Stench of Kerosene

Here is a story about a girl who is actually happily married, but, much to her mother-in-law’s disappointment, she has no children. This fact soon turns out to be fatal to her. Read the story carefully. While you read, with one of your classmates help each other figure out what the story is about.

Stench of Kerosene

By Amrita Pritam

Outside, a mare neighed. Guleri recognised the neighing and ran out of the house. The mare was from her parent’s village. She put her head against its neck as if it were the door to her father’s house.

Guleri’s parents lived in Chamba. A few miles from her husband’s village which was on high ground, the road curved and descended steeply downhill. From this point one could see Chamba lying a long way away at one’s feet. Whenever Guleri was homesick she would take her husband, Manak, and go up to this point. She would see the homes of Chamba twinkling in the sunlight and would come back, her heart glowing with pride.

Visit to Champa

Once every year, after the harvest had been gathered in, Guleri was allowed to spend a few days with her parents. They sent a man to Lakarmandi to bring her back to Chamba. Two of her friends, who were also married to boys who lived away from Chamba, came home at the same time and the girls looked forward to their annual reunion, talking about their joys and sorrow. They went about the streets together. Then there was the harvest festival when the girls would have new clothes made for the occasion. Their dupattas would be dyed, starched and sprinkled with mica to make them glisten. They would buy glass bangles and silver ear-rings.

Guleri always counted the days to the harvest. When autumn breezes cleared the skies of monsoon clouds, she thought of little else. She went about her daily chores – fed the cattle, cooked food for her parents-in-law – and then sat back to work out how long it would be before someone came to fetch her from her parents’ village.

Manaks plead

And now, once again, it was time for her annual visit. She caressed the mare joyfully, greeted her father’s servant, Natu, and made preparations to leave the next day. She did not have to express her excitement in words; the look on her face was enough. Her husband pulled at his hookah and closed his eyes. It seemed as if he either did not like the tobacco or that he could not bear to face his wife.

“You’ll come to the fair at Chamba, won’t you? Come even for a day”, she pleaded.

Manak put aside his chillum but did not reply. “Why don’t you answer me” she asked, at little cross. “Shall I tell you something?”
“I know what you’re going to say – that you only go to your parents once a year. Well you’ve never been stopped before.”

“Then why do you want to stop me this time?” she demanded.

“Just this once,” he pleaded.

“Your mother’s said nothing so why do you stand in the way?” Guleri was childishly stubborn.

“My mother....” Manak did not finish his sentence.

On the long-awaited morning, Guleri was ready before dawn. She had no children and therefore no problem of having to leave them behind or take them with her. Natu saddled the mare as she took leave of Manak’s parents. They patted her head and blessed her.

“I’ll come with you for part of the way,” Manak said.

Guleri was happy as they set out. She hid Manak’s flute under her dupatta.

Saying goodbye

After the village of Khajiar, the road descended steeply to Chamba. There she took out the flute and gave it to him. She took his hand in hers and said, “Come now, play your flute.” But Manak, lost in his thoughts, paid no heed. “Why don’t you play your flute?” she asked, coaxing him. He looked at her sadly. Then putting the flute to his lips, blew a strange anguished wail.

“Guleri, don’t go away,” he begged her. “I ask again, don’t go away this time.” He handed the flute to her, unable to continue.

“But why?” she asked. “Come over on the day of the fair and we’ll return together, I promise you.”

Manak did not ask again.

They stopped by the roadside. Natu took the mare a few paces ahead to leave the couple alone. It crossed Manak’s mind that it was at this time of the year, seven years ago, that he and his friends had come on this very road to go to the harvest festival in Chamba.

And it was at this fair that Manak had first seen Guleri and they had bartered their hearts to each other. Later, managing to meet her alone, he remembered taking her hand and telling her, “You are like unripe corn – full of milk.”

“Cattle go for unripe corn,” Guleri had replied, freeing her hand with a jerk. “Human beings prefer it roasted. If you want me, go and ask my father for my hand.”

Among Manak’s kinsmen it was customary to settle the bride price before the wedding. Manak was
nervous because he did not know the price Guleri’s father would demand from him. But Guleri’s father was prosperous and had lived in cities. He had sworn that he would not take money for his daughter but would give her to a worthy young man from a good family. Manak, he decided, answered these requirements and soon after, Guleri and Manak were married. Deep in memories, Manak was roused by Guleri’s hand on his shoulder.

“What are you dreaming of?” she teased him.

He did not answer. The mare neighed impatiently and Guleri got up to leave. “Do you know the bluebell wood a couple of miles from here?” she asked. “It’s said that anyone who goes through it becomes deaf. You must have passed through that bluebell wood. You don’t seem to be hearing anything I say.”

“You’re right, Guleri. I can’t hear anything you’re saying to me,” and Manak sighed.

They looked at each other. Neither understood the other’s thoughts. “I’ll go now,” Guleri said gently.

“You’d better go back. You’ve come a long way from home.”

“You’ve walked all the distance. You’d better get on the mare,” replied Manak.

“Here, take your flute.”

“You take it.”

“Will you come and play it on the day of the fair?” she asked with a smile. The sun shone in her eyes. Manak turned his face away. Perplexed, Guleri shrugged her shoulders and took the road to Chamba. Manak returned home.

The second wife

He entered the house and slumped listlessly on the charpoy. “You’ve been away a long time, exclaimed his mother. “Did you go all the way to Chamba?”

“Not all the way, only to the top of the hill.” Manak’s voice was heavy.

“Why do you croak like an old woman?” said his mother severely. “Be a man.”

Manak wanted to retort, “You are a woman; why don’t you cry like one for a change!” But he remained silent.

Manak and Guleri had been married seven years but she had never born a child and Manak’s mother had made a secret resolve that she would not let it go beyond the eighth year. This year, true to her decision, she had paid five hundred rupees to get him a second wife and she was waiting, as Manak knew, for Guleri to go to her parents before bringing in the new bride. Obedient to his mother and to custom, Manak’s body responded to the new woman but his heart was dead within him.
In the early hours one morning he was smoking his chillum when an old friend happened to pass by. "Ho, Bhavani, where are you going so early in the morning?"

Bhavani stopped. He had a small bundle on his shoulder. "Nowhere in particular", he said evasively.

"You should be on your way to some place or the other," exclaimed Manak. "What about a smoke?"

Bhavani sat down on his haunches and took the chillum from Manak’s hands. "I’m going to Chamba for the fair", he said at last.

Bhavani’s words pierced through Manak’s heart like a needle.

"Is the fair today?"

"It’s the same day, every year," replied Bhavani drily. "Don’t you remember, we were in the same party seven years ago?" Bhavani did not say any more but Manak was conscious of the other man’s rebuke and he felt uneasy. Bhavani put down the chillum and picked up his bundle. His flute was sticking out of the bundle. Manak’s eye remained on the flute till Bhavani disappeared from view.

Next morning, Manak was in his fields when he saw Bhavani coming back but he looked the other way deliberately. He did not want to talk to Bhavani to hear anything about the fair. But Bhavani came round the other side and sat down in front of Manak. His face was sad and grey as a cinder.

"Guleri is dead," Bhavani said in a flat voice.

"What?"

“When she heard of your second marriage, she soaked her clothes in kerosene and set fire to them.”

Manak, mute with pain, could only stare and feel his own life burning out.

The days went by. Manak resumed his work in the fields and ate his meals when they were given to him.

But he was like a dead man, his face blank, his eyes empty.

“I am not his wife," complained his second wife. “I’m just someone he happened to marry.”

But quite soon she was pregnant and Manak’s mother was pleased with her daughter-in-law. She told Manak about his wife’s condition, but he looked as if he did not understand and his eyes were still empty.

His mother encouraged her daughter-in-law to bear with her husband’s mood for a few days. As soon as the child was born and placed in his father’s lap, she said, Manak would change.
A son was duly born to Manak's wife; and his mother rejoicing, bathed the boy, dressed him in fine clothes and put him in Manak's lap. Manak stared at the newborn babe in his lap. He stared a long time, uncomprehending, his face as usual expressionless. Then suddenly the blank eyes filled with horror and Manak began to scream. “Take him away!” he shrieked hysterically, “Take him away! He stinks of kerosene.”

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