

## Prologue

Angry.

Turbulent.

Vicious.

Violent.

The river that normally ran shallow and placid had overnight swollen in the July rain to a flood.

The small bus carrying sixteen people including mine and our neighbour's family, both fleeing from Sialkot in Pakistan, came to a halt at the riverbank. The driver turned and asked my father, "Ab kya karna hai Bauji?"<sup>1</sup>

"Paar toh jaana hi hai, Makhan Singh..."<sup>2</sup>

"Toh Bauji, bacchon ko bus mein baitha rehne doh, aur aap sab badhey log uttar kar paidal chalo nahin toh paar jaana namumkin hai."<sup>3</sup>

Drenched to the bone, families formed a human chain to

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<sup>1</sup> What should we do now, Sir?

<sup>2</sup> We have to cross the river somehow, Makhan Singh.

<sup>3</sup> Then Sir, let the children remain in the bus but the elders must get off and cross on foot. Otherwise, we won't be able to make the crossing.

cross over to the opposite bank. Men unrolled their *saafaa*<sup>4</sup> and women removed their *dupattas*<sup>5</sup> to bind each other around the waists so no one would get swept away in the gushing, swirling waters. It was a precarious crossing. Several men had children hoisted on their backs or across their shoulders. Wailing babes-in-arms clutched tightly to their mothers' breasts.

My eldest sister, Raj, who was around six-years-old then, recalls that when the bus reached midway in the river, it suddenly stalled and began to float. Terrified, the driver shouted to the people to put their shoulders to it and push with all their might. Panic-stricken by the screams of the children trapped in the bus, they pushed with all their strength and as luck would have it, the bus coughed to a start. Makhan Singh pumped the clutch pedal and slammed the accelerator.

The rhythmic chant of “*Chalte raho! Badhte raho!*”<sup>6</sup> kept the human chain ploughing doggedly through the waist-high waters. Relentlessly, rain poured down on their heads. In the mêlée some panic-stricken mothers, in a desperate bid to save their own lives, plucked the burden of newborn babies from their chests and flung them into the raging flood waters. Others hardened their hearts and deliberately let go of the hands of older relatives to be engulfed by the strong current, so they could cross over to safety.

It wasn't just a country that had been sundered. Families had been riven apart in the aftermath of the partition of India.

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<sup>4</sup> Turbans.

<sup>5</sup> A kind of stole worn by women, draped across the shoulders.

<sup>6</sup> Keep moving! Keep going forward!

## Chapter 1

### Fruit of the Womb

I was born of a mango.

And that's not as absurd as it sounds. For this was no ordinary mango.

The thing is that my mother had already given birth to two daughters before and now that she was with child again for the third time, my grandmother, who was not going to put up with the wails of a third girl child, had decided to take the matter into her own firm hands. Her friends had told her about a sadhu who had just returned from the Himalayas to his ashram on the outskirts of our town and who was renowned for granting the boon of a male child to a pregnant woman. So, the next morning she instructed my mother to put on her red brocade sari and gold jewellery and, without informing the men folk, called for the family's tonga<sup>1</sup>, and both the women rode off to visit the sadhu baba.

Reaching there, my grandmother immediately bossed her way in, ahead of the other women who had come on similar missions, and prostrated before the baba declaring she would not get up until he blessed her daughter-in-law with a male

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<sup>1</sup> A two-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage.

child. Under no condition did she want another girl born in her house this time! Imperious, even in her request that came across as a demand, she got up, adjusted the *pallu*<sup>2</sup> over her head, and pushed my mother forward saying, ‘Give her something, babaji, so the child in her womb will definitely be a male child!’

Now, as my mother later told me, the sadhu baba put his hand behind his back and pulled out a ripe, golden mango from a basket. He muttered something and blew on the mango... “*Phhoo-ooo!*” He then asked her to hold out her pallu, like one would while begging for alms, and dropping the mango into it said, “*Ja suputri, iss baar tere yahan ladka hi paida hogा...*”<sup>3</sup> Having got the desired blessing, both the women then walked out and down the path from the ashram. As my mother was passing by the tamarind trees that grew along the path, a bunch of sour-sweet tamarinds fell at her feet. She quickly bent to scoop them up, without my grandmother noticing her, and hid them in the folds of her pallu. Reaching home, she washed and dried them and enjoyed sucking the brown flesh off the seeds in the privacy of her bedroom.

On the ride back home in the tonga, my grandmother saw to it that my mother squeezed the juice and pulp out of the ripe mango and sucked it right down to the *guthli*<sup>4</sup> which she told her to wrap in her handkerchief and plant it in the garden when they got home. “...and, see that you water it and pray before it every day, first thing after taking your bath,” her tone, which was unusually tart, was surprisingly tender and full of concern at that moment. My mother, who usually never had a good word to say about her mother-in-law, later confessed that she felt a surge of respect for the older woman then.

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<sup>2</sup> The loose end of the sari.

<sup>3</sup> Go daughter, this time you will give birth to a son.

<sup>4</sup> Seed.

That is how, seven or eight months later, I came into the world – via a mango.

Around 1.30 am (the clocks had been advanced by an hour during wartime), the midwife rushed out of my mother's room to excitedly announce, “*Mataji, mataji beta hua hai!*”<sup>5</sup> I believe that is one of the rare occasions that my grandmother's face lit up as an electric bulb. She hugged her son who was pacing the corridor outside the room and blessed him, “At last, someone to carry forward the family name... now let me go in and check if all his limbs are intact... and you, wake up the servant. Tell them to turn on all the lights in the house... and call for the tonga, now!”

“*Mitto*,” she instructed her thirteen-year-old daughter, “Go and light the diya in the puja room and ring the bell to let Krishnaji<sup>6</sup> know, that a son is born to my son!”

“*Bebe*<sup>7</sup>,” reasoned my father, “Why do you want a tonga now... where do you want to go at this hour of the night?”

“Ufffff-ho, Parkaa-aash<sup>8</sup>,” she turned to him, “I'm not going anywhere but I've been waiting for four years now for this event, so I can proudly tell my brothers in the village that a grandson is born in our house. Go, tell Rashid to ride out now to Ugoki<sup>9</sup> and break the good news! I cannot wait till the morning! And then go in and see the face of your son!”

And that's how the news travelled from Ghent to Aix, or in this case, from Sialkot to Ugoki<sup>10</sup> some fifty-odd miles away from each other.

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<sup>5</sup> Mataji, Mataji... a son is born.

<sup>6</sup> A reference to Lord Krishna.

<sup>7</sup> A term of endearment used for a mother or grandmother in Punjabi.

<sup>8</sup> That happens to be my father's first name.

<sup>9</sup> The name of our ancestral village.

<sup>10</sup> Two hamlets in the north-east of the Punjab province of Pakistan.

My mother recalls that when she heard she had delivered a boy, she fainted out of sheer mental exhaustion and relief and slept for a good fourteen hours, something that the barbs and taunts of her mother-in-law had deprived her of, over the years. Constantly living under the fear of a possible second marriage of her husband, if she did not produce a male child, she had tremulously borne her third pregnancy. “Thank God, that mango did the trick,” she would declare with a deep sigh of relief whenever she got into a reminiscent mood.

Naturally, she continued to relish mangoes for the rest of her life. Mangoes in pickle, mango pulp in milkshake, mango slices in curd, mango lassi, mango aam-papad, mango chutney, mango *barfi*<sup>11</sup>, mango ice cream... you could think of any number of creative ways to consume mangoes, yet she could surprise you with a new preparation. During the mango season, she would polish off three or four mangoes at a time – even when they started costing Rs.500 a dozen!

Of course, since these were not bewitched but ordinary mangoes, there was no fear of causing any unwanted pregnancy!

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<sup>11</sup> A popular Indian sweetmeat.