

5 The loo of May flew into Lajwanti's face like flames from the hearth of heaven. The sun from whose mouth the fiery breeze came seemed to be standing relentlessly behind her, even as her heavy jowled brother-in-law, Jaswant, often stood, apparently to goad her on to work but really to draw her attention to himself. And, as the sweat moistened her hands, she tightened her grip on the handle of the cage in which her Maina bird sat, docile and dumb, under the oppression of the heat. But she
10 persisted in her determination to trudge along to Gurgaon, where she hoped to catch the bus to her father's house in Pataudi.

'Talk to me Maina-say something!'

The Maina bird fluttered in the cage, perhaps to indicate to Lajwanti that she was alive.

15 'I will give you water as soon as I get to the bus stop'. And, urged by the heat spots on her feet where the torn soles of her chappals exposed her flesh, she hurried towards the shade of a solitary mango tree which stood a little way away from the Mehrauli-Gurgaon road.

20 Once in the cool, she phewed several hot breaths, wiped the nape of her neck with the end of her head cloth, then forgetfully smudged her face with the soiled dupatta, licked her palate with her tongue, put down the cage of the Maina bird, and looked in the direction of Gurgaon.

The dense heat-mist enveloped everything. But, beyond the green grove of mangoes, half a mile ahead, she could see the outline of the old caravanserai.

25 Quickly, she lifted the cage and went forward. She had the echo augury that Jaswant would be hot on her trail, as soon as her mother-in-law realised that she, Lajwanti, had not returned from the well for more than two hours. And he had a bicycle.

'Come then my little Maina, we shall soon be there...'

* * * * *

30 The exalted bungalows of the police lines of Gurgaon, sequestered behind hedges, under tall trees, quenched the thirst of her eyes. The green leaves of neem trees were

like cool sherbet to her spirit. And there seemed to be a confectioner's shop where she might be able to drink a tumbler of whey and give the Maina a little feed and water.

Somehow, the last lap of a foot journey is always the most arduous. Her legs seemed to drag along. And the burning on the exposed parts of her soles became unbearable.

5 And the echo augury about Jaswant catching up on her enveloped her mind. And she was nearly at the end of her tether. And yet she pushed forward, as though she was possessed by the demon of flight.

There was a moment of weakening as the Maina became utterly still; and, without looking to see, she felt that the bird might have fainted with the heat and died.

10 And in the panic of this premonition, she felt the chords of guilt choke her dry throat: She might have borne the humiliation. She might have given in to Jaswant. She could have closed her eyes. Her husband Balwant was away at College. Her benevolent father-in-law would not have known. And the mother-in-law, who wanted son's son, more than anything else, would not have worried, even if she had come to know,
15 because she favoured Jaswant, who worked on the land and not Balwant who wanted to be a clerk.

'Talk to me Maina... Don't go away from me... If you go I too will be finished...'

As the bird did not even flutter, her heart seemed to sink, and the sweat just poured down her body.

20 'Maybe, I am being superstitious,' she said to herself. 'I should have done a magic ceremony on the cross-roads of Hauz Khas to ensure my safe arrival in Pataudi. And, then God would have kept my enemies dispersed...'

Destiny spread the length of dumb distance before her, however. And, facing the emptiness, she felt as though the whole earth was opposed to her. And she wanted to
25 kneel down before the Almighty for all the sins for which she was being punished.

'Oh gently, gently, show me the path!' she cried out in her soul.

At that juncture, she heard the sinister shout of Jaswant: 'Stop, mad woman, or I shall kill you!'

She did not look back, because she knew the authentic accent of her brother-in-law's
30 voice. She merely ran, with the instinct to fly, to get away, out of his reach, to the group of men who were resting by the confectioner's shop.

The Maina bird fluttered its wings wildly. And now that it apprehended disaster, it shrieked and cried.

‘Stop...’ The voice of doom repeated itself.

5 Descending into the pit of confusion. Lajwanti was lost in the primal jungle of turmoil. The tortures of hell awaited her. But, perhaps she could make it.

‘Lajwanti,’ Jaswant called in a more mellow voice.

This startled her, weakened her, and made her regret she had not given in.

10 She fairly ran, about twenty yards before the confectioner’s shop. Jaswant passed by her, on his bicycle. Then he descended and, putting the machine athwart, barred her way.

Lajwanti conjured up in her downcast eyes the smile of horror that beamed on his heavy, pockmarked face.

She swerved away and outflanked him by diving into the ditch and making for the confectioner’s shop from the side of the depression.

15 He dragged the bicycle and raced up to her.

After he had reached the confectioner’s shop, he dropped the machine and ran towards her with an enveloping movement.

Lajwanti fell into his outstretched arms almost like a willing victim.

20 But once she became aware of the hard embrace of the wild beast, she recoiled back, to free herself.

Again she ran.

Startled, he turned and chased her, catching, her by the headcloth before she could sit down on the wooden bench by the confectioner’s shop.

* * * * *

25 ‘Why did you run away?’ he asked. ‘Have you no shame?... Look, folks...’

The straggling peasants looked nonchalantly at the scene, without coming any nearer. And three school boys came and stared.

‘Let me go — I want to go to my father’s house,’ Lajwanti said, without lifting her gaze to Jaswant.

The Maina bird fluttered in the cage.

5 ‘No, you are returning to your husband’s home!’ Jaswant ground the words. And he twisted her wrist as she tried to get out of his grasp.

‘Brute!’ she cried. And, without shedding any tears, she began to sob. ‘Leave me alone!... Let me give the Maina some water to drink...’

The throttling growth of Jaswant’s bestiality gripped her young body and he shouted hoarsely:

10 ‘Prostitute! Bad woman! Running away!... What will our brotherhood think? — you disgracing us like this!...’

Lajwanti collapsed in a huddle at his feet.

The brother-in-law hit her with his right foot.

At this the confectioner half got up from his greasy cushion and appealed:

15 ‘Ohe, do not hit her. Persuade her to go back with you...’ But as the woman sat mutely like a bundle, the tangled undergrowth of Jaswant’s emotions became concentrated into the fury of his stubborn, frustrated will. He slapped her on the head with his loose right hand.

Lajwanti gave herself to the torment and sat dumbly, suppressing even her sobs.

20 And now a crowd of passers-by gathered to see the fun, but no one intervened.

The grip of frightfulness lingered in the crevices of light before Lajwanti’s hooded eyes.

* * * * *

25 Grating of brakes and the dragging of wheels brought Engineer Din Dayal’s jeep to a sudden halt, twenty yards ahead of the confectioner’s shop.

‘Go quickly’, Shrimati Sushila Dayal ordered her husband. ‘I saw him slapping the woman.’

‘Let us find out what’s what before getting excited,’ said the dour, taciturn engineer. And he turned to the confectioner: ‘What has happened? Who are they?’

‘Sir, it seems the girl has run away from her father-in-law’s house and wants to go to her father’s house... But her brother-in-law came and caught her...’

5 Shrimati Dayal jumped out of the jeep and ran ahead of her husband.

‘Cowards! Get aside! Looking on! As though this is a fun fair!’

The crowd scattered and revealed Jaswant holding Lajwanti by the head cloth, which he had twisted into his hand with the plait of her hair.

‘Leave her alone!’ Shrimati Dayal ordered.

10 ‘Sister, she has ran away from her husband’s house,’ appealed Jaswant. ‘And our good name is at stake!’

‘She must have come away for a good reason,’ Shrimati Dayal said. ‘Where has she come from?’

‘From near Hauz Khas,’ Jaswant said.

15 ‘Hai-on foot?.. Ten miles? She has walked.’

Jaswant nodded his head.

‘Poor child!’ Shrimati Dayal said turning to her husband.

‘I will not allow the girl to die of a heat stroke. Put her in the jeep and let us take her home.’

20 ‘I will not let her go now that I have caught her’ Jaswant said timid but frontal.

‘I will call the police and hand you over!’ threatened Shrimati Dayal.

‘Anyhow,’ Engineer Din Dayal counselled Jaswant, ‘Come and talk things over at my house... Persuade her to go back with you. Don’t force her...’

25 ‘Come along,’ said Shrimati Dayal lifting Lajwanti even as she brusquely extricated the twisted plait of the girl’s hair out of Jaswant’s grip.

‘Give me the Maina to hold,’ Jaswant bullied his sister-in-law.

Lajwanti merely nodded her head in negation and proceeded.

* * * * *

In the cool shade of the verandah of Engineer Dayal's bungalow, Lajwanti removed the hood of her headcloth and revealed her tender, tear-stricken eyes and said:

5 'Give me some water for the Maina, mother.'

'Gurkha,' Shrimati Dayal called her servant. 'Give some cool water to all of us... make it lime and water... Simple water for the bird...'

The servile Gurkha, more taciturn than the engineer, took in everything at a glance and went towards the kitchen.

10 'Why did you beat the girl?' Shrimati Dayal asked Jaswant.

'Time after time we have told her,' said Jaswant, 'That her husband has only one year more to do at college before he finishes his B.A. But she wishes to be with him or go to her father's house.'

'Mother, he is a liar!' Lajwanti shrieked.

15 'You must have oppressed her very much to make her say this of you!' said engineering Dayal.

'Sire, we have been good to her,' pleaded Jaswant. 'She comes from a poor home. My father is Chaudhuri Ganga Ram, Sarpanch of the whole village... I have a wife too, but she is a gentle woman from a big house...'

20 'Like a cow,' Lajwanti flared up. 'And you want many more views.'

'Don't bark!' — Shameless one! Or I will hit you!' Jaswant said.

At this Shrimati Dayal got up with a cool deliberation of her torso and delivered a clean slap on Jaswant's face and said:

25 'How do you like this? — If someone else hits you!' The man was taken completely unawares. He sat with his mouth open but speechless.

'That is what I should have done when he tried to approach me!' said Lajwanti, her head turned demurely away from the engineer.

‘Clearly, this girl is not happy with your family.’ said the Engineer. ‘Let her go back to her father’s house till her husband has finished his studies. And then she can come back to your family.’

5 ‘That is right!’ added Shrimati Dayal. ‘I will not allow the child to be in your grip. You can have one wife and not two...’

10 In the quivering scale pans of balance, created by the voices of injustice, Lajwanti felt the first moment of calm which had come to her during two long years. But immediately she felt the fear of Jaswant’s revenge for the slap he had received on the face. She looked at the Maina and said in speechless speech: ‘Angel, suppose there is a cool place, somewhere in the world where we two can rest...’

‘Ask her to decide,’ Jaswant said, ‘If she goes to her father’s house, she can never come back to us. If she comes back with me, we might consider sending her for a little while to her father’s house.’

‘Tell him what you feel, girl?’ said Shrimati Dayal.

15 ‘I want to go to my father’s house, and never want to set foot on their threshold again,’ answered Lajwanti.

‘There!’ said Shrimati Dayal. ‘That is her answer for you... and if you are a decent man, go back to your home. I will see the girl to the bus which takes her to Pataudi...’ And, she turned to her husband for confirmation of her decision.

20 ‘That’s right!’ the Engineer said.

‘Gurkha!’ Shrimati Dayal called.

‘Coming, Bibiji, the servant answered. And he appeared with lime water for all and a little plain water and cummin seed for the Maina bird.

* * * * *

25 Lajwanti arrived with the cage of the Maina bird in her hand, at her father’s house, when the old man was just going out to bathe his buffalo at the well. He stood open-eyed and open-mouthed, asking himself whether what he saw was his daughter or her ghost. When she bent down to take the dust off his feet, he could smell the acrid summer sweat of her clothes and knew that it was Lajwanti. He dared not look at her
30 face, because a daughter coming back home without due ceremony, was inauspicious. Gentle as he was, however, he did not ask any questions. Only, he called to his young son, who was chopping up fodder for the buffalo.

‘Indu, your eldest sister has come. Wake up your little sister, Moti...’

Lajwanti was sad for her father. She knew that a man who had borne the grinding pressures of years of survival on one bigha and a buffalo, and whose wife had died leaving him with two small children, was in no condition to receive a grown-up
5 married daughter, who had returned without even the proverbial bundle of clothes to change into.

Indu left into the chopper and rushed towards her, clinging to her legs as though he saw the ghost of his mother standing by the door. To be sure, Lajwanti looked the
10 split image of her mother. Only mother had become sallow with lungs, while Lajo’s colouring was pucca brown, and gave richness to the small even face, with the fine nose, flawed by a big tatoo mark on her chin.

Tears welled into Lajwanti’s eyes at the warmth of the boy’s embrace.

‘Look at this poor Maina,’ she said. ‘She had come all the way with me from New Delhi.’

15 The young boy grabbed the cage from his sister’s hand and soon forgot about Lajwanti in the effort to make the bird talk.

‘I should give her some lentils to eat and a little water,’ Lajwanti said, sitting on the threshold of the verandah.

20 ‘Then she might talk to you... Though, I hope she does not say too much... The neighbours will know everything...’

For now that she was here, she wanted her return, somehow, to remain a private occurrence. She knew, of course, that everyone in a small place knew everyone else’s business. And she had no hope of escaping censure from the tongues which had
25 wagged when, before her marriage, she had played openly with boys of her own age, and seldom cared to cover her head with her dupatta because she did not want to look like a ghost. All the elders called her ‘Man Lajo,’ while the boys called her, ‘Meena Kumari’ after the film heroine she resembled. She wanted as she sat there, to know what was in her father’s heart — whether he had understood her mysterious will, and the instinct which had inspired her always to do the odd things. He had always
30 told her that he was sorry he had named her Lajwanti, which means sensitive plant, because she has lived up to her name. Indu pushed a cup of water into her bird’s cage. And lo! the Maina began to talk.

‘Lajo, what does she say?’ the boy asked.

Lajwanti smiled, even as she looked at the torrid sky.

* * * * *

5 After her father returned from the well, he tied the buffalo and put what cattle food Indu had chopped up before the animal. As the boy had not cut enough, he took the chopper and began to prepare more. He was not the kind to scold anyone, and least of all did he want to blame his son for getting excited about his elder sister.

When the buffalo had been looked after, he proceeded to soak the lentils for the evening meals and proceeded to light the fire.

‘I will do all that, Bapu,’ Lajwanti said.

10 ‘Daughter, it does not matter,’ he answered and stubbornly went on with the chores. And, turning to his son, he said, ‘give your sister a mat to sit on.’

Imperceptible as were his feelings behind the mask of his calm, wrinkled face, she saw a pallor on his lips as he said this, and she knew that she was not wanted. That mat was only given to guests.

15 The courtyard was filled with shadows long before the fire in the sky became ashes. Lajwanti could see the clouds tinted red as though the world had witnessed some gruesome murder.

And, frightened of her own self, she tried to hold her breath.

‘Sister, I have brought you a pitcher of water to bathe with,’ Indu said.

20 Before Lajwanti could answer, Moti had been disturbed by her brother’s voice and awakened, whining.

Lajwanti leaped forward to her and embraced the child, consoling her.

25 ‘Lajo,’ her father said, ‘The children want a mother. And I would have kept you here and not given you away, if people had not begun to talk about you...’ He paused after this statement for a long time, and then after blowing at the hearth fire, he continued: ‘Now, I am both father and mother to them... and, as for you, I will take you back to your parents-in-law’s house. I shall fall at their feet and ask them to forgive you. The disgrace of your widowhood without your becoming a widow is unbearable... They will only call you ugly names here... They do not know that you
30 are ‘sensitive plant’...’

* * * * *

Two days later, a post card came addressed to Shri Hari Ram, father of Lajwanti, written by Jaswant, on behalf of his father, saying, that as Lajwanti had run away, without permission from her husband or her parents-in-law, the clothes she had brought on her wedding were being returned and that no one in Delhi was now willing to see her 'black face'.

Old Hari had already been trying to arrange for someone to look after his buffalo, his son and his daughter, so that he could take Lajwanti back to her parents-in-law. He had sent for the midwife, who had delivered all these children, from Pataudi proper, because he did not know anyone in the small village, who would oblige, without the payment of some cash.

Fortunately, the midwife Champa, arrived on the same morning after the post card was received. And she was more than willing, to take on the job of looking after the household.

'Why,' she said, 'I had hoped to see our Lajo with belly. And I had waited to be called to her bedside, so that I could deliver her of a son. And, now, my loved one, you are here, without a sign in your eyes of the coming of the happy event. If only for the sake of the soul of your dear mother, go, hurry back. And come soon with your lap full of a child...'

* * * * *

'I am putting my turban at your feet,' said old Hari Ram to Chaudhri Ganga Ram, literally removing his enormous crown of cloth from his head and placing it on the shoes of his daughter's father-in-law.

'Oh, come and sit here with me,' answered Chaudhri Ganga Ram, brushing the beadstead with his left hand as he smoked the hookah under the shade of a neem tree.

Lajwanti crouched a little way away, with her face covered by her head cloth and averted her gaze from her father-in-law towards the torrid fields. Her heart was in her mouth, lest her brother-in-law, Jaswant, might suddenly appear from the barn, or even her mother-in-law, come on the scene suddenly before the father-in-law had forgiven her. At the same time, she knew that there would be no forgiveness, but only a reluctant nod to indicate that she could stay.

The nod of approval was, however, long in coming. For Chaudhri Ganga Ram kept silent, after having lifted Hari Ram to sit by him, and only his hookah spoke a little agitatedly.

Meanwhile, Lajwanti felt the sweat gathering on the nape of her head and flowing down her spine. And she looked at her blessed Maina in the cage to see if the bird was not dead. The journey had been easier this time, because they had come by bus from Pataudi to Gurgaon and then caught the connection from Gurgaon to the bus stop half
5 a mile away from the little village of her father-in-law. And as the bird seemed still, she spoke to her in wordless words:

‘My Maina tell me what will happen now? My heart flutters, as you often do when you are frightened of the cat coming to eat you. And I do not know if Jaswant will
10 relent and not pursue me anymore. But perhaps now that my father has brought me back, I will allow myself to be eaten. Only the humiliation will be complete now. Oh if only I had warmed to him and not thought of my own man who would never have known! I am really defeated. And even words are no use... And yet within me there is desire, and there is life — a river of feelings like the ancient Saraswati river which
15 has gone underground and disappeared from the surface... How shall I control those feelings, those prisoners, trying to burst out...’

She opened her eyes to make sure. The vision was real.

Involuntarily, her eyes closed and a sigh got muffled into the folds of her headcloth. Sparks like stars shot out of the darkness of her head, and the agitation of nerves pushed up a copious sweat all over her. She knew that the constellations in the sky
20 above her were ominous.

‘So the dead one has turned up!’ the mother-in-law’s voice came, as the old woman returned from the well with one pitcher on her head and another one on her left arm. The heavy breathing of the woman, forced to fetch and carry and do all the chores in the absence of Lajwanti, accented her voice with bitterness.

25 ‘She is your daughter,’ said old Hari Ram to appease the woman. In his innocence he imagined that the proverbial mother-in-law had become the cause of his daughter’s flight. ‘I have brought her back... the midwife, Champa, said that the girl has made a mistake...’

30 ‘To be sure,’ answered the mother-in-law. ‘There was no question, since Balwant has not been back from Kalej for more than a few days at a time... Unless she has cast the spell of her grey eyes on someone else... Jaswant says he has seen her winking at the visitors on the roadside...’

‘We are respectable people,’ said Chaudhri Ganga Ram to reinforce his wife’s speech.

35 ‘I... what shall I say, Chaudhriji,’ answered Hari Ram meekly. ‘I wish fate had made her not so good looking... But, now, I have brought her back. And you can kill her if

she looks at another... Here is a ring for my son Balwant. I could not give much dowry. Now I will make up a little for what the boy did not get...'

5 From the wearisome acceptance of her fate, there swirled up incomprehensible violent urges of truth in Lajwanti, so that she shook a little and was on the point of telling them the horrible facts. And she was mad at her father for effacing himself and bowing before her in-laws. But the tremors in her entrails ended in choking her throat. And the lofty flights of anger only befogged her brain.

'Jaswant! Jaswant!... Come over here...' the mother-in-law called her eldest son.

10 The scarecrow in the field turned round. Then he lifted the palm of his hand to see. He understood. And he began to walk back.

15 In the silence of doom, Lajwanti quivered as though the demons of hell had let loose snakes and scorpions on her body. And, in a fit of crazy abandon, she felt herself borne from the underworld, on a bed, by her heroic husband, his arms wrapped around her... Actually, beneath the trembling flesh, she knew Balwant to be a coward, who dare not even raise his head to look at his elder brother.

'She has come back!' Jaswant ground the words in his mouth, throwing the white radishes away on the ground near the outdoor kitchen.

'She could not tell you that she wanted to see the midwife,' old Hari Ram said. 'It was a false alarm.'

20 'There are mid-wives here also!' Jaswant answered pat. 'Why there is the Safdarjung Hospital!...' Do not be taken in by her stories, Uncle. She has looked at more than one before her marriage... She is just a bad girl!... The way she insulted me when I went to fetch her back,... She sat, there, answering back! And allowed that Afsar's wife to slap me on the face!... Prostitute!...'

25 'Bus! bus! Son!' Chaudhri Ganga Ram said to restrain the boy.

'Take that for having me beaten!' Jaswant said and kicked Lajwanti on her behind, 'Lajwanti quivered, then veered round, almost doubled over, and uttered a shrill cry before beginning to sob.

30 'You deserved a shoe beating!' shouted Jaswant, towering over the girl like an eagle in a malevolent glee of power, his arms outstretched as though he was going to hit her again.

'Come away!' shouted his father.

‘Let him punish her if he thinks she has done wrong,’ said Hari Ram. And let her fall at his feet... My daughter is pure... After saying this he felt pangs of remorse at his own cowardice and he was caught in the paroxysm of a dry throated cough, and water filled his eyes.

5 ‘Maina, my maina,’ Lajwanti said under her breath, ‘I cannot bear this...’

‘Deceitful cunning wretch!’ Jaswant said and he turned away towards her father. ‘Take her away... We have no use for her here! After she has disgraced us before the whole brotherhood.’

10 ‘Not so many angry words, son!’ Chaudhri Ganga Ram said. ‘You have punished her enough!’

‘Son, let her get up and work!’ mother-in-law said.

‘Bless your words of wisdom,’ said Hari Ram. ‘I knew you would be merciful... And now I leave her in your care. Kill her if you like. But don’t let her come to me without her lap full of son. I shall not be able to survive the disgrace if she comes again...’

15 * * * * *

‘Maina, my maina, who will talk to you, if I go away forever?’ Lajwanti asked the bird in the cage even as she washed her with palmfuls of water from the bucket.

The bird fluttered wildly evading the shower.

‘Will you shriek if I drown you in the water, my little one?’ Lajwanti asked.

20 The bird edged away as though in answer.

And she sat down on the ledge of the well, away from the surging waters which were all around her dizzy brain.

25 If she stopped to think, she felt she would never do it... It was now or never, when there was no one on the well except herself and the Maina. The village women had finished fetching the water for the evening. And soon it would be dark.

From where she sat, a tilt — that would do it. But no, She must not wait any more.

And with a jerk of her torso, interrupted by her indecision, she forced herself into a heave.

The fall was ugly. Her left shoulder hit the stone on the side before she fell sideways into the well.

For a moment, she was limp.

5 The impact of the fall took her full-length into the water. But, in a second, she felt her body rising up as though from its own momentum. Unfortunately for her, she was a swimmer. She could not decide to let go of her breath. And, now, her hand pushed up above the water. And she found herself using her arms, to keep afloat.

Still there was a chance.

Rising from the torso, she ducked down, with her nose tweaked between her fingers.

10 She stayed under the water for a minute and then tried to drown herself by letting go of her hand from the tweaked nose.

The head rose above the water, panting for breath.

‘Lajwanti! Lajwanti! Bad one come out!’ her mother-in-law’s voice came, in a shrill appeal. ‘This is not the way of respectable people...’

15 There was no way by which Lajwanti could put her head into the water. Perhaps she really did not want to die. How had the old woman turned up? Because, left to herself, she would have gone under with a second or third try. Not even in the darkness, was there an escape... Above the well, life would be worse hell than even before...

20 Gently, she let go. And then water began to fill her nostrils and her mouth. And she was submerged.

Before she had lost consciousness, however, she felt herself lying down in the slush near the well.

25 They were pressing her belly. Someone was sitting on her. And the spurts of water oozed from her nostrils and mouth. The rancid tastes of stale air was on her palate—the taste of life’s breath.

And as she lay dissolving under her heavy eyelids, the bitterness of her breath seemed to lapse, and sleep shaped her eyes into a fixed stare.

And yet, within a moment, more water had come up through her nose and mouth.

And, within her, she could hear her foolish, tormented heart pounding away.

And then the drowsy eyelids opened. And she could see the Maina bird in the cage by her.

5 ‘Alas’ She said in wordless words, above the ache of the head and the thumping of the heart, ‘There is no way for me... I am... condemned to live...’