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Pali

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*Pali*

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Life goes on and on. Its ends never meet. Neither in the mundane world of realities, nor in fiction. We drag on drearily in the hope that someday these ends may meet. And sometimes we have the illusion that the ends have really joined.

Manohar Lal and his wife had also once lived under a similar illusion. They believed that a great calamity had at last passed over their heads. That the knots that had formed in their lives had been untied. But knots of life never get fully resolved even in stories, much less in one's life. No sooner is one knot untied than another knot forms in its place. The story thus never comes to an end.

One end of Manohar Lal and his family's life was left behind in a small town distantly situated across the border of Pakistan, a country newly carved out at the time of the Partition. With their meagre belongings, the little that they could carry, Manohar Lal and his family had joined the caravan of the countless uprooted people heading for India. The dust raised by their feet hung like a haze in the atmosphere. Like a big river forming into many channels on its onward sweep towards the sea, this vast concourse of unfortunate humanity also proceeded towards the boundary line demarcating the two countries.

Manohar Lal, his wife, and their two children—a little girl in her mother's arms, and Pali, a boy of four, holding his father's finger—trudged along, carrying their bundles on their heads, their weary eyes searching their way through the haze, their ears pricked for any stray remark that might guide them onto the correct path. They were anxious to know the lay of the land and, more than that, what was in store for them.

On the last day, the refugee camp had started emptying out. Carrying their belongings on their heads, the refugees left the camp and proceeded towards the convoy of lorries, ranged one after the other along the road, which would carry them to the border. Holding his son's finger and carrying a heavy bundle on his head, Manohar Lal walked towards the lorries, his wife, Kaushalya, following close on his heels, her baby daughter nestled in her arms. Like her husband, she carried a big bundle on her head. The refugees were frantically throwing their things into the lorries and storm-

ing their way into the vehicles, some of them wriggling in through the windows. Manohar Lal was struggling to push his way towards the entrance when he suddenly realized that his son, Pali, was not holding his finger. Kaushalya had already managed to enter the lorry. Manohar Lal felt no alarm, thinking that the child must be around somewhere. The sensation of the child's grip still lingered on his hand. Everybody was madly pushing from behind. There was a babble of sounds, and the crowd got more frantic with the passing of every moment. The camp managers shouted at the top of their voices, urging the passengers to hurry up and get into the lorries. They had to cross the border before nightfall.

When Manohar Lal failed to find Pali, he became very anxious. He rushed back crying, "Pali! Pali!" but failed to get any response. Becoming alarmed, he raised his voice. His son's name rang in the air above the pervading din. Then he started running frantically alongside the lorries, which had started leaving one by one. The lorry in which his wife was standing with their suckling child was jam-packed, and its horn was blowing insistently, warning the people that it was ready to start. Manohar Lal's throat had gone dry shouting "Pali! Pali!" His legs shook and his head reeled. Such was the irony of the situation for this homeless man: he was shouting for his son on a road crowded with people, and yet he appeared to be shouting in a desert.

He was still searching for Pali when the lorry started moving. His wife's anxious eyes were fixed on her husband in the crowd, and to her horror, he suddenly disappeared from her view. Alarmed, she started wailing. Locks of her hair tumbled over her face, blinding her for a moment, and her child nearly slipped from her arms. She breathed heavily, her chest working like bellows.

"Stop! Stop! Hai, stop the lorry!"

But nobody listened to her. All of them had their own worries to contend with. They were all shouting and crying. Hers was not the only family being driven from its home. There were many of those who had only half of their luggage on the lorry; the other half lay scattered on the road. An old woman, apparently a grandmother, was having difficulty climbing into the moving lorry. She was pushed from all sides and struggled to keep her foot on the footboard. As the lorry moved forward, Kaushalya's eyes went wide with horror. In a daze, she searched for only one image in the crowd: her husband. Then she burst out crying, her plight like that of a bird whose nest was being destroyed before its very eyes.

She heard someone shouting, "Stop the lorry! Stop the lorry!" Other voices joined the cry. The lorry slowed down.

Kaushalya had thrown out one of her bundles and was going to hand her wailing child to a man standing on the road when she saw Manohar Lal running up. But their son was not with him. God only knew which whirlpool had sucked in poor Pali!

Manohar Lal heard some voices being directed towards his wife. “The child must be somewhere here.” The people gestured to Manohar Lal to hurry. “Get in, get in!” they advised him. “He must have got on some other lorry.” There were other voices, loaded with venom and irritation. “Will the lorry keep waiting for your child? If you want to search for your child, you’d better get down from the lorry.” The people had suddenly become callous. If they had not seen Manohar Lal running up, perhaps Kaushalya would have got down from the lorry, wailing, and they would have thrown out her luggage after her. They were right. They had to get across the border before nightfall. So many lives were at stake. Surely, the lorry could not keep waiting for one child.

The refugees’ hearts had dried of all sentiments. Pali had once gotten lost before, and the whole mohalla had gone out in search of him. And now someone kept crying, “Get down, you! If you want to search for your child, get down, and let us proceed!”

The husband and wife could not decide whether to get down from the lorry or stay in it. Having failed to find any trace of Pali, Manohar Lal and Kaushalya kept looking out on the road. Slowly, the town was left behind, and the noise abated. Only Kaushalya kept wailing. The trees, the fields full of greenery swept past their gaze. Pali, lost somewhere in the crowded small town, receded from his parents. Kaushalya’s wailing gradually changed into a whimper. The mental anguish of the passengers expressed itself in the moans of the insane, and then changed into heart-rending cries before petering out into an anguished silence. The lorries moved on, lurching from side to side. Slowly, the morning haze cleared up. Looking up at the vast expanse of the impassive sky where one or two stars were still winking at him, Manohar Lal tried to console his wife. “We may yet find him,” he said. “He can’t get lost like this. Some kindly soul must have taken charge of him and pushed him into some other lorry.” He looked at Kaushalya’s abstracted gaze, and seeing the grief on her face, he said in utter desperation, “What can we do if we don’t find him? God had been benign enough to spare a child for us. We must be thankful to him for that. You know Lekhraj’s three children were killed before his very eyes. It’s God’s will. We must resign ourselves to it.”

Kaushalya’s empty eyes were still glued on the road. There was nothing strange about losing a child under these circumstances. There was no sense in creating so much hubbub over it. As time passed, the uprooted passengers fell to talking with one another, the women following their men’s example. Here and there was the sound of laughter.

The evening shadows lengthened as they neared the border. The convoy stopped for a short while at one point. Manohar Lal promptly got down and ran past the lined-up lorries, shouting, “Pali! Pali!” He peeped into all the lorries through their windows, but he got no response from any lorry. His voice seemed to be echoing back from the wilderness. He could not find Pali anywhere.

On reaching the border, the refugees were transferred to other lorries, which had been parked there to receive them. The lorries raced through the darkness towards Amritsar. The sky, studded with myriad stars, looked so mysterious! Overwhelmed by the immensity of the situation, the refugees had become very quiet, and some of them had started dozing to the rhythmic jolts of the lorries. There were others who just sat there, staring at nothing. Manohar Lal's wife had again started crying. Her incoherent loudness made people think that she was going mad. Then her crying changed into moans, and the onlookers felt reassured that she was not mad yet. She must indeed be missing her child very much. At last, she rested her head against Manohar Lal's shoulder and fell asleep. Manohar Lal silently resolved that if he failed to find Pali when they arrived, he would go back to his old town in Pakistan and, following up certain clues, try to locate him and bring him back home.

The convoy tore through the darkness on its way to Amritsar. People were too absorbed in themselves to think of what lay in store for them. Perhaps their minds had stopped thinking. Fate had thrown a black curtain across their eyes, and they could discern no ray of hope through it. There were only the joltings of the lorries and weariness. Their eyes had become glazed and their throats were parched, and above them were myriad twinkling stars that seemed to mock them.

That night after crying for hours, Pali fell asleep at last, his head resting against Zenab's bosom and his sobs slowly dissolved in a sea of affection. A woman's bosom is the greatest shield against man's afflictions, and the greatest source of love and affection. Zenab had, so to say, caught the child firmly within her citadel of love. For the first time in her life, she was overwhelmed by a sense of joy that only a woman bereft of a child can experience. A tiny, delicate body was clinging to her, as if the child was specially made to fit into the contours of her body.

Her heart swelled up with maternal feeling. "Why don't you speak?" she asked the child.

Shakur, who had been lying in the courtyard in a cot adjacent to Zenab's, kept gazing at the sky sprinkled with millions of stars. It reminded him of Zenab's deep-blue chunri, in which she had first come to his house as a bride. Her chunri had glittered like stars. As he looked at her face glowing behind her chunri, Shakur had felt as if the sun had descended into his courtyard.

Shakur made a living by selling chinaware. Carrying a big basket loaded with cups, saucers, plates, and pots on his head, he would go from lane to lane and from street to street hawking his wares, waving a thin cane stick over his basket. He had been doing it for years. That late afternoon, as the evening came down upon the small town, he had chanced upon a small boy who had been thrown to one side by the ebb and tide of the crowd. He was standing at the corner of the lane crying, "Pitaji! Pitaji!"

Shakur stopped on seeing the small boy. Then he sat down by the boy's side, uttering soothing words to him. He wiped the child's tears with the end of his kurta, and the child stopped crying. "Come, I'll take you to your father," Shakur had said. "But where's your father?" Holding the child's hand, Shakur had taken him to the place from where the convoy of lorries had departed carrying the refugees. The lorries had left long before, and even the dust raised by them had long since settled down. The refugee camp was lying deserted. In the darkness of the night, when Shakur climbed the steps to his house, Pali was fast asleep, his head resting against Shakur's shoulder.

Shakur was a god-fearing man, timidly taking every step in life. When rioting started in the town, he kept himself aloof from the troublemakers. When the grain market was set on fire and there were stray cases of stabbing in the streets, Shakur had remarked, "It is God's anger visiting us." He would repeat this remark every time there was a violent occurrence.

"Why are you silent?" Shakur asked his wife.

"What's there to say?" Zenab replied in a lazy voice, which trailed into silence. She was enjoying the feel of the child's small body. She felt for a moment as if all the obstructions in her path had crumbled and her body was getting lighter. But she did not want to tell her husband that she had come upon a precious boon. Even the touch of that small unknown child clinging to her had sent a thrill through her body.

"All the Hindus and Sikhs left their houses," Shakur said. "They have gone for good. The camp has emptied. Now nobody would dare venture this way."

Zenab gave no reply. The child mumbled in his sleep, heaved a deep sigh, and, resting his head upon Zenab's bosom, fell asleep again.

Zenab looked up at the sky. It was resplendent, as if reflecting her good fortune. As if echoing Shakur's thoughts, she said, "Leave him at the place from where you picked him up, lest some unfortunate curse should befall us."

"Why should any curse befall us? We are giving the child shelter," Shakur mumbled. "If we deliver him to the Police Station, they can't restore him to his parents."

They were trying to read each other's mind.

"What's his name?" Zenab asked, rubbing her cheek against the child's cheek.

"How do I know? When I asked him, he said Pali. Pali."

"These Hindus have such queer names. What a funny name! Pali! If I had a son, I would have named him Altaf."

They lay silent for a long time, lost in their own thoughts. If nobody came to claim the child, he would become hers. A child prancing about in the courtyard! She hoped nobody would turn up to enquire. The tailor, Mahmud, had kept a Hindu woman in his house, and no one had bothered

to investigate. Mir Zaman had ransacked the Hindu tailoring shop next to his and had kept the stolen things in his shop for all to see. Nobody had taken him to task for it. And as for her, she was only giving refuge to a child—a lost child whom her husband had found crying in the street. What was wrong with that? But Shakur’s mind was sometimes filled with fear.

On waking up the next morning, the child found himself among strangers and started crying and repeating, “Pitaji, Pitaji!” Zenab put a bowl of milk against his lips and kept fondling his head and caressing his back. But little Pali would not stop crying and soon broke into hiccups. Zenab’s eyes went to the door, worried that someone would hear the child crying and force his way into her house. Yes, the child was there all right, and all said and done, it was a stolen child. What if someone got wind of it? She must keep the child hidden from prying eyes for some days.

Pali stopped crying at last. He sat in a corner, maintaining a grim silence and emptily staring this way and that. He kept sighing, and Zenab sometimes felt that with the coming of the child, she had herself become rootless.

Shakur had thought that within a day or two, after becoming familiar with his environment, the child would start feeling at home. But he still had misgivings. One never knew. His parents might be searching for him and might track him down to Shakur’s house. A large number of refugees still had to migrate. Shakur feared the police might come to know about the lost child and create serious trouble for him.

The first two days were nothing short of an ordeal. On the third day, the child became a little communicative. He saw a white cat sitting on the wall of the courtyard and beamed at it. The cat jumped down and sat on the floor. The child ran towards it, crying, “A cat! A cat!” Zenab felt so happy.

There was a knock on the door. It sounded loud and ominous. Zenab and Shakur looked towards the door in alarm, their hearts pounding hard.

“They have come,” Zenab said apprehensively. “The people to whom the child belongs!” Fear streaked across her eyes.

“Could be the people from the Police Station!” Shakur said, his fear mounting moment by moment.

Another powerful blow. It sounded like a heavy lathi crashing against the door. “Open the door!” A voice invaded the house from the other side of the door.

As Shakur proceeded to open the door, Zenab hurriedly moved into the inner room with the child.

It was neither the police havildar on the other side of the door, nor the child’s parents. It was the bearded maulvi of the neighbouring mosque standing there, holding a thick lathi. There were two men standing behind him, both armed with lathis.

“Is there a kafir’s child in here?” the maulvi barked, stepping into the courtyard. “Who has brought him here?” The two men wielding lathis followed the maulvi into the courtyard.

“Are you hiding another kafir in your house too?”

Shakur ran in and hurriedly returned, carrying a murha.

“I swear by the Holy Quran that we are not hiding any kafir in our house,” Shakur said. “We have only given shelter to an orphan boy.”

“Where’s that orphan?”

“Ji, he’s sleeping inside.”

The maulvi cast a suspicious look at Shakur and then tapped the floor sharply with his lathi.

“Produce him before me! I want to see him.”

Zenab came out carrying Pali in her arms.

“So you are giving refuge to a kafir child?”

“I’ve adopted the child, Maulvi sahab. It’s no sin to adopt a child,” Zenab said in a firm, steady voice.

“Have you had him circumcised? Has he read the kalma?”

New life surged back into Zenab. The maulvi had not come to snatch the child from her. He had come only to make him a Mussalman. Zenab stood silent before the maulvi.

“Why don’t you speak? You give a kafir’s polluted child a place in your lap. You give him your breast to suckle. Do you want to nurture a snake?”

The maulvi’s argument had driven Zenab against the wall. No, she couldn’t refute his argument. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? But she had found nothing polluted about the boy, nor did he look like the young one of a serpent. She was going to speak when the maulvi banged his lathi on the ground and said, “Bring this kafir’s son to the holy mosque. Early tomorrow morning. Or you must be prepared to face serious consequences!”

The maulvi dramatically took a full turn and walked out. As soon as he had gone, Zenab tossed her head happily and smiled. All that the maulvi wanted was that the boy should say the kalma and be circumcised. Why wait till tomorrow? She was prepared to do it right now. What was there to fear? The maulvi had not threatened to take the child from her. He had not even hinted at it.

The circumcision was performed the very next morning. Little Pali was terrified at the sight of the razor and clung to Zenab’s legs.

The circumcision done, the maulvi petted and consoled little Pali, ignoring the fact that all the time the child had kept uttering “Pitaji! Pitaji!” in great agony. The maulvi did not mind it at all. He just smiled indulgently. The neighbours came and felicitated Shakur and Zenab.

The maulvi gave the boy the gift of a red Rumi cap with a black tassel and placed it on the boy’s head himself. Zenab gave him a brand-new white muslin kurta to wear and helped him to put it on then and there. The maulvi then lifted the boy and placed him in Zenab’s arms.

“Take him!” the maulvi said happily. “He’s your own child, not a kafir’s. He belongs to the whole community.”

The child was renamed Altaf—from Pali to Altaf. Carrying Altaf in her arms, Zenab went around distributing sweets in the mohalla.

Gradually, the child took to his new ways. Within a year, little Pali, now crockery seller Shakur Ahmed's son, Altaf Husain, became a familiar figure in the area. He played in his courtyard, hawking chinaware and aping his father's drawn out, lusty cry. He would collect all the utensils from the kitchen and put them in a basket, which he carried on his head and trotted round the courtyard announcing, like his father, the articles he had for sale.

When the month of Ramzan came, he would plant himself in the middle of his courtyard and proclaim to the beat of an empty tin canister, "Get up, you pious Muslims! Wake up from your sleep! Keep your holy fast!"

Shakur and Zenab lost no time in putting Altaf in the school attached to the local mosque. Sitting on the brick platform outside the mosque, he memorized the Quran along with other boys, swaying his head rhythmically in consonance with the lines from the holy book.

Zenab and Shakur's lives started revolving in a new orbit around Altaf. They wove their dreams around him. One day, Shakur would stop hawking his wares from door to door. Instead, he would set up a shop where father and son would sit together, conducting sales. They would not be at the mercy of others. They would be their own masters and sleep peacefully, with not a care in the world. Zenab eagerly looked forward to the day when Altaf's bride would set foot in her house, wearing ceremonial anklets.

Two years passed happily in this manner. One day, the chinaware seller had gone on his rounds, and little Altaf was at school. Only Zenab was at home. Sitting behind the tarpaulin curtain, she was grinding wheat.

There was a knock at the door. "My man is not at home," she responded from where she was sitting. "Come back in the evening."

After a pause, a voice said, "There's a court summons in Shakur Ahmed's name. He has been asked to report to the Police Station."

Zenab stopped grinding the wheat. Adjusting her palla over her head, she got up and stood behind the tarpaulin curtain. A tremor of fear ran through her spine. "What's the matter, ji?" she asked.

"Send him to the Police Station tomorrow morning. It's urgent."

"What for, ji?" She asked in a tremulous voice.

"They have come from Hindustan to claim the child. There is a letter to that effect."

Zenab shook from head to foot.

"Send him to the Police Station tomorrow morning," the man repeated. "Don't forget."

Zenab heard the man's retreating steps from behind the curtain.

There are some wounds that heal with the passage of time, leaving a mark on the mind. But there are certain griefs that slowly eat into the heart like termites, completely ravaging the body. There is nothing a man can do

about it. When Kaushalya reached India with her husband, her lap was bereft of a child.

That day, if the convoy of lorries had safely reached the border and Manohar Lal had gone across it with his wife and child, they would have forgotten about Pali's separation from them as time passed. Unfortunately, it did not happen like that. They had just crossed the city limits when something happened. The convoy was passing along the road when a mob suddenly emerged from the fields flanking the road and raised war cries. Rushing up, they blocked the road. They wore masks, brandished swords and spears, and shouted filthy abuses. Most of the lorries had already passed, but the last three could not escape. Those in the lorries heard the same heart-chilling sounds of brandished swords and spears that Manohar Lal and Kaushalya had heard in the town from which they were escaping. Kaushalya did not even know at what point a heavy jolt knocked her down. She only heard Manohar Lal's voice, "Here, give me the child." Then that sound faded as she got another powerful push from behind, which sent her crashing to the floor of the lorry. When she regained her senses, all round her in the darkness she heard whistles blowing to the accompaniment of groans behind her. She felt something clammy on the floor under her hand. It could have been water; it could as well have been blood. The lorry suddenly started, and as she looked out, she felt as if the stars were moving with the lorry. Her throat was parched, and she desperately needed water. Then the stars started revolving, and she passed out.

Even on reaching Delhi, Manohar Lal could not get over the sensation of being crushed under a heap of dead bodies. He feared that if he could not extricate himself, he would die under their weight. While slogging along on the roads of Delhi with his wife and bemoaning the loss of their children, he realized that if he did not turn his back on the calamitous past, he would perish on those very roads. He hired a pushcart and set up shop in one of the bazaars of Delhi. When he returned home late at night, tired and weary, he would find his wife moaning as if she was on the verge of insanity, and his courage would desert him. What if she really went mad? How would he take care of her with so many other problems to handle? The small spark of life that was left in him would be extinguished too.

Taking her hand in his own, Manohar Lal assured Kaushalya that it was not too late for them to have another child. But at the mention of children, her condition would worsen. She would start trembling, and sometimes she wailed in such a heart-rending manner that even he became jittery.

The government had set up large organizations to trace abducted women and lost children and to retrieve stolen goods. Government officials made frequent trips to Pakistan for this purpose. Manohar Lal took time from his work to visit these government offices and meet influential people in order to seek their help in tracing his child. But he was too unimportant for anyone to take much notice of him. Month after month passed, but he obtained no leads. It was not easy to trace a lost child in a town

swarming with people. When he had started looking, he had hoped that he had only to visit the town and identify the particular spot where Pali had been separated from him. He might find Pali at the entrance of some lane, eagerly looking for his father. He would immediately pick up the child in his arms and, on returning to Delhi, put him in Kaushalya's lap.

What vain hopes! Things were just the reverse of what he had hoped. It was as if his way were like a single thread hidden in a tangled mass: he did not even know where to start. For two full years, no progress was made on his case. Then he was allowed to accompany rescue parties of government officials and social workers who visited Pakistan from time to time. He would pack his small tin trunk and join them. But each time he returned, plucking his hair in despair.

After another two years, he at last had a lead. He learnt that the boy was living in his erstwhile hometown with a man named Shakur Ahmed, who owned a chinaware shop. This time Manohar Lal was quite sanguine that his trip would not prove fruitless.

The first time the police havildar came with the summons for Shakur, Zenab was greatly upset, her condition like that of a fish that has been thrown out of water. She felt that her dreams were crumbling before her very eyes.

Shakur returned in the evening, and his face turned pale on hearing the news. The news soon went round the mohalla, and many sympathizers dropped in to console him. The maulvi also came, tapping his lathi on the ground.

"You need have no fears," the maulvi said. "How dare they touch the child! Now that he has accepted Islam, we won't let him fall in the hands of kafirs."

Maulvi sahab's words revived Zenab's drooping spirits. He was right. Pali was not the same child who had slept in Zenab's arms on his first night in their house. If someone had come to claim him then, she wouldn't have stood in the person's way. But things were different now.

The elders of the town went into a huddle, and it was decided that Maulvi sahab would himself deal with the police. Maulvi sahab had an ingenious scheme up his sleeve. The police havildar would be tutored to report that he had not found Shakur at home, and hence the summons could not be served on him. If the havildar persisted in making calls, Shakur and his wife would leave the town for a few months and stay somewhere else with the child.

"The havildar be damned!" Maulvi sahab said. "I know how to cut him down to size!" He went away tapping his lathi and feeling very important.

A strange game of hide-and-peek started thereafter. The high-ups in government make agreements, but it is the petty government functionaries who execute these agreements. The orders would come from above to produce the boy before the authorities. Walking straight in line with his nose, a police constable from the Police Station would go to the right house. He

would bang on the door, make threatening noises, pocket a rupee, and write on the summons papers that he had found the house locked and, on enquiry, had learnt that the residents had gone away and there was no knowing when they would return.

This was not a question of a small bribe, or one of returning an adopted child. The matter was taking on a religious cast. By not sending away the child, the police were doing a service to religion—something considered to be a pious act.

Months passed and merged into years.

On one occasion, the entire rescue party descended upon Shakur Ahmed's house, but found it locked. The family had been notified in advance and had disappeared before the arrival of the party. Shakur Ahmed, it transpired, had gone to Shekhupura to meet his brother, and no one had any information as to when he would return. When the party reached Shekhupura, it learnt that Shakur Ahmed had left for Lyallpur only a day earlier with his wife and child. "Yes, there was a child with them. But we do not know the man's address. He didn't leave any address behind before going away."

During this game of hide-and-seek, three years passed. Manohar Lal's face had started turning dark. His cheeks became deeply lined, and his hair showed streaks of gray. All the time, the dust of despair kept blowing before his eyes. He could not even distinguish between a truth and a lie. Life was mauling Manohar Lal with the same ferocity that a hawk tears a bird apart with its beak.

Whether it was the result of Manohar Lal's determination or the effect of Kaushalya's sighs, after seven years Manohar Lal found himself sitting in Shakur Ahmed's courtyard. He had gone there with a government rescue party and a woman representative of a social-service organization. Representing the Pakistani side were two police officers and a magistrate to conduct the proceedings. The meeting had been made possible by the intervention of a high Government of India official who had persuaded his counterpart in Pakistan.

At the meeting, Manohar Lal was required to prove that the child was really his. There was a legal angle to it, and he had to conform to a set procedure and convince the officials of his right to the child.

There was tension in the courtyard. The Maulvi sahab was sitting a little apart from the officials. Many people had gathered outside Shakur Ahmed's house. Zenab was sitting behind a tarpaulin curtain on the verandah. Her face looked pale, but her eyes were sharp and watchful, like the eyes of an eagle guarding its nest. Altaf Husain sat leaning against her, looking tense and bewildered. Zenab squeezed his shoulder frequently.

Before the proceedings started, Maulvi sahab issued all sorts of threats, perhaps to intimidate Manohar Lal.

“Nobody can take away the child. No kafir can touch him,” he kept muttering.

The head of the Indian party asked the magistrate several times to order the maulvi to be quiet and reminded the magistrate that if the maulvi did not stop interfering, tension would increase.

Since Partition, the blood on the roads and streets had dried, but its stains were still visible here and there. The fire that had engulfed the houses had died out long since, but the charred frames were still standing. The mad frenzy of Partition had abated, but its effects still lingered in the minds of the people.

“Call the child!” the magistrate said, starting the proceedings.

“We have not stolen anybody’s child,” Zenab’s agitated voice said from behind the curtain. “Why should I send him out?”

“Produce the child before me.” The magistrate repeated his order. Shakur Ahmed went behind the curtain to fetch the child.

Manohar Lal’s heart was pounding hard. The most decisive moment of his life had come. He was eager to have a look at his long-lost child. At the same time, his mind was assailed by doubts and fears.

The boy was made to stand before the magistrate. Seeing the crowd in the courtyard, he became nervous and clung to Shakur’s legs. Putting his finger in his mouth, he looked around at the people as if stupefied.

“Son, come here,” the magistrate said. “Look at who is here. Do you know any of them?”

“Nobody should prompt the boy,” the police officer said in a warning tone. “Let the child decide for himself.”

Manohar Lal failed to recognize his own son: an eleven-year-old boy with a Rumi cap perched on his head and wearing a muslin kurta and salwar. Manohar Lal’s eyes were beginning to deceive him. He stared at the boy for a long time. Then the image of his own child flashed through his mind, and his throat choked with emotion. *Pali!* he cried. *Pali, my son!* But his voice died in his throat. He was not supposed to draw the boy’s attention to himself.

The boy surveyed the people sitting in the courtyard. His expression recorded no change at the sight of Manohar Lal. He was looking as scared as before—only a little more so. Manohar Lal watched him intently. He had grown quite tall and fair and handsome and healthy. Manohar Lal felt that the time of decision had come and gone. The dice seemed to be loaded against him. Shorn of all joys, his life would remain bare and empty like a sandy waste.

Breaking the silence, the maulvi said, “So you have seen it. The child has failed to recognize him. Had he been this man’s child, he would have dashed forward to him. And look at this man’s audacity—he has come to demand another’s child!”

The lady social worker was greatly annoyed. "Come here, son," she said. "Look, who's the man sitting in front of you?"

"No prompting please!" the police officer warned the social worker. "Leave the child alone. Let him find out for himself."

Zenab was sitting inside, holding her breath and feeling uncertain.

Addressing Shakur, the social worker said, "You've yourself admitted that he is not your child—that you've adopted him."

Before Shakur Ahmed could reply, the maulvi banged his lathi on the floor and said, "We don't deny that he is an adopted child. But how can one accept this man's contention that the boy is a Hindu child and belongs to him?"

The magistrate nodded his head as if he was in agreement with what the maulvi had said. He looked at the child, then at Manohar Lal. Manohar Lal felt more and more hopeless. His own child was standing before him, and all he could do was watch him listlessly. The opportunity to get him back seemed to have slipped through his fingers.

"The child has become nervous," the social worker said.

"Please keep quiet!"

"What more do you want?" the maulvi asked. "It's already decided. You people may go."

The social worker turned to Manohar Lal. "Yes, now I remember," she said. "Where's the photograph you showed me the other day?"

As proof, Manohar Lal had not been able to bring anything except a small photograph. Once at Kaushalya's request, he had had himself photographed with her at the Baisakhi fair. In the picture, little Pali was sitting in his lap. But it could serve no useful purpose at the moment. Pali had grown quite big and bore no resemblance to the little boy of the photograph. Manohar Lal took it out of his pocket and passed it on to the magistrate.

"My son is in this photograph. It's the same child. You can see for yourself."

Shakur Ahmed flared up. "Janab, this photograph proves nothing," he said to the magistrate. "I too have a photograph."

He went in his house and came back with a framed photograph. Wiping it with his sleeve, he handed it to the magistrate.

"It's the same child whom you see standing in front of you," he said, pointing towards the boy in the photograph. "You can verify for yourself."

"Come here, child." The magistrate placed Manohar Lal's photograph in front of the boy without making any comment, convinced that he would not be able to recognize anybody in it.

The boy looked intently at the picture for some time. Then, lifting his hand, he placed his forefinger on Manohar Lal's image and cried, "Pitaji!" Then his finger slowly moved towards the woman in the photograph. "Mataji!" he exclaimed.

The child's eyes remained fixed on the photograph. A strange restlessness seemed to seize him.

Manohar Lal burst out crying. He thrust the end of his turban into his mouth to suppress his sobs.

The magistrate placed the other photograph in front of the child. The child beamed. "Abbaji! Ammi!" he exclaimed.

A wave of joy surged through Shakur Ahmed. Zenab peeped out from behind the curtain. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

The maulvi's face had remained taut all this time. Then his expression suddenly mellowed.

"Now he is a Mussalman's son, not a Hindu's. He has read the kalma," the maulvi said with an air of finality.

"Please be quiet!" the social worker cried.

"Why should I remain quiet? This man had thrown him away and disappeared. We brought him up!" The maulvi's voice rose.

Hearing the maulvi's loud and threatening voice, the boy ran to Shakur and clung to his legs. Then he ran towards the veranda and hid behind the curtain.

The people outside must have heard what was going on in the courtyard, for suddenly voices resounded. "Allah ho Akbar!"

The lady social worker and the two Indian officials stoutly put forward the plea that, since the child had recognized his father, he should be restored to him without further ado. But things seemed to be taking an ugly turn. The tension was mounting. While the child was sitting in Zenab's lap with his arms around her neck, the complexion of the problem was undergoing a change. It had become a Hindu-Muslim matter. Questions like "Whose child is he?" and "Who brought him up?" seemed to have become irrelevant.

Finding himself at the end of his tether, Manohar Lal had an idea. Getting up, he went and stood near the curtain. Folding his hands, he said, "Bahen, I'm not begging you for my child. I'm begging you for my wife's life. She has lost both her children. She is missing Pali very much. His absence is driving her insane. Day and night she keeps thinking of him. Please have pity on her."

The area behind the tarpaulin curtain remained steeped in silence. The officials of both countries watched the curtain intently. The maulvi rose to his feet. He had no doubt that Zenab would hurl the choicest abuses at Manohar Lal. Instead, they heard the sound of sobbing. "Take away the child. I do not want an unfortunate woman's curse to fall upon me. How could I know you had lost both your children?"

Manohar Lal felt like going behind the curtain and falling at the woman's feet.

An hour later the child was given a send-off. Amidst tears, Zenab and Shakur helped him put on new clothes, which had been specially made for

the forthcoming Id. They put a new Rumi cap on his head. Then Zenab said, "I will part with the child on one condition. You must send him to us every year on the occasion of Id to stay with us for a month. Do you agree? Then give me your word."

Manohar Lal's body tingled. His hands still folded in supplication, he said, "He is your wealth, bahen. I give you my word. I'll remain indebted to you all my life."

The wheel of life started moving again. The same meandering paths, the same turnings, the same ups and downs. If things had ended there, this narration would have assumed the form of a story, possessing something of interest for everybody. But nothing ever ends, nothing ever comes to finality. The powers that be struck out one more name from the long list of the abducted, and transferred that name to the list of the found.

The government jeep was travelling at great speed. By the side of the driver sat an armed guard and next to him the police officer. At the back of the jeep sat father and son, tightly set against each other, and opposite them the lady social worker. The child looked lost and forlorn. In contact with the boy's body, Manohar Lal's body had again started tingling warmly. The cords of affection that had snapped were slowly reconnecting.

They crossed the border in the afternoon. Getting down from the Pakistani jeep, they submitted their papers to the scrutiny of the Indian authorities stationed on the other side of the boundary line. Manohar Lal, his son, and the others then drove off in another jeep towards Amritsar.

The jeep had not gone far when the lady social worker, as if acting on sudden impulse, extended her right hand, whisked the Rumi cap off the boy's head, and flung it out of the jeep. The red cap with the black tassel flew in the air and landed in the dust at the edge of the road.

"My cap!" the boy's hand went to his head. "Hai, my cap!"

The lady social worker leaned towards the boy. "You are a Hindu boy. Why should you wear a Muslim cap?"

Manohar Lal did not appreciate the brusque manner in which the cap had been removed from the boy's head and thrown away. "That must have hurt the boy's feelings. He doesn't know that it is a Muslim cap," Manohar Lal said to the social worker. "Why did you throw it away? Stop the jeep. I must retrieve the cap."

The boy had pulled a long face and was on the verge of tears. His hand resting over his head, he kept moaning over the loss of his cap. "Oh, my cap!" he cried again and again.

"He is still a child, ignorant of these things," Manohar Lal explained patiently. "See, he's still crying."

"Let him cry," the woman said. "Crying is not going to do him any harm. You're not going to give him a Rumi cap to wear, are you? He'll stop crying in a short while."

The jeep raced on, raising clouds of dust behind it.

Far away from the border, in a small town where many refugees had settled down, the news spread at the speed of lightning that Manohar Lal and Kaushalya's son had returned. The impossible had happened. God's mill, they said, grinds slow, but it grinds fine. The boy was returning after seven years. A lucky child indeed! The women kissed the child's head and bowed their heads in gratitude to God. "See, bahen, one who is ordained to live lives long... See, bahen, the child you were holding against your bosom was snatched away by death right from your arms, and the one who had stayed away from you and was lost and forlorn has come back hale and hearty. Nobody can harm a person who has God's benign protection."

Back home, the child kept whimpering as he had done during the first two or three days of his arrival in Shakur's house. On the first day, he kept watching his mother, Kaushalya, from a distance. He saw nothing of those traits in her that he hazily remembered. The loss of her children seemed to have wreaked havoc on her youth. Dim memories of the past were slowly reviving in the child's mind: hazy, nebulous, incoherent. He vaguely remembered his small sister lying in his mother's lap. And the buffalo that stood tethered outside their door and on whose back he used to enjoy riding. Also the wooden bed that was a permanent fixture outside their house. He could hear a babble of sounds rising higher and higher every moment. The identity of his mother had gradually started returning to his mind. But sometimes he still wondered if the boy who was standing before her, finger in mouth and brazenly staring at her, was really Pali. He would feel more and more confused.

Three or four days passed in this manner.

Then came Sunday. The dholak began beating in Manohar Lal's courtyard from early morning. The women of the mohalla gathered in the courtyard and sang in tune to the rhythmic beat of the drum. Two small cotton carpets had been spread in the courtyard, and a few cane seats were lined against the walls. There were also some cots to sit on in case too many guests arrived. Kaushalya was looking her normal self. She was not silent or withdrawn as before. She even laughed a little. That morning she wore a red chunri hemmed with threads of gold—a red chunri, the traditional Hindu symbol of matrimonial bliss and good fortune.

Manohar Lal was all attention to the guests. He was not tired of telling his friends that the people back in Pakistan had taken great care of his son. He could not match the attention and affection they had showered on him. He would indeed remain indebted to them all his life.

The narrow courtyard was filled with guests. Holding a big platter of laddoos, Manohar Lal was about to go round to distribute the sweets when Pali did something strange. He had been sitting by the side of his mother, listening to the women playing the dholak and singing, when he abruptly got up and fetched a mat from inside the house. He spread it on the floor, sat down on it, folding his legs under his thighs, and started saying his namaz.

The people sitting in the courtyard watched him with curiosity. But their curiosity soon changed into dismay.

“What’s going on, Kaushalya?” a woman asked. “What’s your son doing?”

Manohar Lal was feeling embarrassed by his son’s behavior in front of his guests. He should have anticipated this and done something to prevent it from happening. He apologetically said to the man standing by his side, “Every afternoon right at this hour he sits down to say his namaz. He instinctively knows that it’s time for namaz.”

“Don’t you stop him?” a voice asked.

“He’s still a child. He’ll learn soon enough.”

A man who was regarded as a big shot in the mohalla said in a loud voice for all to hear, “He must at once get rid of this nasty habit. We don’t want to have a Muslim among us.”

The boy continued with his namaz while the people around him watched with feelings of disgust.

Manohar Lal said as if in self-defence, “You know, those people didn’t have a child of their own. And—”

“Manohar Lal!” The big shot who was regarded as the Chaudhri of the mohalla cut him short. “You must know those people have foisted a Muslim convert on you and yet you have nothing but praise for them.”

The boy was still sitting on his folded legs and, with his palms raised upwards, repeating his namaz prayers. The Chaudhri went and stood by the boy’s side.

His namaz finished, the boy was wiping his face with both hands when the Chaudhri caught him by the wrist and dragged him to the middle of the courtyard.

“What were you doing?” he asked the boy.

Pali was unnerved. “I was saying namaz,” he said in a faint voice.

“We won’t allow you to do such silly things in this house,” the Chaudhri barked at Pali. “No namaz hereafter. Do you understand?” Turning round to the people watching, he remarked, “Those Muslas have planted the poison of fanaticism in his mind. And at such a tender age!”

He stood thinking for a while. “Better call a pandit,” he said in a decisive tone to a friend. “And also a barber. We must perform the boy’s mundan. And let him keep a proper tuft. Those rascals! They have planted a Musla among us.”

Pali stood there looking utterly confused.

“What’s your name, boy?”

Pali looked timidly at the massive bulk of the Chaudhri and mumbled in a subdued voice, “Altaf, Altaf Husain, son of Shakur Ahmed.”

The Chaudhri glared at the boy. With great difficulty, he restrained himself from slapping him. The boy felt that the pressure of the man’s grip on his wrist had increased. He gave the man a terrified look.

“No, your name is Pali—Yashpal!”

The boy stood silent and then mumbled, “Altaf.”

“Repeat that name again and see what happens. I’ll pull out your tongue!”

“Have you seen these Musla doings?” the Chaudhri said, turning to the people around him. “They call it conversion: religious conversion. Reform!”

The barber arrived, followed by the pandit. Accompanying the pandit was a man carrying ghee and other ingredients for performing a havan.

The boy was again made to sit on a mat. The barber sharpened the razor on his palm and, according to the directions given by the pandit, started shaving the boy’s head. As long as the ceremony lasted, the boy kept sobbing with bowed head. Once he got up in fright, and crying “Ammi, Ammi, Abbaji!” he ran towards the wall of the courtyard. Standing with his back against the wall, he looked at the Chaudhri like a deer at bay, watching a hunter. At the suggestion of the Chaudhri, Manohar Lal went to fetch the boy. He held the boy’s hand and gently brought him back to the mat.

A tuft of hair was left in the middle of his cropped head. Pali was bathed, then given a brand-new dhoti and kurta to wear. To the chanting of mantras, he was given a sacred thread.

“Child, what’s your name? Say five times, Pali, Pali, Pali...”

Sometime later, looking every inch a brahmachari, Yashpal, Pali, stood at the door with folded hands, seeing off the guests. The relatives and guests caressed his head and blessed him while departing. Manohar Lal distributed laddoos.

At that time, sitting in their lonely courtyard hundreds of miles away, Zenab and Shakur were conjecturing. Zenab said, “He is gone, and with him is gone all the gaiety of this house. At this time I used to go out into the street in search of him. He would try to hide from me, running into nooks and corners. I would never know where to find him. Oh, it was such joy! Well, what do you think? Will he come to visit us for Id? Will those people send him here? I think they will.”

“Oh yes, you once told me you had a cousin living in Bareilly. We shall go and stay with him and meet our son. What do you think of that?”

Zenab wiped her eyes again and again.

*Translation from Hindi by the author*