giggling a little, she shut her eyes again. She knew who this woman with a beard was – Shaukat Ali, a prominent public figure and a Muslim League leader in Puranapur, a good old friend of both her father and Uncle Bhagwan. She wondered why

Vishnu was being so silly.

Vishnu hadn't recognized the man in the darkness. To take the local politician for a woman with a beard? Laughable. He laughed a little and called himself what he knew Meenakshi was already calling him under her breath – *gadha*, a donkey. He whispered into her ear again, 'Why does he talk so much?'

'Because...' Meenakshi was mumbling.

'Because what?'

'Er... he is a leader.'

'But so is Uncle Bhagwan. A Congress leader. He doesn't talk nonstop.'

Bhagwan was Jyoti's younger brother, almost the same age.

'Some leaders are like that. See, Gandhiji doesn't talk at all when he has something important to say. He observes *maun vrat*, refusing to talk. Now go back to sleep, *gadha*. I want to listen.'

'Anyway, how is your health, Shaukat?' Jyoti Prasad said, his voice relaxed. Once close friends, they were meeting after quite a while due to recent turmoil and the changing times.

'Not first class. That's why Missus and I are going to Ambarsar. To see a cardiologist, her cousin's nephew. Just qualified.'

'Nothing serious, I hope.'

'Not really. Only, I get a pain every now and then.'

'Still smoking a lot?'

'Try not to. My one vice.'

'But a man of many virtues, our Shaukat.'

'Don't know about that, Jyoti. In life, there are more important things to worry about than a man's health.'

'Nothing is more important than one's health.'

'Maybe you are right. But...'

The League leader had now moved on to the hot topic of the day – Partition.

‘Inevitable now. Inn-Evvi-Tabble, I’m afraid. But there needn’t be any bloodshed here like there was in Calcutta last year.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we are brothers, really.’

‘Then why do you want to split away?’ Jyoti said.

‘Religion, Bhai. Religion. Beyond you and me.’

‘We’ve lived together for generations. All sons of Mother India.’

‘True. Sons of Mother India, blah blah... But things have changed. Open your eyes, Jyoti Prasad, and see the writing on the wall. There is only one word.’

‘Yes, Shaukat Ali. It is Independence.’

‘No. It is Partition as Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah has rightly demanded. Even Attlee grudgingly said yes to it in February. And it is to happen by June next year, at the latest.’

‘Grudgingly means not really. Most other bigwigs in London don’t want it either. Including Churchill.’

‘Nobody in London really cares. Including your Churchill.’

‘That is not true. Anyway...’

‘Anyway, whatever happens, happens for the best. But nothing untoward must happen in our Puranapur. Personal guarantee given. Yours sincerely has worked it out with my dear old friend Bhagwan. We may have begun to think differently but...’

A long hysterical whistle shut him up. The train, now running at about twenty km an hour, lurched to a sudden halt, throwing everybody off their seats.

‘Ohho!’ the League leader cried.

Everybody was badly shaken.

‘You alright, children?’ Shaukat asked.

They were all okay. They collected themselves and stuck their necks out of the windows to see what the matter was. Fields of ripening golden wheat sprawled endlessly in the mellow light of the early morning. At the head of the train, close to Vatala station, was the scene of the ugly commotion. A clutch of rough-looking men surrounded the engine.

‘An accident,’ the politician said and stood up. Instinctively, he flung open the carriage door and leaped out. He wanted to be on the scene of public concern to offer immediate benefit of his leadership. Jyoti and other men from the train followed out of alarmed curiosity, some twenty of them. Headed by Shaukat Ali, the procession had gone a mere fifty yards when it was stopped in its tracks; a tall, thin man with death written all over his face was running towards the befuddled crowd. He sported a goatee and wore a fez like Shaukat Ali. A number of Jat peasants chased him, among them many swarthy Sikhs; Vatala was in Sikh territory. One of them pulled out the curved Sikh *kirpan* from the sheath by his left side. The blade glinted in the rising sun as he brandished it menacingly.

‘Murderer! Cow slaughterer,’ he shouted and all the Jats around him echoed: ‘Murderer! Cow slaughterer!’

‘Save me, Shaukat Ali Saab. SAVE me...’ howled the frightened man.

MURDERER! COW SLAUGHTERER!

Scared by the metallic monster hurtling towards her, a stray cow grazing in the field by the railway line had suddenly veered around to go over to the other side. The fat cow mistimed it by just one split second. The monster, whistling deafeningly to avert a mishap, had to hit her, carrying a mound of flesh and bones in

a stream of blood until it lurched to a shuddering halt.

The accident could not have happened at a worse time. There was anger in the air waiting only for a spark. Danger lurking around. The mood of the Hindu and Sikh peasants was murderous too. The cow, for them, was not just the giver of milk; she was Gomata, a goddess they worshipped. Now, before their eyes, the most revered animal had been slaughtered on the rail. The same animal that was slaughtered by Muslims for sumptuous meals. To add to the misfortune, the hapless train driver was a Muslim man, complete with a macho beard and skullcap.

By now, the train was empty of passengers – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Meenakshi and Vishnu joined their father. Jyoti and Shaukat looked at each other, the sense of impending doom throbbing under their chests. It was touch and go.

‘Do something, Jyoti. You are Bhagwan’s brother.’

‘Do what, Shaukat?’

‘Save the poor driver Abdullah. He’s a father of four. All girls. All unmarried. Save him from these fanatics.’

‘Save me, Prasadji. Not my fault. Did my best to warn her. But she just walked right in front of the train. Swear by Allah. Swear by you...’

Jyoti moved fast. He placed himself between the blood-baying crowd and the engine driver.

‘Brothers, it was an accident...’ Jyoti shouted.

‘Why didn’t he use his eyes and brain and apply the brakes on time?’ the armed man yelled.

‘...A very tragic accident, brothers.’

‘...Move aside, man. Or else...’

The man put the tip of his razor-sharp *kirpan* at Jyoti’s chest. Jyoti tried to wrench it from the man’s hand. He failed, and his hand received a long cut. Meenakshi and Vishnu screamed at

the sight of blood.

‘Good gentlemen, you all. This man is the elder brother of Puranapur District Congress leader Bhagwan Prasad. He is pleading with you to let the man go,’ Shaukat cried, giving Jyoti a handkerchief.

‘In the name of Mahatma Gandhi, I beg you.’ Jyoti said.

After a long pause, which could have ended with cold-blooded murder on the mute railway line, the men went away. But despite his bloodied hand, Jyoti still wanted to go ahead with the planned visit to the Golden Temple. Shaukat forbade it. Vatala station was only a little walk away. There, Shaukat had Jyoti’s hand dressed – it was a minor cut – at the station dispensary. In the end, Jyoti could not take his boy and girl to Ambarsar. Emergency braking by the train driver had caused some damage to the track. It would take hours to repair.