

FROM DELHI TO BEDFORD

Pathik glanced into the dim shop where a girl was unrolling a sari for a customer.

‘Which one Uncle?’

‘The one in orange.’

Pathik peered again. His eyes settled on a girl with a pleasant face and a milky complexion. His heart skipped a beat. ‘Yes! Yes, Uncle. I will marry her.’

The young man’s mind soared above the swarming market, somersaulted above the mess of roofs, eager to fly away, escape his narrow life and begin anew with the girl in the orange sari.

They headed for the Delhi bus station. A cow barring their way, his uncle turned to him and lifted a hand.

‘You won’t tell your father that you have seen her, will you?’ Rejuvenated, the uncle’s eyes twinkled, a grin revealing two brown teeth. ‘I did just the same when I was your age.’

The old skin was so leathery, the white Rajasthani moustache and turban so frayed, that Pathik struggled to bring up the vision of a young groom.

‘I found out where your auntie lived and rode to her farm.’ The old man cackled. ‘I peeped over the wall and saw her, sitting with her sisters.’ His yellow eyes misted over. ‘That was the day I fell in love with her.’

Love, ‘*pyaar*,’ the magical word of films and songs. Pathik glanced back at the shop. Was he in love? His heart was beating rather fast, it was true, but how could it be? He had been told that it would take months –years even– until a man loved his wife, and yet...

‘Oh yes, I was smitten. After we were married, the army sent me to the Punjab. I wrote to her every day. I even sent her poems.’

Pathik tripped over a legless beggar who had wheeled himself under his feet.

‘Beggars are a disgrace,’ said the old man. ‘It is about time Mrs Gandhi got rid of them.’

That day, Mrs Gandhi’s government was the least of Pathik’s concerns.

‘Uncle, does the girl in the orange sari know of my plans?’

‘Her name is Kalyani.’

‘Kalyani.’ The sound trickled on Pathik’s tongue like honey. ‘Has Kalyani been told that I intend for us to leave India?’

‘Certainly. Women always spend the first few months of their married lives crying for their mother. What would you do in England with a wife who cries all the time? Don’t worry. She has agreed to follow you.’

‘Really?’ Pathik was puzzled.

‘But why England, Pathik? Why?’ insisted the old man as they reached the bus station. ‘When we have had such trouble getting rid of the English. Stay here in Gurgaon. Our farm is doing well. The four buffalos feed everyone and we can grow enough wheat and beans for your new family.’

Yes, why England, Pathik asked himself as he searched for the Gurgaon bus. Was it because the sixties were modern times? Because he wanted to be part of that great ‘we can do anything’ feeling sweeping the world? Was it because his very name, Pathik, meant ‘the traveller?’

They sat in silence. The Gurgaon bus was far too noisy to hold a conversation. The driver beeped his horn at every dog, pig, goat, cow and camel-cart they met along the twenty-mile track snaking out of Delhi through fields and eucalyptus forests.

Coughing dust, they walked home along a sunken path lined with dung cakes and rushes. Pathik's resolve weakened as the low evening sun spun gold over ploughed fields. The last rays bounced off the brass pots women carried on their heads. Laughing, they pushed buffalos in front of them.

Inside the walls of the farm compound, a calf slept curled up in the sand. Under a thatched shelter, servants busied themselves grinding wheat for that night's chapattis. A scent of cumin and coriander floated out of the house. Walking past the kitchen window, women's chatter greeted the two men. An auspicious date had already been chosen for the wedding. Pathik trusted his parents' choice. His elder brother Badri and his wife were happy together.

Watching his two nephews playing with the calf as he and Badri had done, Pathik knew he was expected to plough the same furrow as his ancestors. Not him. He wanted more. The world was changing for the better and he wanted to be part of it.

December arrived at last. Wedding season. Riding a richly caparisoned horse, Pathik headed a noisy procession of family and friends all the way to Kalyani's village. Preceded by a band of drummers, he reached the gates of her farm. At last, kneeling on the dais, light-headed after three days of purification in the Shiva temple, he watched Kalyani come to him step by slow step, resplendent in red and gold, under an arch of flowers held above her by her sisters. She settled next to him, lifted her veil and smiled. Her eyes sparkled. Choked with emotion, he forgot to smile back.

Dawn was just rising when Kalyani accomplished the last rite. Holding on to Pathik's coat, she took seven steps around a small fire – following him, as she would do in life - 'like the two wheels of a cart.' The priest had said.

Pathik could not wait to be with his young bride, but according to custom, it was only on the second night that alone in the nuptial chamber, Pathik drew the heavy bolt across the door, turned to his wife and asked the question which had puzzled him for so long.

'Kalyani, why did you agree to come with me to England?'

Crouching against the bedstead like a doe before the kill, Kalyani didn't answer. She bit her fists, eyes huge with fear, unable to speak.

Tentative, compassionate, Pathik sat on the bed and held her. '*Above all be patient, make sure she is ready,*' his brother had advised him. '*Don't rush her.*' Dizzy with the rustle of her silk, the softness of her arms and her perfume, Pathik felt dislocated, his body exploding into a million particles of light. He held her chastely and surrendered to Fate, his spirit merging with hers.

After a very long time, Pathik cleared his throat. 'There is something I must tell you.' He looked into Kalyani's damp eyes. 'You know that I am an accountant, but in order to get to England, I had to agree to do manual work.'

Kalyani took his hand in hers, opened it and studied the soft skin of his fingers with a mischievous grin.

Pathik added quickly, 'I do help with the harvest. I'm quite strong.'

She kissed each of his fingers in turn. 'What do you think you will have to do?'

'They build cars over there, on assembly lines.' He lowered his eyes. 'I don't know. Actually, I'm a bit scared.'

Kalyani's hand tightened over his. She hid her face in his shoulder and spoke so low that he could hardly hear her. 'Pathik, I too have to tell you something. I am so sorry. But I am not...' Her voice was strangled. 'An uncle raped me.' She confessed in a sob, 'when we... when you... there will be no blood.'

His first reaction was to push her away, tell her he felt betrayed. Instead, he held onto her, his fingers digging into her skin until his anger subsided.

'Which one? Was he here today? You wait, I'll...'

'No Pathik please, it's no use. We owe him. I've warned my sisters.' Words caught in her throat. 'There's nothing we can do.'

Swallowing his rage, he tentatively lifted a hand, stroked her hair and let her cry out all her tears, promised that he would not touch her – not tonight – that he would wait. They had a whole life ahead of them, didn't they? A good life? Just the two of them. The two wheels of a cart.

Kalyani's dowry covered the price of their plane tickets from Delhi. Neighbours, family and servants assembled in silence in the yard of the farm to watch them pile cases filled with spices and homegrown produce onto the horse-cart. Pathik's eyes were drawn to the terraced roof. How many summer nights had he spent there under the bowl-shaped moon with his gang of cousins? A long breath left his body. It was time to carve out his own destiny.

Small brown faces were watching him from the parapet. The boys would be exhorted to study and get a good job like Uncle Pathik. Failure was not an option.

At the coach station, while their luggage was being strapped to the roof of the bus, a wistful Badri hugged him, slapped him on the back, and joked, 'When you come back, I will pick you up in my car!'

Pathik nodded, his heart about to break. He summoned up a smile. A car? Gurgaon did not even have roads.

When the newlyweds reached Doncaster on Boxing Day, nothing had prepared them for the pervasive cold, the empty streets, the barren drabness and the ghostly faces which all looked the same. Orphaned, they wandered about in a daze, wondering what they had done. Then they found out that Pathik was to work in a coal pit.

While her husband toiled at the bottom of his inferno, Kalyani waited alone, too scared to go out. When Pathik came home at night, she knelt by the tub in front of the coal fire and washed the grime from his body. Exhausted, he still found the strength to kiss away the filth that had sullied her. Out of that wretchedness, their love grew, filling their soul with light, with warmth, with hope.

For six months, Pathik hurled his anger and shame at the rock, buoyed by Kalyani's smile, waiting for him at the end of the day.

Finally, their nightmare at an end, they fled Doncaster and asked for two tickets for a town where they knew they would find kindred souls, spiritual support, and spices: Bradford.

But Lord Shiva had other plans. Pathik found himself in Bedford instead, assembling pumps on the factory floor of Allen's Engineering while searching for an accountancy job worthy of his qualifications.

At long last, he was able to abandon his boiler suit, and clad in smart grey cloth, take possession of a wooden desk and a metal filing cabinet. When this should have been the end of his tribulations, he found it was another test.

'Oh, Lord Shiva,' pleaded Pathik one morning when he could take no more, watching spirals of incense lift his prayers above the home shrine. 'You gave me a good wife and I thank you for it. You gave me the strength to work in the mine and taught me humility. But Lord, you know my soul. Please tell me what to do.'

Put in charge of salaries, Pathik had soon realised that he was paid less than the dim typists in beehives and mini-skirts who clustered around the tea trolley, boasting of Baby Cham-fuelled nights of sex. It was humiliating.

That Friday, Pathik knocked on the glass door of the boss's office. Mr Arbuthnot, a mastiff of a man, received him from within a noxious cloud of smoke.

'What's the matter?' growled the old man, ash dropping on his pin-stripe suit.

Pathik hesitated. He fingered the thin payslip envelope inside his trouser pocket, fighting the urge to turn back.

'Come on, man, speak up. I haven't got all day!'

Pathik visualised himself inside a beam of light sent down by Lord Shiva and stood tall. 'Sir, I am very sorry, but I should be paid according to my responsibilities. I know that I receive less than... than...'

Arbuthnot's smirk prevented him from carrying on. 'Listen, Chandrany...' The piggy eyes fixed Pathik with contempt. 'I was good enough to give you a job where you don't have to get your hands dirty. You should be thanking me. Now, we'll talk no more of this outburst. Close the door when you go.'

'What do you mean you have resigned?' Kalyani's bangles jangled in anger. 'How are we going to pay the rent? Oh, Pathik, what have you done?'

'I am sorry. We work hard. We deserve a proper life.' Pathik placed both hands on her shoulders. '*Pyari*, it is time we found you a job too.'

'But how...'

Pathik hesitated. He felt disloyal at the decision he had come to. Kalyani was so beautiful in her blue sari. He took her in his arms, drew her to him and ran his hand over her breasts in a sudden rush of guilt and desire.

'Pathik!' said Kalyani. 'What are you doing?'

'Come here. Let me show you how much I love you.'

Two hours later, Kalyani followed her husband to the High Street and into the tall art deco building of EP Roses. With a bout of sudden confidence, Pathik led his wife to the top floor where he ordered a pot of tea for two. Half a crown for tea and a portion of cake was extortionate, but it was what English people did. It was time to fit in.

'You'll never get a job if you don't look like them,' said Pathik, pushing the cake towards her. Kalyani nodded meekly.

Moments later, they stepped down the grand staircase, glancing down the rows of drab suits, drab skirts, and drab jackets. After an awkward search, they settled on a couple

of navy blue dresses, which Kalyani tried on while Pathik gathered up armfuls of her discarded sari, shutting his heart to the glorious scents of sex, perfume and incense emanating from its folds.

‘What do you think?’ Kalyani stepped out of the booth, self-consciously pulling at her knee-length dress, her face flushed with shame. She had never before exposed her legs.

Unable to look his wife in the eye, Pathik crammed the last of the sari into a bag and turned to the sales assistant.

‘She’ll keep the dress on. I will pay for everything now.’

‘Oh, Pathik! Please, give me time...’

Pathik remained immune to his wife’s pleas. He grumbled at her with a callous determination he did not feel, ‘That’s what you are wearing now, my dear. We are here to stay.’

‘Phew, it’s warm. To think it was snowing when we left Bedford.’ Pathik spotted their luggage on the carousel at Delhi airport and winced as he hoisted the cases onto the trolley. Filled with presents, they were heavy, but he had been away for decades. He had to make an impression.

‘Badri says he’s too old to drive, so Raj will pick us up. I hope we recognise him.’

Fanning herself with her boarding pass, Kalyani ran a hand over her damp grey hair.

‘Of course we will. You skyped him only last week.’

‘Uncle! Over here!’ A young man dressed in white waved from the barrier. He bowed and touched his uncle’s feet and greeted his auntie the same way before leading them to a SUV parked on the pavement. He put the luggage in the boot. ‘I’m glad I took the Safari. I’d never have fitted all those bags in the BMW.’

Once they hit the freeway, Pathik glanced at his nephew and saw himself at that age, ambitious, cocky, and ready to take on the world. ‘Two cars hey? You’ve done well.’

‘Ah, Uncle, it’s been hard work. Everyone wants to be a mover and shaker in India.’ Raj yanked the wheel to avoid a rickshaw. ‘Life’s easier in England.’

Pathik’s jaw dropped at the cheek of it. He swallowed hard. Did his nephew really think he’d had it easy? Then again, he only had himself to blame. His letters home had always bordered on the boastful. He shot a wide-eyed glare back at Kalyani. She patted his shoulder with a benevolent smile.

‘Shame the girls aren’t coming.’ Raj said.

‘Plenty of time when they’ve finished university.’ Pathik took deep breaths of thick acrid air. The traffic was dreadful. Clutching the dashboard, he looked for familiar landmarks, but Gurgaon had become a suburb of Delhi.

‘Is there anything left of the farm?’

Everything had gone. Eucalyptus forests had given way to roads, and farms to high-rise flats; but for a few brown pigs rooting around parked cars, they could have been in Manhattan.

Raj wagged his head. ‘We sold to a developer. He built five apartment blocks on our land and gave us the biggest top flat.’ He grinned. ‘Plenty of room for you and Auntie.’

Bereft, Pathik was overcome with yearning for fields of wheat, lazy buffalos and women returning from the well, pots of gold balanced on their head.

Yes, this was the progress he'd wished for. This was what the future looked like. Aching for remnants of his past, his heart did a flip. Preserved inside the tentacles of a banyan tree, the old Shiva temple was still there. *'What you give, you receive. It is the law of karma.'* The old priest had said. Pathik had tried to be a good man. He'd worked hard and so had Kalyani in her post office, but financial success was a double-edged sword. He would boast to Badri of course, and Badri would boast back, but tomorrow, he would go and give thanks to Lord Shiva for the best thing of all, for the love that had grown over the years, the love that had kept the sparkle alive in Kalyani's eyes and her smile warm.