

A Herd of Deer

By NALISHA LADHARAM

They said her name was Lakshmi Rathod. They said she was my sister. They said she was a Sati.

When my sister married she returned only once.

Then we sat in the yard, climbing over the wooden frame of the bed and sinking into its woven ropes. She told me of the sights she had first seen on the journey to her new home.

There was sand everywhere, she said. Sand came in through the open windows of the bus. Sand settled on her husband's eyebrows and eyelashes and on his moustache too. She pulled her *chuni* all the way down from her head, and covered her face. With only one uncovered eye, she looked out thorough the bars of the window. On either side of the black, tarred road there were carved, sand dunes that curved up to the sky. Imprinted upon their sandy skin, were strange spools and whorls and lines: fingerprints of Lord Bhrama, the Lord of Creation. But even stranger was the humming sound of silence. It was the sound of creation that hung over the sand, she said.

When the bus had driven into the lush groves of the *Bishnoi* people, she heard another sound, she said. She heard the sound of thousands of birds, beating their wings against the leaves and branches of the *kedjiri* trees, rising like a storm above the lake. Here, there are hundreds of tame deer, she said. The deer are so tame, they allowed her to stroke their black skin and white underbellies. And one even ate out of her hand. They all have big, big, beautiful eyes. And their horns! They are long and twisted and thin just like this newspaper cone, she said. Then she chose a fat, roasted peanut from within the inverted paper horn in her hand, and popped into my mouth.

The *Bishnoi* loved all of the Lord's creation, she said. They never killed any living thing, and never even uprooted any plants, she said. So there were bushes left standing there, amid the fields that caught the desert sand as it blew over the full, fields of grain. There were miles of unfelled, green leafy trees whose roots dug deep into the earth, to slowly sip the stored moisture of precious rain. My eyes grew wide. I had never heard of

such a love; a love that welcomed grit and gravel and transformed it into verdant landscape; a love that was embodied in the tame, breathing, bodies of a herd. I had never known that love could water a desert.

“When is she coming back?” I asked my mother soon after she left.

“She has travelled with her husband,” my mother said.

“When is she coming back?” I asked again.

“She has travelled with her husband...to Bharatpur,” my father said.

“When is she coming back?” I asked yet again.

“Bharatpur is ...very far away,” my mother said.

The circumference of her pink, glass bangles, knotted in a handkerchief in the corner of the cupboard, grew smaller and smaller. Then they slipped onto my wrists. Her slippers grew shorter and shorter. Then they too slipped onto my feet. It seemed as if I had become her; and she, my sister, had been but a mirage distilled in a dream. How could she forget me when I had never forgotten her?

I remembered her wedding day. She had worn the clothes and jewellery presented to her by her husband. There was a thick rope of gold that ran down the parting of her black hair. Where it ended, upon her forehead, a large gold *rakhri* dominated. It had stipulated, this fashioned piece of shining gold, that she must not stray from her husband's side. His enameled red and gold earrings, overturned cups upon overturned cups, were rimmed with golden drops. The earrings had said she must not pay heed to gossip. The gold band that encircled her neck was encrusted with uncut precious stones, which flashed like coloured glass. The necklet said she must always bow her head in humility. When I saw her stand up, her shoulders were stooped, weighed down by the weight of his jewellery. She slowly raised the full, red skirt that fell about her hennaed feet. Gold rings flashed on her toes. The gold rings said she must be a thrifty housewife. She walked slowly to the door. It seemed as if she struggled with weak, shaky, newborn limbs. The anklets that chimed slowly about her steps said good behaviour should always walk with her. I remembered her pausing in the doorway, raising her head and turning to look at me. Her eyes were luminous. Then she bent her head, heavy with the weight of the jewellery, the many marigold garlands, the red and gold embroidered cloth that covered her head, and she was gone.

They said that night, the night my mother and father first heard of their son-in-law's death, there was a silence in the darkness. And then there was more silence as the lights

went on inside. They said they had swayed, as the limbless, hollow, clay dolls sway, when little, little hands swing their baked skirts across the empty void within, and hit the wooden stand inside.

In the surrounding villages, the village people had heard of another impending death. They had heard that a widow wished to burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. At first, there were only a few people, striding across the dry soil. But then, one by one, the ones became tens, and the tens became hundreds. They streamed into Lakshmi's village and stopped in front of the courtyard of her house. There was a barricade of patient, perspiring men and women in orange and pink and white. As the afternoon sun rose, the barricade had grown taller, as people had climbed onto the courtyard walls. Then this barricade spread and scattered as even more people climbed on to the trees outside the walls.

There were only two policemen. They could not pass through this wall of angry, perspiring men and women who pelted them with hot stones heated by the sun.

They said that in the evening, Lakshmi and her husband's family had stepped into the courtyard. They say a hush had cleaved into the murmuring crowds. They say that she had looked unnaturally beautiful in the softened sunlight. She was dressed in her red and gold wedding *lengha*. They said, too, that she had been very calm, that she had not needed any assistance, as she had walked to the waiting pyre. They said too that one by one she removed her jewellery. First, she slowly removed the shining *rakhri* on her forehead. Then she mechanically removed her earrings, her necklet, her bangles, her anklets and her gold toe rings. These she gave to her husband's family. She had stood unadorned before them, then. They said her family kept her close. That they walked with her to the pyre. That they waited for her to be seated and for the felled wood of the pyre to be lit.

The judge declared it an aided and abetted suicide. Then the newspaper headlines stated, "Lakshmi Rathod allegedly immolated herself on the pyre of her husband in Rajasthan's Sirohi district." Odd city women, with their hair cut as short as men, chanted and protested and held placards up in the air. But now the women, they are all gone. Now those newspapers, they write of other things. No one remembers them.

But no one will ever forget my sister. In her village, the village people have erected a sati stone in her memory. And although the heat and dust have troubled the exacted beauty of the stone, I can still see her chiseled face and form within. There are offerings of scented flowers and fresh fruit: proof of prayers said. She is as a goddess: for had she not

redeemed her husband in heaven, and all his family on earth, by her virtuous act? Would she not redeem them too?

People still remember Laksmi . Even the shepherds and their women, before they walk with their dusty, dusty sheep, across to the rivers and the rain, in the search for the clumps of grass that will turn into milk, even they come to join their hands and bow their heads before her.

Everyday I think of Laksmi. Sometimes she comes to me in dreams. I know that she comes to my mother in dreams too.

In the summer evening my mother stares across the barren yard from over the fumes of the clay oven. She feeds the little oven with charcoal and small, squares of newsprint, fanning the little flames that begin to take. As she does so, she looks past the *tulsi* plant outside the entrance, and into the house. I know she is looking at the prayer cupboard. She stares for a long time. I know there is a patch of charred red and gold cloth on a shelf. I say nothing. Then my mother starts. Paper, the size of a one rupee note, twirls in the air amid the fumes and sparks. I catch it.

My eyes are drawn to the bright, yellow colour. I look at it. It is a photo. It is the side-view of a woman. Her head is demurely covered. She is wearing a large, round, gold, nose ring. It is so large that it falls over her lips and hides them from my eyes. Her eyes seem closed but it is only because she is looking down at the little fawn she cradles in her arms. The fawn is looking up at her with moist and luminous eyes. In this fading light, it is very hard to see where her own brown skin ends, and that of the little fawn begins, for the fawn is suckling at her breast. I show it to my mother. She too is surprised.

We show the little piece of paper to my father. He takes it from us and holds it in his gnarled hands. He looks at it. It seems that the earth under his old, cracked nails trembles. Still, he examines it very carefully. Then, just as he holds it out to me, he stops and looks at it again. He has just noticed small, black words that underline the photograph. He struggles with the words and reads them out very slowly.

“The fawn’s mother is dead,” my father says.
He looks away with an expression of bewilderment.

“The *Bishnoi* woman is now the fawn’s mother. She nurses the fawn like her own child so that it can live.”

His voice is losing its hard, sharp edge. It is turning to water. I can hear the sound of thunder deep within my ears.