



STORIES OF THE SOIL

CLASSIC • PUNJABI • STORIES

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The Sinful

Kasurwaar

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I almost tripped over the broken bits of bricks while entering the courtyard. Had I fallen my freshly washed hair would have been full of muck. My heart is beating faster now. My legs are swollen from walking back from Rajjo's home. It is strange because I used to be able to walk for miles with a big bundle of grass on my head and nothing would happen to my legs. The image of Rajjo's thick blood is frozen in my mind. What a sight it was! I even saw her head being chopped off. Not just I, the entire village saw it. Rajjo lay chopped in pieces on the floor—my lord! I could only look at her for a few seconds. 'Forgive us my Lord! Forgive our sins!' The words uttered by the crowd still echo in my ears. When I walked out of my friend's house, the words of the village boys pierced me: 'It's just as well this is the end of the story. She was a sinful woman . . . living in the village had become difficult.'

Another neighbour, one whom Rajjo used to talk about, said, 'But Darshi took a long time to do it. He should have had the courage ten years ago. Even so it is never too late.'

I trembled as though he was aiming those words at me. I was the one who drove Rajjo to her death. In the early days when she used to come to Dittu's home to fetch fodder, she used to talk to me. Although Rajjo's husband was a peon in the bank his income was not enough to take care of the family. Later, I got her to work for Dittu and the village started talking about her too. She never thought much of Darshi.

I take two more steps and fall on the broken bricks. These

bits of Lahori bricks once formed the Muslim haveli before Dittu demolished it to build a two-storeyed house. How I had carried these bricks on my head! My head had ached for days. When I had asked my son Nazar to help me carry the bricks, he had screamed at me while bathing under the tap, 'You carry the bricks to build your palace. I am not your servant.'

He had finished bathing, got ready and gone off to see the wrestlers at the fair in a neighbouring village. I had cursed him and carried on with the task of bringing the broken bricks home in a basket placed on my head.

Dittu, who owns a dairy, belongs to our caste. Once he started selling buffalo milk and earning good money, his paunch grew and now he is fat like a trader. Anyway, may Dittu live long! I got these broken bricks because of him and now our courtyard does not get slushy when it rains.

My daughter-in-law does not say anything and carries on washing clothes in the bathroom. She is beating the clothes with a stick but the blows seem to fall on my head. The bitch Romi is chained to a pole and seeing me, she barks. I get up and go to Romi. She licks my feet and I caress her soft coat of hair with my rough hands. I don't like it when Nazar orders his wife to keep Romi chained while he's at work. Lovingly, I set her free. Romi jumps and runs out. I feel somewhat relieved. My daughter-in-law comes out to hang the sheets on the clothesline and says angrily, 'So you have let the wretch go roam with the stray dogs. The last time your son found her with such difficulty which is why he kept her chained. The other day all the dogs followed her here. The villagers are very embarrassed and have told us to keep her chained because it is difficult for the girls to come out with the bitch mating all over the place.'

She goes back to the bathroom and starts beating the clothes again. I cannot match her sharp tongue. Scared, I look through my glasses at the bathroom and brood. I don't feel like eating either. It is cold even during the daytime. As I make my way to

the small room, my feet hit the dog's chain and it clangs making strange music. I bring my hukkah, fill it with tobacco and place a live coal on it. I come inside, sit on my cot, wrap a thick sheet around myself and start smoking. My stomach seems to be bloated with gas. I exhale some smoke and look at the framed photograph on the wall across. It is a picture of me in my youth and Nazar's father Lachhu stands by my side. The thought of Lachhu brings my bile to my mouth. He looks all right in the photo but soon after our wedding he started drinking every day and he became thin like a stick. I recall his emaciated body. He is not Nazar's father although the world thinks of them as father and son. Only Lachhu and I know the truth. I have never told anyone else. How could I reveal the fact that Nazar and Rani are that paunchy dairy man Dittu's children? Lachhu rarely worked and when he did, he just drank whatever he earned. His parents got fed up of his behaviour and asked us to leave their home. I was ill-fated and I had to labour to make a living. I was not a new bride anyway. We had been married for five years but I didn't have a child. I would attend to the buffaloes along with Dittu's wife. He had hired a couple of boys too. Dittu's wife's joints soon started aching and she became bedridden. Dittu hired another boy. I would collect the buffaloes' dung, clean their urine, bathe and milk them. The boy would assist me. I would make dung cakes for my home and bring fodder for my buffalo and manage somehow. Later, I only bathed and milked the buffaloes.

Paunchy Dittu's wife could be heard groaning from her bed every day. His children were usually away at school and college and he would come after me, wagging his tail. He started with helping me with my chores. Sometimes Lachhu would forbid me from going to the dairy. 'Listen to me, Amro. I won't have you going to that fat dairy man. He is a son of a bitch. You are not to go there.' I would say nothing and a day or two later Dittu would come to our home, asking about us. He would leave some money if we were hard up. Lachhu was always all smiles

in front of him but later he would torment me. He would try to hit me.

I would go to the dairy whenever required. If the buffaloes were to be milked, Dittu would send word through one of his boys. Then, very naturally, we started drinking milk from the same glass and eating from the same plate. Dittu seemed like an angel to me. Everyone in my home was getting enough to eat. While working in the dairy, I conceived Nazar, then my daughter Rani, then another daughter and then one more. There was enough milk for all the children but Lachhu was sick all the time. When I would bring milk or fodder home, Lachhu would scream until he was breathless.

A sparrow perches on the frame of the photograph and the spell of my thoughts is broken. I try to scare away the sparrow with my hand and wisps of straw fall into my hukkah but there are no sparks. The coal is long dead and I pull at the hukkah's pipe in vain.

My daughter-in-law is still wielding her stick in the bathroom. My clothes are dirty too and I should give them to her for washing. I put the hukkah away and try to get up from the cot but I hear a crack in my knee and a wave of pain runs through my spine and the rest of my body. As I take the clothes from the hook by the window my gaze strays outside. Romi is jumping and playing with the dog from the big house. The other dogs are at a distance. I feel good seeing Romi happy and free. Then the dog climbs on Romi's waist and starts fidgeting. I don't think much of it because the buffaloes at Dittu's dairy were serviced this way. The college-going girl from the big house is hiding on her terrace, watching the dogs mate. The dogs remind me of Baba Kanshi.

We were miserable when my daughter Rani started getting seizures in the prime of her youth. People asked me to take her to Baba Kanshi who was in a nearby village. Kanshi beat her with a broom. Then he asked us all to go out into the courtyard

and he was alone with Rani in the room. The very first day I saw Baba Kanshi doing to Rani what the dog was doing to Romi in the field. I marched inside and Baba Kanshi let out a self-conscious laugh. I felt like hammering his head but did not do so. Then Baba Kanshi started visiting our home. Rani's seizures stopped and I was very grateful to the Baba. I wanted him to cure my husband too but that did not happen.

When the dogs twist their backs downwards, I turn away from the window. I am scared that if my daughter-in-law spots the dogs in the act she will scream at me again. Picking up the clothes, I am reminded of the day when Dittu and I were mating in the fields and our clothes lay discarded by the side. A few boys from our community picked them up. I was very afraid of the reaction in the village. Dittu went home and brought his wife's clothes for me. I went home late that evening and could not look Lachhu and my son in the eye.

I give my clothes to my daughter-in-law to wash and drag a cot into the sun. I feel like smoking the hukkah. I light it and start pulling at the pipe. What else is there to do? I am reminded of the cigarettes I used to smoke with Baba Kanshi. I had stopped going to Dittu's dairy and was one day returning from afar with grass for the buffalo. The theft of our clothes had caused quite a stir in the village so I kept away from the other women. Seeing me near the cremation ground with a bundle of grass on my head, Baba Kanshi got off his bicycle. We sat in the shade of a tahli. He lit an expensive cigarette from a packet in his pocket and handed it to me. I took a few puffs and gave the cigarette back to him. He also had guavas with him and we ate them. Just then I saw an old woman from our community with a bundle of grass on her head passing by the sugarcane field on the right. I returned home by the track that ran around the outskirts of the village just as thieves return home. She had already delivered the news at my home. My son Nazar was so upset that he hit me. When his wife tried intervening he hit her as well. 'You have

made it difficult for us to live in this village. Why don't you die?' he yelled. Lachhu too showed me his fist. I felt like killing myself. This was no life, really.

After this incident Lachhu was a broken man. He never got up from his cot. Whenever he coughed, his face turned an unhealthy red and his breathing became heavy. He had coughing fits several times a day. Nazar spent the money he got from the factory on himself. I had borrowed money to get Nazar married and within a year I was a grandmother. The girls now brought home the vegetables and fodder.

Romi comes in and I turn to look at her. My daughter-in-law is angry and hits the poor creature. Romi whines and crawls under my cot. I cannot stop myself. 'Why must you hit this dumb creature?'

She answers in anger, 'You are very kind-hearted! What did you gain by setting her free? Don't you realize that your son will kill her?'

So my daughter-in-law knows of the dog's indiscretions. The sun has moved past the courtyard to the tahli trees at the back. I chain Romi to the post. It is cold and I drag the cot inside. The girls also return from their work at the potato cold storage factory. Rani puts a little bundle inside. Perhaps she has brought home some potatoes. My daughter-in-law does not ask me to start the fire in the mud stove. She does it herself and makes the rotis.

I was not too broken up when Lachhu died. In fact, at that time I had felt relieved. I realize that the tobacco box is empty and I send my younger daughter to get some. Nazar's little son comes crawling to me. Although I'm a little afraid I pick him up and my thoughts turn to my childhood.

My childhood was ordinary, simple, like it is for most girls. When I was small, my mother thrashed me. I would refuse to go to school but she would drag me there. I barely managed to scrape through every year. I was in class six or seven when my

father was paralysed. There was no source of income and my mother sent me to work with the other women from our mohalla. I was young so I only got a meagre wage. Then my mother began sending me to wash clothes and clean in the home of the England-returned family. The people of the house were kind. They gave me food and old clothes. But I was helpless before their college-going son—I still tremble when I think of the first time. He used to give me food and money on the quiet. Later, I started liking it. It was then I got married to Lachhu. Perhaps the old hunchbacked grandmother of the house said something to my mother because I was asked to stop working there. It was the same quagmire of poverty in my husband's home.

I hold my grandson close to my chest. Holding him thus, I feel as if my childhood has returned. The child starts weeping. Perhaps I hugged him too tight. I soothe him and Rani comes with my food. 'Amma, eat something first.'

I look at her with a start. I feel very sorry seeing her wilted face and I traverse the distance from childhood to old age. I don't feel like eating anything. The vegetable gravy is red and looks like blood to me. How could the blood from Rajjo's floor be this bowl? I recall Rajjo's chopped neck and the clots of blood. I cannot swallow a morsel. I hear the sound of a cycle. Perhaps Nazar has come home. I am scared to think of what may become of Romi. I feel sorry for her. Perhaps my daughter-in-law has told him everything which is why he is shouting so angrily. 'It would have been best if this woman's head was chopped off in time just like Rajjo's.'

It is my son who says this. Yes, he is right. I led Rajjo to her sad fate. I taught her how to milk Dittu's buffaloes and on her own she learnt how to wash herself and return home with a can full of fresh milk. I stopped going to the dairy but Rajjo did not. I too should have been killed like her. Lachhu should have killed me before he died. Nazar should have chopped off my head. The village people would have saved him just as they will save

Rajjo's husband Darshi. But no one bothered to kill me.

I put my food away. How can I eat my roti with blood? There is blood on my hand and just as I go to wipe it, Nazar springs on me. 'Old woman, what have you done? Why did you unchain Romi? Will you let me live in this village or not? Tell me!' he rages. I say nothing because he is clearly very angry. Perhaps he has gambled his wages away. Panting, he goes out. As I get up to follow him I hear my daughters cry out, 'Bhaiji, why have you done this?' I run out in a panic and scream, 'You sinner, what have you done? Why have you killed this poor creature? May you suffer!' I say this and start weeping. Romi's body is still after the painful convulsions subside. The girls too start sobbing. The neighbours gather to see what is happening. I feel as if they are saying Nazar has done well. I lose consciousness. The girls drag me inside and lay me on my cot.

After some time I regain consciousness. Seeing blood on my clothes, I recall Romi's throbbing body. Strange mad thoughts come to me but I am not mad. Nazar is mad. I have been murdered twice in a single day but I am still alive. Why am I alive? Why don't I die? The whole family is asleep. I try to lie down but thorns prick my back. I go out and light my hukkah. Smoking helps for a while. The gurgling sound of my hukkah annoys the girls for they cannot sleep properly. Like many others, I cannot quit this bad habit. It was my mother who got me started. She would ask me to fill her hukkah and then refresh it. So I would take ten or twelve puffs before giving the hukkah to my mother. The cloth around the water pot of the hukkah is torn but Nazar will not fix it. My son threw the chillum once so even that is broken. My hukkah is as wretched as I am.

I think of poor Romi once more. When thieves had started scaring the villagers, Nazar had taken money from the factory manager and bought her from someone. Romi was a clever bitch. She would never allow a stranger into the home. Whenever I would call her, she would come to me and start licking my feet.

She would coo like a dove and I would stroke her dusty coat. Did she deserve to be killed for roaming around with the dog from the big house? Nazar has no idea how to deal with animals. It is not okay to keep them chained and give them a few morsels to eat. I find myself laughing at my thoughts. As though I know how to deal with animals!

I feel as if some other woman is speaking from within me, a woman I had left behind in the village where I was born. It could be my mother or Kisso or Lammo Panchani from the barber's family crawling in my veins, telling me, 'Just look at you, Amro! Why did you do what you did? It was for your family. The shameless villagers can only croak like frogs. Have they the courage to look me in the eye?' The last sentence was uttered by Lammo Panchani.

If I had not gone to the paunchy Dittu's dairy in those days, what then would have become of my family? It was I who built these rooms. Where would my family have lived? I arranged for the money for my son's marriage. I don't know if it was my belly, money or a sickness of the soul that made me commit those sinful acts. I can feel the pain now. I wish I would die—chopped up like Romi or Rajjo. Just then a rat jumps on the pan and tilts it. An awful stink reaches my nostrils. I look down and see that it is my urine pan that the rat has upset. It had been lying here since last night. I use the pan at night to avoid the cold. I forgot to empty it this morning. How could I remember anything? The morning had begun with the news of Rajjo's death. The stink is so bad that I leave my hukkah and get up. I open the door and look back. It is not urine on the floor but blood and the pan looks like Rajjo's chopped head. I panic. It is my head. How peaceful I feel seeing my severed head lying there.

The girls toss in their cots, troubled by the stink. The older one mutters something I can't make out. I feel cold. I close the door and crawl back under my quilt. I try to smoke to keep warm but the fire is gone. I switch on the light to go to the

kitchen to light the fire. I come back in and Nazar follows me. I start and look at it.

'Old woman, what is this stink? What have you spilt here?'

'What, son? This is my blood but now it stinks. You too are my blood.' I don't know what I am saying. My head is swimming.

'You mad woman!' Nazar curses and retreats but he calls out from the doorway: 'Go to sleep, old woman and let the girls sleep too.'

I think Nazar is mad. My eyes see Rajjo's bloody body. The warm blood oozing from Romi's body doesn't let me sleep.