

**G**ROWING out of buttresses and arches, cutting through the cracked masonry of pigeon-encrusted domes are bastard *pipals* that have taken root in the sun-drenched stone of the Red Fort. Sometimes they grow tall, like that one there, to shelter barbers, madmen, charlatans, and shrines. And a *paan wala* who lifts bold black eyes to stare into mine, safely distant, in my balcony. The Fort has long disemboweled dynastic power, all human life. Only the bastard trees remain. Knowing this, still I mourn?

There are many houses tucked away in my memory. They seep into my vision, layer by layer, like the trifle Reva loves. There are those in which I lie vacant nights in open spaces looking up at marigold garlands of stars, there are tiled grand galleon ones when I am contained in cotton quilts of winter warmth. Ones vaunting headdresses of stucco crosses, embroidered shields, vain *guldastas* sprouting wispy clumps of dry thicket, twirling emblems all, of kingly masonry embossed upon colonial red brick. And there is... this. If I shut my left eye I will not see the reinforced concrete of the projecting balconies of other flats. I will see nothing but the sky and the foliage of a lone inflamed *gulmohar* weeping copious red tears and once more.... I will be home.

Could I have picked up the reddish roof tiles mouldy with age and used them in my new apartment? I could... and yet, they wouldn't hold the same way because they wouldn't be in that same house down the lane behind the railway siding, nor would I hear the hooting of the coal engines drawing up Prayag Raj station. I really can't build the same house, tile by tile, can I? But I can build it on paper, word for word, and it will share the same sweet fragrance of that one, because

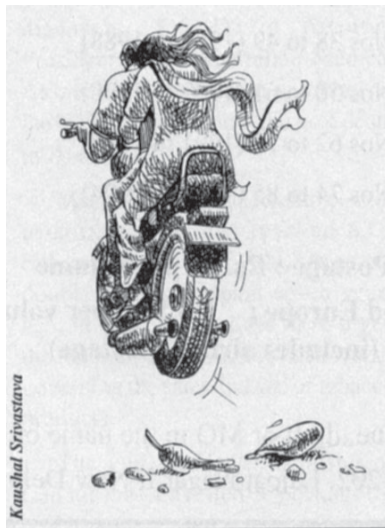
## SHORT STORY

# Give Me Back My Country

Manju Kak

it will again be the selfsame configuration of smells and thoughts. Except....for one thing. The people. I have to bring the old people back, people whose smells clung to the spidery cracks of limewashed walls, smells long buried yet not banished. Yes, there will have to be smells and sights ...and weddings.

And... Sarju Yadav. Sarju's strong moustachioed body will be lurking in the shade of the deep veranda where he will be talking to Reva about the University, about the lightning strike his Union has called. Sarju will have his motorcycle gang wearing little green flags stuck in their headbands. They will be the green good bandits of the Janata Dal and they will bike down Katra, block all traffic, staccato gun shots from their bikes rallying spirits, righteous in youth, raise slogans strong with sound. Shops will crank shutters and, again, nothing will come of the day.



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Sarju Yadav will drive his motorcycle up to my gate, watch Reva get off it, and patiently explain why it is wrong for her to live like this. Reva will glance back and not see me watching through the wire mesh door because it will be dark inside and Reva will agree with him — yet tremblingly bolt back the fragile eggshell of understanding, culled from books and theories vaguely digested, fearful of not being able to mend the fragments it will shatter my life into. Fearful of betraying the house that has held her father's dreams and mine.

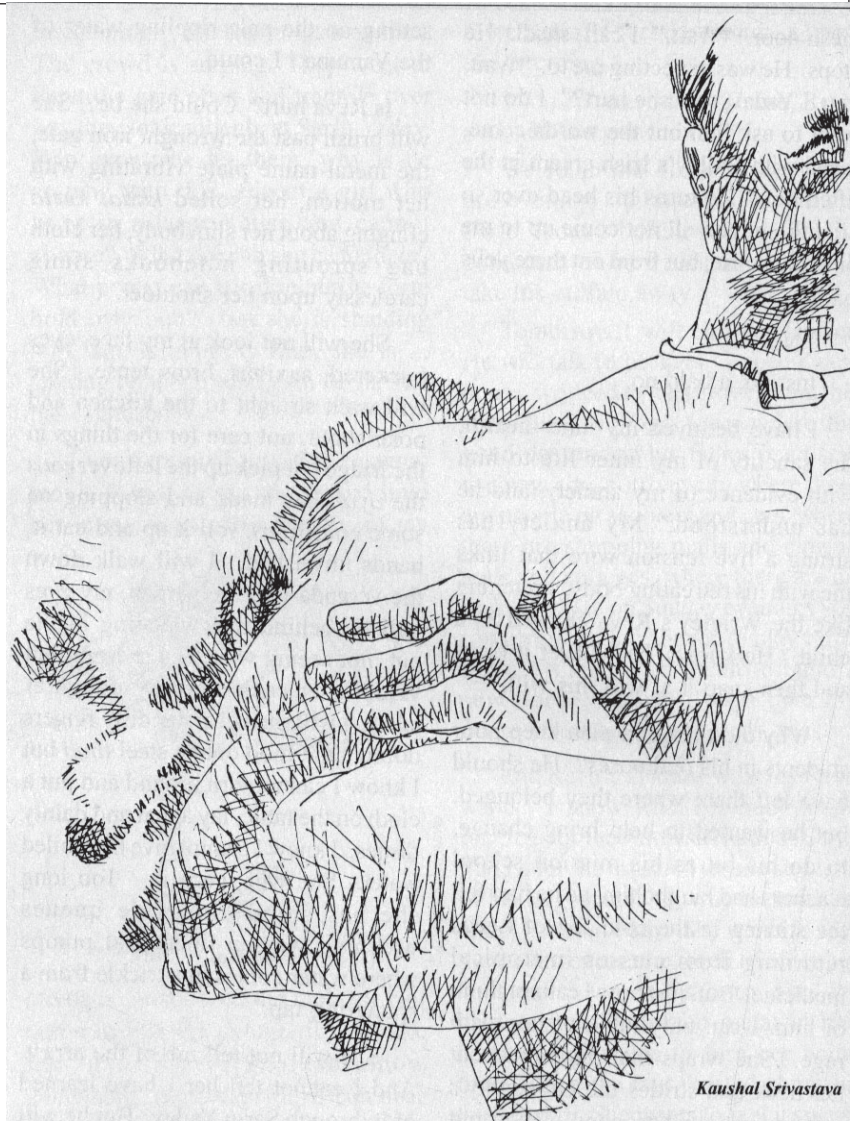
But Sarju Yadav will be strong with muscular bands about his arms. Sarju Yadav will be real. And Reva will feel him broad beside her, and tossing back the slippery strands of her washed hair, she will go with him, riding against the wind. Sarju will take his motorcycle down the road blowing his horn and the public in the bazaar will cleave aside. They feel his power, the power of the students behind him. He will topple vendors' stalls straining under fruit, cheap plasticware, fresh greens. Reva's head will half-turn, glance at the bruised goods, at the eyes of the hawker, victim once again of the same power they shout slogans against, and she will wince. But she will not murmur words of rebuke that hover upon the threshold of her mind, she will say nothing because Sarju's arms will be around her and she will be flying high, exhilarated.

And the house, sticky with night mist, will be left mourning.

Houses have a will of their own. They grow into spaces, spilling like saucers of milk finding the slope in the floor, and when they don't want to see the worlds around them changing they slip filmy masks over their heads. Houses hold secrets. Houses wear clamps of steel, that won't let those they hold within stray. But Reva strayed when she sat on Yadav's motorcycle.

Reva had a gift of dreaming, a gift she got from me. I wear that mask, a membranous embryo, and in my spaceship I leave here and go where my heart will take me.

Sarju Yadav wanted Reva ever since the time he used to lurk in the dark shadowy veranda of my house, not daring to come in. For inside he would recall the smell of tobacco from my husband's cigar, the mustiness from rich, dank carpets laid in a monsoon room lit by a stream of dim yellow light from a hanging grape chandelier and the misty white streak of a ventilator ray, none bold enough to dispel gloom. He would hear a whiplash in the curling ends of my questions. Sarju Yadav's rippling muscles grow slack and limp under the glistening threads of his terricot *kurta* worn over light brown terylene pants split apart at the seams and flaring out ever so slightly that give them away as second-hand. They are a bit incongruous on his broad muscular frame. I smile. This man dressed so cannot trouble my ordered world. But he steps back. He has delivered the letter that has come in my absence at the outhouse he inhabits. And he will retreat. He *must* retreat as he has always done, as his father did when he toiled in my garden. Wait, he has stopped by the gate and he is thinking. He turns, strides back with the tail of his *kurta* sashaying behind him, a duck's fin, his firm steps slow as they climb up



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the stairs. He coughs against the wire grill door. "What is it?" I ask sharply. "It's Reva, bibi ji," he says. My voice turns sharper. I do not like him using her name like he was her born equal. "Reva bibi." I snap. "What of her?" His voice turns off-key, unable to toss his defiance in the sure manner he wants to.

"It's Reva," he repeats, petulant insolence lacing his voice, "who was caught in the *gherao* today." A cold coil in my stomach. Which *gherao* this time, I question myself uselessly, for I know the pattern of it all. "The

Committee members bailed her out," he informs me flatly. He's sent them to, I know. "Send her in when she returns," I command, chilly, my fear hissing out. But I should know better, "No. Wait. Let her come on her own."

I do not want him carrying messages. Do I see a grin on his face? How can I see his face, it's his retreating back that I see — but his back is grinning, his broad chest is grinning, that thick curly crop is... my heart misses a beat, he oils his hair till it glistens and the sweet sticky perfume of Cantharadine clings to the

mesh door. "Wait." I call, shrill. He stops. He was expecting me to. "Wait, you... Yadav, was she hurt?" I do not want to ask him but the words come, laced with Bailey's Irish cream in the afternoon. He turns his head ever so slightly — he will not come up to me or to the house, but from out there yells back,

"No."

Just no, a bald no.

I have betrayed my inner hearth, the sanctity of my inner life to him with evidence of my anxiety, and he has understood. My anxiety has strung a live tension wire that links me with his retreating body, stretching like the Wrigley's Reva chewed as a child. He knows, he will let it draw and then snap it at will, his will.

Why did the good man keep poor students in his outhouses? He should have left them where they belonged, but he wanted to help bring change, to do his bit as his mission school teachers had taught him, as he had felt the stirring in the cold fog of Leeds returning from classes in tropical medicine. But, just now I cannot think of him, I can only think of her, with rage. She wraps that *dupatta* about her neck and strides the University's campus shouting slogans. They put messy oily hands about her smooth arms and shoulders and smoke *bidis* passed mate to mate. The sweet smell clings to her clothes. I made her wear a cotton voile saree and my seed pearls and how beautiful she looked standing in the whitewashed portico of our house receiving Professor Joshi and his wife and son. An engineer from IIT. They could move in here, they could even have all the rooms. I would keep the back room, lock it, then go to Brindavan. See other widows bathing at the *ghat*, take a room at the ashram and watch the sun, red orb,

setting on the pale rippling water of the Yamuna. I could.

Is Reva hurt? Could she be? She will brush past the wrought iron gate, the metal name plate vibrating with her motion, her soiled *khadi kurta* clinging about her slim body, her cloth bag sprouting notebooks slung carelessly upon her shoulder.

She will not look at my face, eyes puckered, anxious, brow tense. She will walk straight to the kitchen and poke about, not care for the things in the fridge but pick up the leftover *rotis* the *ayah* has made and slopping on some cold *sabzi*, roll it up and eat it, hands unwashed. I will walk down the veranda into the garden, my eyes will be behind me, watching inside out, not seeing what lies in front, but visualising each step my daughter takes. I will shrivel at her dirty fingers doling cold food onto a steel *thali* but I know I cannot turn around and put a cloth on the table, lay a mat and dainty dishes. I know I cannot give her boiled water. She will scorn it. Too long she has stood alongside queues watching women line up at pumps where water comes in a trickle from a sputtering tap.

She will not tell me of the arrest. And I cannot tell her I have learned of it through Sarju Yadav. But he will ask her if I know. He will joke with her about me. He will question her about the intimate details of her life. He will smoke sweet *bidis*, meet his mates' eyes, lashes dipping upon irises of yellowing hope, will loll on his *charpai* and she will be amongst them, and the smell of his oil will cling to her clothes.

Sarju Yadav will graduate this year. But he bathes his buffalo with the same vigour as his father did. Reva says to him, Sarju teach me, and he holds her hand under his and alongside, and gently they feel the

teats. Their hands go up and down in motion. Sarju Yadav's *lungi* strides up and slips open. In modesty he stands, folds it in half and tucks it about his waist. Now he squats, the checked cloth taut against his hairy thigh. She squats too, having tied her *dupatta* across her waist. Then he holds her hand and raises himself slightly, holds the teat and presses it down. She does the same. They do it in unison. Her hands over the plump healthy flesh and his firm dark ones over hers. I can shout, I could call out. She will look defiant, and he will wear that amused look. He will finally know about us.

There are days when I lie in bed as if asleep but sleep won't come. I strain to hear sounds from Reva's room, of her putting away pens, books, of the clatter of a pencil falling, of the soft strain of the light from her lamp, the same lamp under which he used to read Pinter, Chekov, and his medical manuals. I dread it the most when there is no rustle, when there is no light, when the lamps go off, when I cannot hear the sounds of her sleep. I dare not get up, I dare not see her bed unslept in; have small footfalls taken them away through the creaking swing door of the pantry? Fancy has paved a road for her that will take her off on an aerial highway to his room, a room filled with laughter of raucous friends, and she will roll into the dip of his *charpai*, snuggle against him and his mates, and they will again pass arms about her shoulders; comrade, some *garam chai*, they will nudge. Come my Reva, come comrade of my night; and in the morning again I will see his face. Screams will split open my mind and I will spit on that... Sarju Yadav.

He would not dare, he would not...not when the good doctor was alive...no — then the smell of his cigar had kept him obsequiously at the door,

where it was decreed he should remain. Hush, hear, what is it, that...that noise building up. So early? It comes louder. Who are they? Why...it is those Yadavs and Mewas and Jhurris! In procession again? They are stopping at my gatepost. Why are they stopping by my gatepost? Look, they are holding aloft those green flags again. They are shouting slogans...about caste, about liberty, about land.... whose land? They are shouting against an old lady, living in a large sombre house full of memories, while they, the youth, with memories to make, live in outhouses. Their shouts grow louder — throw out the *netas*, throw out the teachers.. throw out this old...witch...? Is it... I? But... this is my home...is this not my land?

What has the good doctor done, serpents in my bosom, where did I go wrong? I kept them in my home, they used my water, my electricity...they used my daughter...and now... they want to take my land too? *Yooou bi.....cchu* Yadav. Reva, oh my Reva, is she too with them? Who, who will tell me?

She comes running, in her outstretched hand a green banner, she comes running towards the gate, her hair streaming. She slams it, is locking it and sticking the flag upside down to bolt the gate post. They are chasing her but she is holding the bamboo post of the banner horizontally between her chest and gate. She is barring them with her frail body. They are screaming at her to let them in and she is shouting back. I cannot hear what she says but I see Sarju Yadav, taller and stronger than the lot, pushing his way to the front and begging her to move away. He is pointing a finger at me proud and distant in my porch and she is beating her chest and pleading with him. He is cursing, raising his hands

threateningly, but she holds steadfast. The crowd is surging. They want to burst the gate open and trample over her, they look sullenly at Sarju Yadav. Why won't he let them, why is he arguing with this...slip of a girl who lives in a large house and cannot choose? What use can she be to them? What power can her diminutive form hold over him? But she is standing still, she is taunting him, she is ... spitting on the ground. Ah Reva, She has... chosen.

I am frozen with fright, I cannot move, I want to run to her and hold her in my arms. But I know all my



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strength cannot hold the mob. It will come in like the deluge, it will take her and me. Wait..somehow something has stood still. I can hear only her voice, only hers... Sarju Yadav is still and so are those others. Slowly the kaleidoscope of people, colour shift, I see a new pattern ... they are drifting, the people... they are melting. As they scatter away I see the last of them leave. My body defreezes, the nerves that have tensed slacken and I move very slowly towards her, but she is immobile. I walk erect and proud to the gate. Beyond, there is no one. I cannot believe a minute ago it was crowded. I move slowly and reach my daughter and I put my hand on her shoulder. She shakes it off. Slowly I place it

there again. I feel the tremor. I know she is crying.

“Come,” I tell her. “Come, Reva, your tea has grown cold.”

We sit in the dining room where the evening sun streams in, we see Sarju Yadav's buffalo lowing, but the outhouses are bare. Tomorrow he will take his buffalo away.

Tomorrow I will call my lawyer. He will talk to brokers. I need a new house, we need to move away from this crumbling *moffusil* town where the good doctor and his father practised, to a new city, a strong city where there are people on scooters and cars, where there are shopping malls and cinema halls and colleges, where there are no strikes, where on Sunday evenings you can go to the club. I need to play cards again. It isn't so difficult to build a new house. I can always take my things from here, cupboards, tiles..

And Reva?... I know what my Reva wants. I know what her body longs for. It is for the warm strength of Sarju Yadav, for the muscled tensile strength of his large hands to wrap themselves about her slim body. She wants to feel their coarseness, the smell of oil in his hair, the shape of his brass *lota*, its heavy round-bottomed metal in her hands. She wants to fuse her body onto his on the taut twisted hemp of his *charpai*. She wants to feel it swing beneath their weight. She wants it to sink, sink down as she feels one with Sarju Yadav. She wants to enter his spirit, she wants to steal some of it for herself. She wants him to be part of her, his oil, his *lota*, his hands that milch buffalo, the heady smell of stale sweat, she wants him and through him..... she wants to inherit her country.

I cannot let her have it. □

*Manju Kak is a New Delhi based writer and the author of the novel First Night in Colonelpura from Penguin . Her collection of short stories is forthcoming.*