

THE RIOT
A SHORT STORY BY DEEPAK JESWAL

All incidents, characters and portrayals are fictitious and work of imagination. Any resemblance to anyone living or dead is purely coincidental. All views in the story are of the characters and not of the author.

When the night envelops the day in its dark, strong arms, the day submits itself like a beloved in her lover's arms.... content and satisfied, they merge into oneness, that is fulfilling, enriching and fertile. On such a balmy evening, Saagar and Farzana, made soft silent love...the rustling of the sheets, the gentle sighs of Farzana, and the hot sweat of the naked bodies, echoed the quietness of the vast expanse of the fields outside. The sun had nearly set, and the redness spread over the azure sky like a veil on a shy woman's face. They were two lovers, like the night and day, meeting, mating in a dilapidated old inn on an expanse of arid countryside. It was very quiet, very silent, very sensual evening...the field spread into the vastness, and the sky bent over the earth, to touch its face over the horizon.

The train came to a screeching halt on Platform No 2 of Ghonth, a small hamlet on the border of the state. There was the usual clamor of the coolies trying to catch hold of the elusive customers. There were only a few those ever got off at the nearly forsaken station. And a dozen coolies instantly mobbed off whoever did.

" Just ten rupees, Sahib.... will drop you till the *tonga*"..." Just eight rupees *sahib*...will arrange for *tonga* also". They shouted and cried, and pushed each other, and the lucky one grabbed the bag and started walking towards the exit, while the hapless customer just ran behind him.

A tea vendor - cum - rustic burger seller screamed his product in a sing-song manner, hitting the iron stove with his ladle. A passenger hollered from the front bogey, and the vendor started his rushing, pushing aside any one who came his way.

A lady argued for the exact change with the magazine seller. A group of *sadhus* suddenly started to chant the name of the Lord Rama, accompanied by the *dholak*, and *manjira*. It was a clutter at the station, whenever a train stopped here, which was few and far between. There was noise and more noise.

The station itself was a small one, built by the British as a resting inn cum shelter for the labor that they took to the North Western Frontier (now in Afghanistan) for the cultivation of poppy. Now it was a dirty, dusty town that just went about its existence in a non-committal manner like India's many towns.

On this day, however, there was something unusual. Something cruel that lurked. The noise and clutter housed an evil undercurrent. A group of men, in short beard, were standing with some odds and ends, at the corner of the station, all of them chanting Allah in a low hypnotic tone.

The train rang its shrill whistle, cutting into the din like a knife into the heart of a man. The train grunted, and started to roll out of the station.

Suddenly the group standing on the corner gave a loud roar. With an animalistic energy, they rushed towards the train, their arms waving, brandishing swords and knives and hockey sticks. A few carried gallon cans. Three of them jumped onto the engine, and pushed the driver aside. The rest entered Coach No AS2, third from the engine. The sadhus, who were still chanting the name of the Lord, were taken aback.

" You bastards, you shall pay for harming us" screamed one from the gang. The *sadhus* pushed to get to the door, but were obstructed. Outside, everyone was paralyzed by the sudden outburst. Two robust young men, with beards, kept vigil with fire in their eyes. None of the bystanders on the station dared to come near.

The fanatics inside poured kerosene and petrol from the cans on the *sadhus*; they tried to resist, but in vain. They were all cramped in the small coach, and the door was blocked, they tried to oppose, and push, and hide beneath the seats. Some entered the toilet on the far end. Others knocked to be let in. The shower of petrol continued, on all of them, on seats, on windows. And there was swish, a match was lighted.

"You Bastard you shall die...*Allah o Akbar*" screamed the mob, and threw the match on the seat. A fire leaped and ran through the cabin like a swift snake. They jumped out of the door, and closed it from outside. As the flames came up, passengers from other coaches also clambered out and ran out of the station. There was a rush, an exodus.

There were screams, shouts, cries as the Sadhus, tried to break open the door, climb out of the iron-grilled windows....they burnt, roasted....the mob kicked at the burning bogey, and shouted " Allah Be Great" and ran out of the station - nameless bunch of hooligans, lost to the wilderness from where they had come.

The flames leapt into the evening, like a dragon trying to gobble the sky; the redness merged with the setting sun; the screams sliced through the air into the setting darkness - futile, fervent and frustrated.

.....

His steps echoed on the marbled floors of Raj Bhawan, as he walked swiftly towards the cabin on the far end. He was tall, with long strides, and his hands trembled as they held a facsimile page.

With a quick jerk he opened the door. A huge mahogany table covered most of the opulent room, decorated with portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, and other freedom fighters.

The occupant of the desk looked up in surprise. "Ishwar--" he started to speak, but broke off, seeing the ashen face of his visitor.

Ishwar threw the fax pages on the table, and screamed "Have you seen this, Gupta?"

Gupta picked up the ruffled sheets with his podgy hands, and read through the fax. It was a long press release, in fine print typed in single space, with no breaks. Gupta was in his late fifties, had shrewd cunning eyes, enveloped by large round plastic spectacles; a thick nose that towered over dark puckered lips, black with the smoke of the Gold Flake that he smoked non stop. Starting his career as a mere party worker, he had risen fast to the seat of the Chief Ministership in the state, largely due to his shady and shoddy links both in the business and the under world.

Gupta's fat body fit snugly into the comfortable leather seat, and could have made use of more space, if it had been available. His eyes darted through the page in swift fox like movement, and after reading it through he let out a small whistle.

"Bastards they are!!!" he exclaimed. The fax was a brief account of the Gothra Burnings. "When did this happen?"

Ishwar raised his brows questioningly - surely the CM would be the first to know of such an important happening. But seeing Gupta's non-committal stand, he replied, "One hour back probably."

"They should be hanged for this"

Ishwar looked at his Chief Minister curiously. "Are you a fool?"

Gupta took the remark with affront. Ishwar was a power crazy man who made or broke ministers. His clout in the political circles was strong. As a leading man of various industries, policies were formed or destroyed to suit his needs, and some for his whims. No political party ever denied any access to him. And they all owed their tenure, and the easy comfort thereon, to Ishwar Chandra. Prone to some nasty language, many bore with him for their ulterior interests. And for Gupta, his entire power centre lay on the fulcrum of Ishwar. If the latter so much as swayed, Gupta would be out. So, Gupta kept quiet, and stared blankly at his mentor.

"Don't you see the opportunity in this?" spat out Ishwar.

"Opportunity?" mumbled Gupta

"Yes...create riots my friend. Kill Muslims from Hindus....and I shall provide the weapons and means. Destroy the entire leather industry of the Muslims in this"

" But...." interrupted Gupta, his tongue darting over the black lips nervously.

"Don't you see? The elections are there round the corner. You need the Hindu votes. They can be won only this way. Are you blind to this ? "

Gupta was not blind to this. But he was not a fool also. He saw much more. Ishwar's tannery was facing trouble from the nouveau riche Muslims settled from Dubai and Kuwait. And he needed to destroy them if he wanted his monopoly on the leather trade to continue. Gupta hated Ishwar. He hated that long mean face, the nasty brown wolfish eyes, the never ending arms, that lay sprawling on his desk, and the long fingers that were drumming on the polished mahogany desk. Ishwar sat contended, looking at Gupta's timid fat face, like a child enjoying an ant trapped in a glass. Like the ant, Gupta could only get up, move feverishly from one end to another, but could not escape. Ishwar had too many secrets with him that could put Gupta in jail forever.

The fingers drummed a dull drone. Gupta walked towards the window, and looked out into the night. It was early winter, the sun had set early. There was a soft cool breeze outside. But he could not feel it, the window was barred. It never opened; he had tried it a couple of times. Like him, he thought, trapped and stuck. At this moment he wondered if it was all worth it or not. But then, the luxuries were too difficult to give up.

Turning back with a sigh, Gupta picked up the black receiver of his telephone.

.....

"I did not switch off the fan before leaving home."

Saagar was just drifting into the no-man's land of sleep, when he woke up with a jerk hearing Farzana's voice. They lay together in the night, with just a small squeak of the fan overhead interrupting the quietness in a dull rhythm. Both were naked, her arms around his torso, her head lying on his arms, which wrapped around her. Without thinking or acknowledging, his hand was caressing the soft silkiness of her arms.

"How unromantic Fazu....." he complained. " How did you think of the fan just now?"

" Just like that.It just came in my mind"

In the distant, somewhere very far off, a group of village women were singing a folk song in a tuneless dull chorus.

" I love you "

" You really know how to jump topics!" He said, kissing her head.

" And I am hungry..."

" Hungry for what....." he teased.

" You naughty doggy " she hit him mockingly on the hairy chest.

Saagar and Farzana were on their honeymoon. The past one month had been tiresome. There were rituals, celebrations, parties. And finally the entire night of marriage ceremonies which had left both exhausted. So after resting for a day at Delhi, they were now out to Nainital for a holiday. On the way, while driving, a strange sexual undercurrent had passed through them, which neither could resist. So they had stopped at this nearly broken down inn, off the highway. They were on their own, and no hurry to reach anywhere. Their love making had been rough and smooth at the same time, an intense longing that was getting fulfilled after two years of courtship, parental opposition and finally the marriage. Parental opposition as they both belonged to two different religious community. But the parents of both were ultimately mature enough to understand that Saagar and Farzana could not make any meaningful relationship with any one else. Hence they gave in. Moreover, both the families belonged to the upper middle class strata of society where religion was just a few rituals on festivals. Otherwise, God was an entity that had succumbed to money , business and other more necessary items of life .

Shakirapur was not a town; it was more of a village with some shops strewn on a broken down Main Road, some kilometer inside from the National Highway. As the shops ended was the Rest In Hotel, a ramshackle of a building, shady to the core. But it added to the nature of adventure when the two love birds stopped there.

Saagar squeezed Farzana in his strong arms, and felt contented, loved and fulfilled.

" Dinner ? "

Farzana nodded.

Together, they dressed and walked down the stairs to the main lobby.

The lobby was dimly lighted with a couple of bulbs that bathed the room in a dull yellow light. The manager who had met them stood in front of the dark brown reception desk. The carpet below was worn out, and was also brown in color. The room was a cramped one. Apart from the reception desk there was one Rexine Sofa, two armchairs surrounding a dirty stained glass table.

" Hello sir" said the obsequious manager.

"*Chacha, khaane ko kuchh milega?*" Saagar.

The manager, a man in his mid forties, with speckled face that told the story of measles long time back, smiled. He had long teeth, that protruded from his face. He wore a traditional Muslim dress.

" We don't have a restaurant here. But the wife was just preparing dinner , you could join us "

" No no---" started Saagar

" *Arre mian*, have it no. Its pure, we have both just broken our Ramazan. And will be delighted to have you two. "

Farzana blushed. She had never in her life kept the holy fast of Ramazan.

" *Chacha*, tell Farzana to be a devout too" teased Saagar.

" And you , sir?" questioned the manager, Ikram Bhai.

" He is Hindu" said Farzana. She was now used to this sort of questioning.

Ikram Bhai smiled benignly. "Come on in, do join us. It's simple *dal* and *roti*. In any case, all the shops have closed down in Shakirapur, you won't find anything else."

Saagar and Farzana looked into each other eyes, and both read consent in the others.

Together, they entered the door just behind the reception desk, which housed the residence of the owner Ikram Bhai.

The dinner was light and well cooked by the demure *burkha* clad wife of Ikram. They were amused at the love story of the two. Both enjoyed every moment of the evening.

It was the night of love...and hatred was just a corner away.

.....

The riots broke out in the entire state simultaneously. No one knew how or when, but just about everyone was ready to kill his neighbor, provided he was of the opposite religion. It was as if some epidemic had swooped on the sanity of mankind, which made them thirsty of the blood of another man. There were rapes, killings, looting, arsonery and abuse. Blood flowed easily than water. There was no mercy, no hope. Children and women had no consideration. The mob just went from house to house, in their satanic mission killing and kicking and abusing.

And they reached Shakirapur in the afternoon.

In fact it reached there a little before, when Saagar was dressing. He had switched on the 14' television provided in the so called "De luxe" room. The buttons were all broken down, and there was no name of the manufacturer visible. The remote was equally ancient, with the figures nearly invisible due to excessive usage.

It was there on the news - the killing at Ghonth, followed by the immediate riots in various parts of the country. Eager cameramen had already reached the affected areas, and inquisitive journalists poked and pushed their microphones in front of injured and semi injured people callously recording their reactions. The riot had already left some 50 people dead, and an equal number maimed.

It was spreading fast, claimed the news reporter.

"It's the Hindus who are leading the troop this time. They feel they have to avenge the death of the 30 dead *sadhus* at Ghonth, But the Muslims are not far behind in taking out their swords. This is Raj laxmi reporting from..."

As they listened to this an awkward silence befell on the couple.

Somewhere outside, they heard a few screams and shouts, a clatter as rusty shutters of the shops were being forced down. They could hear shouts for help. Farzana ran to the balcony, and looked out, and gave a small cry.

" Saagar they are here....." she cried worried.

He reached the balcony, to see a sword piercing a man's heart. There were a group of saffron clad men, shouting " *Jai Shri Ram*" and kicking and throwing things out from a shop at the far end of the street. Other shop keepers were bringing down the shutters; they were running away from the mob, which was now concentrating on ruining another shop next to the one which they just had. The street was filled by people running, on scooters, horns blaring, pushing and shoveling.

Outside their door, there was a loud rude knock.

Saagar opened the door, Ikram rushed in .

" Hurry *saheb*, Leave....there is a riot on in Shakirapur"

He rushed out to knock on the next room, probably the only other guest of the Hotel.

Saagar shoved his clothes into the night bag, and holding Farzana's hand, ran down the stairs, and out of the hotel. Immediately they were caught in the rush of people.

Their car was standing some yards away, in front of a broken down building, as that was the only place for it to be parked.

As he rushed towards it, his hand lost his grip over hers. A large group of men came out of the opposite building, (it was some sort of a school probably) and nearly carried him away, like a wave carrying off a twig in its arms. Farzana cried out. He ran towards her, but could not reach near.

Suddenly, he saw the hotel keepers wife coming out, and enveloping Farzana, she took her into a by lane, just as the sword brandishing mob entered a shop two buildings away. Saagar was dragged a few inches by the frenzied crowd from the school, and he stumbled over a fallen body, and his head hit the tarred road. A sharp pain ran through his head. The students of the

school had almost passed away, and he saw one of the mobsters running towards him, a long sword in his hand, glimmering in the sunshine.

"I am a *hindu* " he screamed in desperation and tried to get up but rudely, he was pushed back. The man with the sword eyed him, trying to weigh if Saagar's statement held any truth. But before either could react, they heard another sound.

"*Saala Hindu?* " a gruff voice called. A young lad of seventeen in a *kurta pyjama*, and the holy cap of Muslims appeared from behind the door of the school.

He kicked Saagar on the chest, and took out a small knife from his pocket

For a split second their eyes met. Saagar saw the fire of rage in that man's eyes...the rage of a mad man.

" Leave him " the man with the sword said.

The Muslims attention was diverted towards the man with the sword.

The two engaged in a verbal duel, and were nearly on the verge of hitting each other, but another wave of mad crowd was near, and the attention got diverted.

Saagar nearly lost his consciousness, when a strong arm gripped him from behind, and took him into the hotel. He heard the front door close with a bang, and he was pushed and stumbled to the back side, towards the Ikram's residence, where the couple had had dinner last night. He managed to see that two arms were dragging him, they were strong, and muscled, and they belonged to Ikram. He got on his feet, and followed Ikram out from the back door into a narrow alleyway. The alley led into another narrow lane, a pig sat there, and the place smelt of shit. He followed Ikram without active consciousness in a maze of narrow lanes bordered with tall broken cement and mortar houses, finally into an open park, and into a square white and green building. The noises were now far behind him, and he stumbled into the building and fell down.

.....

The tension in the night was tense.

Saagar sat cross legged on the corner. Farzana, sat beside him, her head on his shoulder. Both were safe for now, but for how long they did not know.

During the commotion in the morning, when Farzana's hand had slipped from Saagar's, Ikram's wife had brought her to the same place, where Ikram had dragged him to in his semi-conscious state. It was a mosque - a safe refuge for Muslims. The large iron doors were shut and bolted. There were some twenty odd people who had taken refuge here. The mosque had two huge halls, with cement flooring, and walls filled with inscriptions from the Quran. Saagar and Farzana were alone in the second inner hall, and they sat on the cold floor, with a matted window a little above them. A forlorn bulb shone outside from a street lamp. The light filtered through the window in an eerie design. The lights of the room were off. The others were outside; they could hear the small humdrum of conversation from the other room.

" No one knows where we are " said Saagar. He was worried and anxiety writ large on his face. " What will papa say?"

"I know....they don't know we stopped here. They will be waiting for our phone call tonight"

" Will we be safe ?" asked Farzana, her voice trembling.

A shiver ran down his spine. He looked into her horrified eyes, and saw the reflection of the same fear that he could feel in his heart. What if they could not come out alive? Somewhere outside was a mob raging mad.

"Don't worry, everything will be ok " he tried to reassure her, but his voice betrayed his feelings. They spoke in soft whispers. " I saw death today in that man's eyes."

He recounted his story.

"My God... how mean!! How can anyone kill someone like this?"

"Probably it is a collective revenge. How could they kill the innocent *sadhus*...imagine being burnt alive"

Farzana shuddered.

And though he did not mean to say it, the words just tumbled out of his mouth "You Muslims are real brutes!" They were out before he could even think what he had said. Perhaps, the eyes of the killer on the street were still haunting him. Perhaps it was a suppressed feeling somewhere honed into him right through his childhood. But they came out. They came out at this inappropriate time, sitting in the mosque, with his newly wed Muslim wife!

He might have followed it with an apology, but Farzana's arm withdrew from his shoulder, and she retorted, also a split second too soon, " And what were Hindus doing killing and looting there?"

A cold wind wafted through the window. It sliced through the space created by Farzana moving away from Saagar's warm body. It felt chilly and icy.

He was suddenly angered at her remark.

"What you guys did at Gonth was no healing!!" he replied back.

"Saagar I am amazed" she said indignantly." How can you justify the killings of one set of people by another? I was nearly killed there when you just drifted away."

Their voices were no longer in whispers. It was loud and ringing, and it echoed in the empty room.

"Come on Farzana. Muslims are known to be plunderers right from the time of history"

His voice was rising like his anger. She could feel her cheeks redden too. What nonsense, she thought.

" Don't forget Ikram saved your life."

"Yeah big shit!! From a school child who was carrying a knife! Is that what is taught in these *madradas*? To kill? To murder innocent people?"

" Go to hell.Your ingratitude is amazing. I never realized you could be so callous"

" And what are you showing"

"It's all because you don't want to submit to the fact that this country should have been of us. You people demanded for a separate country, and got it, and still languish here in stink and stench and owe your allegiance there only"

"You are impossible." She got up, and started to leave. "You only want to rule...that's why you married me too thinking that you could rule over me also"

Her voice was sharp and cruel. It hurt him. To her, his voice grated.

"Just shut up" he said and turned his face away.

His breath was rising. What was this woman talking about? All along he had read of how the Muslim rulers had invaded the country, looted it of its wealth, and plundered the nation. They did not belong here also. Why was she talking some nonsense?

"Everytime, a Muslim does something wrong, its right and secular" he carried on, his voice steely with rage.. " And when we do something it becomes communal. Bah!"

She just got up and went out of the room, without replying.

He was left alone in the dark room.

.....

"Ishwar, its two days now. The press is not talking kindly. Can we stop this now?"

Gupta looked at him straight, but immediately retracted back, seeing the wily brown eyes.

"You sweet idiot," smiled Ishwar. "What does the Press know? They have to write what is politically correct. I know of journalists who are happy, but can't write about it openly. And the Press votes hardly matter, do they?. Come on now, don't you see that the common Hindu votes, and he adores you, for helping this extortion. And don't worry, if my leather is saved, I will give you double the money for your electioneering. Now, stop worrying over silly little lives"

Ishwar spoke as if he was admonishing an errant child. They were in Gupta's office.

"Now my boy," continued Ishwar, his long fingers starting their drumming on the desk." Get ready for a press conference. And put on a sad face. Give the press what it wants. And give the people what they want." With a sudden sharpness he added, "And give me what I want"

Perhaps Saagar had dozed off, because he woke up with a start at a sharp sound somewhere in the outside. For a second he was not aware of his surroundings, and his eyes took some time to adjust to the dark room. He felt the hardness of the cemented floor on which he lay. His throat felt dry, a dull pain throbbled in his temple, and he could feel a low chilly wind, coming from the window just above him. He was all alone, and then consciousness seeped back into him. He had fought with Farzana, and she was no longer there any longer. What had transpired between them ran like a reel in his mind. Immediately he felt a faint sense of guilt, but as the conversation replayed in his mind, he felt his blood churning, and his anger was rising. He was never a staunch Hindu, in fact, he was a liberal, he even wished a many of his colleagues on Eids. That is why he had fallen for Farzana also. Religion was immaterial at that time. Yet, in his mind, somewhere deep down his sub-consciousness, ran the ghettoisation that is

inadvertently taught along with the alphabets in school and home. His mind raced to the small by lanes that he had been dragged to while being brought to this mosque. To him that was how Muslims lived, bordered off from the main society- living in dredge, poverty and dirt. He smelt the offensive stench of the pigs, the open drain running on both side of the narrow lane, filled with human faescia-a smell that mixed freely with the meat being cooked inside the houses in strong raw spices, to create an extremely pungent odor; he saw the stained, nose running faces of kids being pulled back by large breasted, women hiding their faces behind the *burqa*; their foul breath caught in the dirty fabric; men with stained teeth, smoking unfiltered cigarettes. He abhorred them, their sight, their smell and their loud gruff voices. His adrenalin rushed and he wanted to go out and hit all of them for killing those innocent *sadhus* traveling on a train back from a holy pilgrimage. He now understood the rage of that man with the sword, yes, he was one of them. That man also had a life , probably parents, a job and a wife too. But he was also on the streets for a cause....now Saagar realized how that gang came into existence. They were one of his brethren only. He belonged to them.His education was immaterial, his liberal outlook a farce that he had created around himself in his pseudo intellectual urban upbringing; that was a facade that was demolished by the riot. Saagar became a carnal force, ready to destroy, devoid of feelings, and for him now Farzana was a mere object that belonged in an enemy camp.

He had to get out of here. He had to leave this mosque. With a strong resolution he got up to leave, just as the door opened, and Ikram came in.

" How are you feeling?" asked Ikram. He carried a large aluminum glass filled with water, and offered it to Saagar.

Saagar kept quiet, and looked at the water with disdain. The glass smelled, perhaps of the breath of the previous user of the glass, it was a stale smell of meat and tobacco.

But the thirst got the better of him, and he gulped the water, which soothed his parched throat.

"They know you are a Hindu" explained Ikram on his own.

Saagar hated him for this. He was not scared by a bunch of uncouth hooligans. Was this a threat? Or a friendly advise ?

"Outside there are a bunch of them standing pelting the mosque" explained Ikram. "They will go soon. They are only a few and we are at least fifty"

Another sharp noise. So that's what had woken up Saagar- an altercation.

" I have to go now" said he rudely and walked out of the room.

The room outside was also a bare hall, with inscriptions from the Quran on the light green walls. It was filled with men ready for action.

He heard the shouts outside, and went past a few to the forefront.

At the front gate, a Muslim was there with a gun ready to shoot, and smiling. "You bastards" he shouted. "Go away ".

Beyond him he saw two Hindus, throwing a stone. One of them was hit by the bullet. Saagar was aghast.

Suddenly he heard someone speak, "There's the Hindu husband of Farzana sister"

Sharply he turned away and ran with his head low to the back entrance, pushing a few surprised men, and stepped out into the cold night.

Farzana stood there.

Their eyes met. Her round fair face showed the remains of the track where the tears had rolled down freely. Her *dupatta* hung loosely around her head and a few nasty naughty strands of hair peeped out and bordered her expressive visage like a dark cloud around the moon.

He stepped towards her furtively.

.....

The next morning, on the radio, they heard that the curfew was imposed at Shakirapur for another day but it was lifted in the evening.

The market place was abuzz with news, activity and gossip. There were a few incidents of Muslims taking to street, but the police were taking control. Perhaps the mad rush was subsiding.

However at one place activities were at a tense situation. It was a mosque holding a Muslim wife to a Hindu husband - the husband was now at the Laxmi Narayan temple, just half a kilometer away.

.....

"You have to tell where that bastard is" shouted the man, across the thin muslin curtain.

Farzana backed away in a shudder. Her night had been of terror, of a vague realization that she had married the wrong man. His intense vulgar display last night in the cold room had left her very weak, very sad, and very exhausted. This was her clan, her own, who would protect her.

Farzana sat in the women section of the building separated from the men by the curtain. They were now at the *Maulvi's* residence behind the mosque. Last night after her fight with Saagar, she had rushed out of the room and cried on the inn keeper wife's shoulder. She was comforted.

"You have sinned by sleeping with that man" continued the man. "God is giving you the chance to atone your wrongs. This is the holy month of Ramzan, give him up and ask the Lord for forgiveness."

She could not recall when she had last bowed to offer her Namaaz. She was never trained for that, nor did her parents insist on this. For her Id was just another festival, like the Diwali, for shopping and fun. Her cosmopolitan upbringing had always challenged traditionalism. She was the only daughter of a member of the Foreign Services. She had traveled to many foreign locations with her father, and in the long run adapted an open culture, which also included going to the Church with her school friends at some places of her father's postings. Her education in computer was her only obsession, and her job at a reputed software firm was her blinding passion, apart from the love that she thought she had felt for Saagar. For her religion was just a column in most of the forms that she had filled while searching for a job.

But last night she realized she had been perhaps wrong. Her religion was like the birth mark on her chin, a furrowy mole which Saagar called her "Beauty Spot". She could not change that, or her religion.

"Child, please understand, we have to stand united if we have to ever stay peacefully here in this land" said a voice. This was the inn keeper's wife, sitting next to her, holding her in a motherly manner. She rested her head on the shoulders of the lady.

"For generations these Hindus have truncated our growth to suppress us ", the man continued. "As a result of which our *quam* has never risen from poverty. It is their mean and vile way of ensuring their superiority over us; to keep us to the ground so that they can continue with their atrocities. They have to pay."

His voice was loud, gruff and steely.

"And do you think your husband will leave you alone. Has he not already left you all alone here? He does not care for you. Tell us, before he comes to some mischief. "

The tears that Farzana was trying to hold back broke the dam and gushed out with a severe force. Her body shook as she cried, wetting the blouse of the lady to whom she clutched with a child-like intensity.

She started to speak but her voice failed her. She saw Saagar of last night, and she spoke.

.....

" Look they are coming!!!!" shouted Hari Ram.

He was standing at the window. Saagar was just behind him .

Hari Ram was the man he had seen with the sword yesterday. And he was the one who had given him refuge in the temple. There were just the two of them here. The priest and other workers of the temple had already fled away.

"Look -she betrayed you" he spat in anger, and picked up his sword and fastened the gun to the belt. "Quick we have to rush out....and kill them on their turf"

He shut the iron gate of the temple and bolted it. Then he closed the second wooden door.

Saagar's eyes moistened as he saw the crowd down the street rushing towards the temple, their voices ringing out a crude war like noise.

He followed Hari Ram to the back yard, out into the courtyard where a large *peepal* tree stood. Outside, the back lane led to the main road, where perhaps his car was still parked. He just wanted to run from this mad house to his car and drive away. And forget these two days forever.

" Hurry up, Saagar" urged Hari Ram. " Which way was the mosque ?"

.....

It was early December but the sun shone relentlessly on Shakirapur that afternoon. Farzana stood on the outside of the courtyard, looking at the forlorn figure of Hari Ram racing on the tarred dusty road- a lonely mad man perhaps in search of a fight. She hated him, and everything that he stood for. With a firm resolve she just turned her back and watched the looming facade of the mosque, its crevices, the peeled off paint, the bricks peeping out of the plaster of paris, the stains on it...

"Saagar" she whispered to herself. " Why did this day happened? For what purpose, for what end? "

.....

Noises echoed, the din of people, the clash of swords, the voices of pain, screams of death...Hari Ram, in his dark blue jeans and denim shirt with a saffron bandanna stood over him " She betrayed you" " She betrayed you" " She Betrayed YOU!!!!!!!"

He woke up with a start. Sweat trickled down his brows, and his breath was short and quick. It took some time for him to adjust to his surrounding. He was in a wooden floored room, on a soft and comfortable bed. On his right side, at a small distance away were the French windows, curtained off by thick beige self-printed curtains. There was a small gap between the folds, and he noticed young daylight- the first few rays from the sun on the mountains beyond.

And then he looked beside him on the bed. Farzana was lying in a fetal position; asleep peacefully, a half smile on her face; the quilt wrapped neatly around her.

And he sighed with relief!

It was all over. The nightmare at Shakirapur had passed. They were now in Nainital- safe and secure, and together.

The only witness to the nightmare was his white Santro car, which had broken side windows, and several large dents. But that was a small price to pay for what could have happened.

His mind replayed the scenes over and over again. The night he left the mosque, he had met Farzana at the door step. Her eyes were filled with tears. All his anger had melted seeing the innocent look on her face, and without realizing he had hugged her. It was at that time they had decided that it was no point in arguing with each other, but there was no escape from the madness also if they revolted. Hence, they decided to go to their respective camps and meet the next morning at the car.

To do this however, Saagar had to somehow kick off Hari Ram. And so to confuse him, Saagar decided to take Hari Ram out to the wilderness beyond the mosque and hit him at the appropriate time and run off.

However when he saw the mob coming to the temple for a while he thought that Farzana had actually betrayed him. Soon, he realized that the mob he thought had come to siege the temple had not even bothered to stop there. They just passed away because their destination was someplace else. Farzana had not betrayed him. As she explained later, she had sent them on a wild goose chase to some outskirt place.

As Saagar was following Hari Ram, he managed to hit him on the neck, before they could reach the mosque, and he had run off to the car. Farzana was late. Nevertheless, he waited. He had nothing else to do. And like she promised, she came. And both escaped to Nainital.

Saagar pulled open the curtains, and opened the door. He inhaled the fresh morning breeze of the hills. The mountains beyond were verdant, cheerful and green.

Farzana stirred in her sleep.

He went to her, and took her in his arms.

"Farzana " he whispered. " I am sorry."

She murmured in her sleep, half opened her eyes, and slid into his arms with content.

"I am sorry; I thought you had almost betrayed me. I am sorry I mistrusted you" he whispered softly.

She smiled, and opened her eyes and looked at him fully. "Its ok...for a minute even I thought you had betrayed me when I saw that man rushing to the mosque."

"Its sheer madness that took over both of us"

"No it was a test from God...we just succeeded", and she closed her eyes again.

Outside, the day had broken out in its entirety; the birds chirruped their sonorous songs. The mountains washed by the dew stood witness to the lovers who snatched their faith and love from the dirty arms of hatred and animosity.

Love conquers all!

**A STORY BY DEEPAK JESWAL
THE END**