

The White Towel.

Bali Rai

Dust, red and dry, burned in my nostrils, as a relentless sun beat down on my uncovered head. The pails of creamy white water buffalo milk I was carrying increased in weight with every step I took along the narrow path between my Grandfather's house and that of his brother. I was helping out with chores. Doing my bit. I was on holiday from England. Three boring weeks in my grandfather's village, getting fried by the sun and eaten by the mosquitoes that droned through the night like the bombers that destroyed parts of London during the war. I spent every night waiting to get bombed. And every morning I woke up itchy, covered in raw, red bumps.

My T-shirt was soaked through; the sky blue fabric was now a kind of dark navy, and my trainers were wrecked, covered in dust, crusted mud and stained by the thick, warm milk that I was spilling everywhere. It was all down my trousers too, like I'd had an accident with a porno mag and my left hand. Something was crawling down my neck, tickling the hairs it found with its legs. I wanted to slap the little bastard, whatever it was, into oblivion, but I couldn't put the pails down. I'd never pick them up again if I did. I couldn't believe the way that my Indian cousins worked
20 in the sun, out tending the fields, and never even complained. The heat was a nightmare. And they were all so strong but skinny with it. Like sticks with string for muscle. Stronger than me. But like my old man used to tell me all the time - me and my sister had it easy.

'Blinkin' easy the life you's got, innit ? Everything buy for you an' food on table.

Even your bottoms clean for you. Wanna try life in bleedin' India for a week.'

Then he'd chuckle to himself.

'Prob'ly kill you though...'

Suddenly my head grew light and I felt dizzy. I stumbled and then fell, spilling the milk everywhere. My forehead caught the edge of one of the pails as I fell and the metal rim cut through the skin. I turned over onto my back and touched the wound. Blood was streaming out, rich and crimson. I lay there for a while, trying to catch my breath as a cold sweat broke out all over my body. My thoughts were all fuzzy and I began to shiver. I had a fever.

I got up slowly. I was unsure on my feet for a moment before steadying myself and heading for the house. I walked into the open courtyard holding a hand against the gash in my forehead. My fingers were covered with blood which had also dripped onto my dusty, sweaty T-shirt. My father's youngest sister came out and ran towards me, holding her hands to her mouth.

'BeteH, what's happened to you?' she said in Punjabi.

40 As she spoke her husband came over with a towel and put it to my head, dabbing it gently to the wound.

'I don't know,' I replied, in my best Punjabi. 'I felt dizzy and then I fell over.'

My uncle pulled the towel away from my head and looked at the cut. As he did so I was looking at my aunt, who saw the towel and then flinched. A sad, distant look crossed her face like a dark cloud and she looked down, squeezing one hand into the other. The white towel was covered in blood. My uncle guided me by the shoulder into the house and sat me down on a *manjah*, which is like a bed, with a wooden frame and interwoven strands of rope to make up the mattress.

'Sohni !' he shouted to my cousin, 'Run and get Sahota doctor-ji.'

I shivered as a strong fever took over and faded out of consciousness, my mind wondering about my aunt's reaction to the towel. She hadn't flinched at it like someone who hates the sight of blood would. She had just looked sad. Like it reminded her of something. I wondered what it could have been as I passed out...

Later, as I lay shivering in the humidity and heat of a Punjabi summer, the fever burning through my body, I asked my aunt why she had reacted in that way.

'To what, beteh?' she said, like she was trying to put me off.

'The towel, Aunty-ji. You looked really sad when you saw the towel. Why?'

She looked away and the same cloud as before passed across her face.

60 'It's nothing....'

I didn't believe her.

'It must be something because you've just done it again,' I insisted.

She sighed and then got up, walked over to the door to the room and pushed it shut. Then she returned and sat by my side, picking up a damp cloth and wiping sweat from my burning forehead, carefully avoiding the wound, which had been treated with iodine and then patched up with a dressing.

‘Beteh, there are things that you don’t understand. About our family.’

‘Such as...?’

‘We had a sister, your father and me. A younger sister. Jagpreet. She was so beautiful and clever and full of joy...’

‘The one that went mad and killed herself...?’ I asked, remembering what my dad had told me about her.

‘Yes, only she didn’t go mad.’

A tear welled in my aunt’s eye.

‘So what happened and what does it have to do with a towel covered in blood?’

My aunt let a few tears fall and then pulled herself together. She looked at the door again, as if to make sure no one was listening. And then she told me a story...

80 Jagpreet was a happy-go-lucky girl with light brown hair that looked blonde in the sunlight, warm, cream-coloured skin and eyes that shone out like amber stones. She was the kind of girl that every boy in the village wanted to spend time with. Often she would go out into the fields to do her chores for a day and return having done nothing, all her work done for her by lovesick teenagers anxious to catch her eye and her heart. Not that she played on this or took advantage of her suitors. She exuded innocence about such things, my aunt told me. She didn’t even notice the admiring looks she received as she walked barefoot around the alleyways and gullies of the village, or washed her hair under the hand pump. She just thought that people were being kind to her. That the young men who would have died for her were merely being brotherly.

She looked like a fully grown woman at the age of fourteen and after she had reached that age, men from around the village and beyond began to arrive at her father’s door, ready to betroth their sons and heirs to her. Once, in just seven days, my aunt told me, thirteen potential fathers-in-law visited and took tea with her father. Thirteen men who wished to see their sons happy. To see them satisfy their longing for the beautiful girl they had caught a glimpse of out in the fields or amongst the mango tree groves. She was almost magical, said my aunt. Everyone loved her and everyone wanted to be her friend. Animals calmed down when she whispered to them. Babies stopped crying when she looked into their eyes and smiled. An old lady from

100 the village had seen Jagpreet sleeping out in the fields once, in the shade of a well, and swore on the Ten Gurus that as she slept, a cobra, black as jet and as long as a stream, had slithered past her, caressing her skin before moving on.

Her family adored her. She was the youngest child and the most loved by her father, a stout Punjabi Jat Sikh. My grandfather. Normally such fatherly adoration was confined to the male heirs of a family but Jagpreet had such a way about her that my grandfather had viewed her with the same pride as he had his only son. My aunt wiped away another tear as she told me how her father had cried when Jagpreet had died. How he had been left a broken man with nothing but sadness in his heart. A heart that was so broken that he had died from it, almost a year to the day after his daughter. He had died calling to her.

The day that Jagpreet turned sixteen had been the day that her short life began to come to an end. She had returned from the fields one afternoon carrying a small bird that had broken its wing, crying at its pain. Laying it down on a soft pillow she had heard her father calling to her. She left the bird lying on her bed and made her way out to the courtyard where her father was sitting drinking spiced tea with a tall, distinguished looking man from a village two miles to the west, close to the city of Chandigarh. The man was a wealthy trader, a Jat who had earned his wealth selling fabrics and whose brother was living in England, working and sending money back to his family. As she approached, the stranger stood and hugged her as if she were his
120 own daughter and proceeded to tell her of his son, Malkit, a tall, handsome boy of eighteen years, who was studying to become a teacher.

Jagpreet looked to her father, searching his eyes for an explanation. Her father smiled and called her to him. Taking her hand he told her that she had been betrothed to Malkit and that the stranger was her father-in-law, a wonderful man from a big, wealthy family. The kind of family that would look after her as she deserved and love her as her own family did.

Jagpreet turned to their guest and smiled a smile so warm, so loving, that he had to turn away his eyes. A tear ran down his cheek. He turned to Jagpreet's father. 'Bhai-ji - your daughter is surely as you said she would be. Beautiful and so pure. It will make me glad to take her as my daughter-in-law.'

'Today is a day for rejoicing in the blessing of the Guru,' replied Jagpreet's father. 'For today two families have become one.'

The two men embraced warmly and the guest went on his way, eager to return to his son with the good news. Jagpreet took her father's hand again.

'Father, will you still love me as before?' she asked. 'When I am married and part of another's family?'

'Beteh, I could never love you less than I do, only more. But tell me - are you truly happy with the path that I have chosen for you?'

140 'Yes - if you have chosen for me then I must obey. I know you have chosen well,' she told him.

'Are you sure Jagpreet? I would not wish to make you unhappy.'

'Then tell me what this boy is like - Malkit.'

Her father looked away.

'I must confess that I haven't seen him,' he replied. 'But his father is a well-respected man and I trust his words. Malkit, he tells me, is tall and handsome, with skin as light as milk and he is as strong as an ox. He is studying to be a teacher and he will take you to England when he goes. England, beteh, where life is so much easier than it is here.'

Jagpreet smiled.

'Oh he sounds so wonderful,' she said. 'When will we be married?'

'Soon, my love, soon. I will begin organising everything in the morning.'

'May I go and tell my friends,' asked Jagpreet.

'Yes beteh, you may,' laughed her father. 'Today we have been blessed by the Lord. *Waheguru Satnam.*'

My aunt stopped for a moment, pausing to wipe her eyes free of tears. If only he had known, she said to me. If only he *could* have known. She swabbed my forehead with a wet towel and then continued...

160

The preparations for the wedding began the next day just as my grandfather had said they would. My aunt told me of trips to Chandigarh to buy fine silks and Indian gold. Of men coming to the house to take orders for sweetmeats and dhal and rice. Of the hunchback who lived down the gully from our family, Mahon Singh, who was related to a famous Punjabi folk singer and had asked him to come along. Mahon

Singh also led a small band of horn players and they were hired to play during the three days of celebration. The wedding would be the best that Jagpreet's father could afford. No one would ever be able to say that he hadn't seen off his beloved daughter in style.

But at the same time some of Jagpreet's spurned suitors became angry and began to tell tales about her. That she was not the pure, innocent girl that she seemed or they had sullied her *izzat* with their ardour. That she was not a virgin. These rumours were dismissed by the majority of the villagers however as the ramblings of disgruntled and jealous men and the preparations continued until, finally, two months after they had begun, everything was ready and the wedding festival began.

It lasted for three days and three nights and the entire village came along, as did many more people from around about. The two families met each other on the wedding day itself and got on so well that an outsider would have sworn that they had known each other for all of their lives. Jagpreet's mother got on famously with
180 Malkit's mother. His brothers with hers. And so on down the family line. Many chickens and goats were slaughtered to feed the revellers and much beer and corn spirit was drunk. The folk singer sang of Sohni Mehiwal and Heer Ranja - star crossed lovers from an earlier generation- and of the glory of the Punjab, beautiful land of the five rivers, as his fans mobbed him. Such was the fuss that the local police called by, took in the scene and decided to stay as guests.

Eventually the final evening came and it was time for Jagpreet's groom to carry her away to his own village, his entourage, or *juneth*, in tow. First he had to approach the gates of Jagpreet's father's house and ask to be let in, a tradition that Punjabi's still continue today. My aunt was weeping openly as she told me this part and I had to sit up and comfort her at one point.

'Oh, beteh, Malkit was as handsome as any man I have ever seen. Truly a match for my sister...'

'Please carry on,' I begged, eager to find out what happened after the wedding.

The women, as is tradition, teased Malkit at the gate and refused to let him pass until he had given them something. First he offered them pennies, then a rupee and then five and ten. Eventually he gave them twenty rupees each and they let him through, all the while teasing him and trying to play tricks on his best man, who was with him. Malkit ignored the jibes and embraced Jagpreet's father, drank from a cup

of milk and then asked for his bride. Jagpreet came out of a side room, dressed in fine
200 silk, in a shade of crimson which made her seem more beautiful than a flower, and
drank from the same cup as her husband. Then, as Jagpreet's mother and sister and
female cousins began to wail and cry, Jagpreet bade her family goodbye. She saved
the longest embraces for her mother and father, who wept openly at the loss of their
daughter to another family, even though it was such a happy occasion.

Finally she let go of her parents and made her way to the gate, her brother, my
father, behind her, for it is tradition too that the bride's brother accompany her to her
new home on the first night. As she made her way to the horse drawn carriage that
would take her to her new life, several of the villagers began to cry too and the
children of the village lined the dirt path and waved and smiled and blew her kisses.
One or two of her suitors, minds clouded with opium smoke and sullen, stood with
drooping eyes and breaking hearts, and watched her go. Jagpreet cried, said my aunt,
yet she smiled too, for she was happy and excited and sad and afraid all at once. She
was leaving all that she had known for something new and who knew when they
would see her again and when. She belonged to another family now, said my aunt. It
was like a light was being put out.

The return to Malkit's village went without hitch and the party continued into
the night as Malkit's friends congratulated him. The first night was not the night when
he would have his bride to himself. He would have to wait for the following night,
220 when she had been prepared and had settled in a little. And Malkit's mother and
sisters would take care of Jagpreet first, making sure that she was happy and giving
her instruction into the ways of married life. It was tradition. Instead Malkit sang and
danced and drank with his friends and late into the night collapsed in a dreamy, happy
daze, sleeping until the sunrise with a smile across his face.

It was whilst he and Jagpreet slept that a messenger arrived at Malkit's
parents' door; a shabbily dressed man of low standing, barefoot and half-naked. He
asked one of Malkit's cousins for Malkit's mother, Naseebo, who was herself still
awake and chatting happily with her friends. Naseebo told the cousin to send the
messenger packing.

'Is he an idiot?' she asked. 'Can he not see that we are in the middle of a wedding?'

'He insists that you come to the gate, thai-ji,' replied the cousin.

‘Oh, very well, but if he is wasting my time I want you to beat some sense into him, the *chamarr*.’

‘Agreed,’ said the cousin, following his aunt back to the gate.

The messenger took in Naseebo and then the cousin and moved in close to whisper.

‘Tell the boy to leave us,’ he said.

‘Never!’ exclaimed Naseebo in disgust. ‘You think that I would drag my *izzat* through the mud to stand at my own gate, in the middle of the night, with a strange man? I
240 would rather cut off my own nose.’

‘I am a eunuch, sister,’ replied the man, ‘and of no threat to your honour and yet I fear someone has already cut off your nose.’

Naseebo eyed the eunuch up and down, realised that he was as he claimed to be and sent the cousin to stand about ten feet away from the gate. Then she turned back to the eunuch.

‘Tell me quickly what you mean,’ she hissed. ‘And if you are trying to trick me then I will have you hanged before the morning.’

The eunuch smiled, showing a set of yellowing and broken teeth.

‘SPEAK !’ hissed Naseebo once more.

‘Your daughter-in-law is not what she seems,’ he told her with a malicious grin.

‘You dare to come here on my son’s wedding night and...’

‘Hear me out, sister,’ said the eunuch. ‘What use is a flower when its petals are soiled and its bloom has been taken,’ he asked.

Naseebo’s breathing quickened.

‘What are you telling me, you hag?’

The eunuch grinned yet further.

‘You know what I say. And you know how to see if I am telling the truth,’ he said.

A dark cloud passed across Naseebo’s face. She looked at the eunuch with loathing.

260 ‘If I find out that you are lying,’ she told him, ‘my sons will cut out your heart.’

‘I am not lying,’ replied the eunuch. ‘Good night to you.’

And with that he turned and walked off into the night.

Naseebo waited until the following night to try and find out if the eunuch had been telling the truth, after Jagpreet's brother had left for her father's house. She told no one about what the eunuch had said except for one of Malkit's sisters, Gian, whom she enlisted in her task. Just before the new couple were due to spend their first night together, Naseebo gave Malkit a white towel - brand new, and told him that he must lay it underneath his wife as they did their business for the first time.

'It is tradition, beteh,' she told him. 'Nothing more.'

Gian, meanwhile, spoke to Jagpreet, as any new sister-in-law would, whilst brushing her hair and rubbing coconut oil into her skin. She too told Jagpreet of the white towel and said that it meant nothing.

'Just tradition, Jagpreet. Nothing more,' she lied.

Malkit took his bride to bed for the first time and closed and locked the door behind them, suspecting nothing.

280 The silence of the early morning was broken by a loud wailing and cries of 'Whore' and 'Liar'. Malkit had brought out the towel in the morning and handed it to his mother who had inspected it for signs of blood. There were none to be found. Naseebo had nearly fainted, caught herself at the last moment, steadied herself and then the anger had taken over.

'They have cheated us,' she cried, pulling Jagpreet from her room by her hair, tearing clumps out as she dragged her to the courtyard and threw her, screaming and crying, to the dusty ground.

'Look at this whore!,' she screamed. 'This thief...She has cut off my nose...'

The family came running out to see what was happening so early in the morning. Malkit's father swore at his wife and demanded an explanation. Naseebo told him of the eunuch and all that he had told her. Then, with rage burning in her eyes, she showed him the towel.

'Look at it - you who brought this whore to our home. Pure, is she?' spat Naseebo.

Malkit's father trembled as a fire began to burn slowly inside of him. He turned to his daughter-in-law and kicked her in her midriff and spat at her, as she lay helpless, confused and afraid.

'WHAT IS THIS?' he demanded. 'Your father has taken my *izzat* - you dirty whore...'

300 Malkit attempted to intervene, torn already between his love for Jagpreet and his family's honour. But his father pushed him aside and pulled Jagpreet up by her hair.

'I will drag this whore through the streets to show the people what she really is. She has the face of an angel but the heart of a snake...'

Jagpreet's hands were tied and she was dragged screaming through the gullies and dirt paths of the village. She protested her innocence over and over yet it made no difference. For hours she was pulled and pushed through the lanes, spat at, kicked and punched until at dusk she was discarded in a field like rubbish and left for dead.

Malkit returned to his father's house and locked himself in his room, crying and ashamed that he hadn't protected his bride from his family. But she had lied to them. Virgin brides bled on their wedding night, yet this girl had not. How could that be? The eunuch must have told his mother the truth. Only the truth meant nothing to him as he sat in the dark and cried. He could think of nothing else but Jagpreet, yet didn't have the courage to go and find her and see if she was alive. Family honour was far too important. Malkit would regret his actions until his death some years later.

I looked at my aunt, tried to hold back tears of my own and shook my head. I didn't know what to say. I mean what were you supposed to say to a story like that? I couldn't believe that such horrible things had happened in my family. It was like I was hearing a story from ancient times yet it had only occurred thirty years earlier. I was disgusted. But I still wanted to know what had actually happened to Jagpreet.

320 'So did Jagpreet die in the fields,' I asked my aunt, who was wiping away tears.

'No-one knows beteh. Her body was never found. Some people said that she was eaten by wolves, others that she was rescued by the eunuch and ended up as a prostitute. But a hermit woman, who lived out in those fields, told us that she had dragged herself to the nearby river and let herself fall in. No-one knows the truth.'

'And the story about her going mad?' I asked.

'That was us,' replied my aunt, looking ashamed. 'We made it up to save her honour, even in death.'

'Oh... ' I said, not knowing how else to respond.

'But Malkit's family told everyone that she hadn't been a virgin,' continued my aunt.

'His mother, Naseebo, carried the white towel with her for a while - as proof. It was a

difficult time for our family and your grandfather could not handle the shame and the sadness. But it was all lies - I knew my sister and I know that she was innocent on her wedding night. I *still* know it.'

'And that's why you reacted badly when you saw the blood on the towel after I'd cut my head?' I asked.

'Yes *beteh*. That *one* towel, white, with blood stains upon it, which would have been enough to save my sister's life...'