

Monday 12th September 2016

Mrs Kaur

My grandson Mandeep lies on his tummy on the rug, legs swinging in the air, crossing his ankles, uncrossing ... He is propped on his elbows with a book. The golden photograph of Sri Harmandir Sahib watches him from the wall. It is so lovely to look at them both.

“If I finish reading this can I do something else? Is it long till Mum and Dad get here?”

“Daddy-ji will be home later. As every day. And Mummy-ji too.”

Aman is making money at his place of work. He buys and sells, buys and sells, what exactly he buys and sells I do not understand. His BMW will arrive home long after my grandson has gone to bed. I hope Suki is making money too, at her fashion shop of clothes, for if not, she will return in a bad mood. And there is really no need. We can easily give away more than the one tenth daan the Guru Gobind Singh required, and still have the radiators hot hot so Mandeep can swing his bare feet and I can become warm again after collecting him from school.

I have a list of jobs. I must pick beans from the garden, make filling for pakoras, marinate the chicken and wash the rice. I must massage my husband's swelling feet. But Mandeep is not a keen reader, and his parents want him to practise more.

“Please read me your story.”

“You won't understand the English.”

“I shall do my best. And when we have both had enough, you can put this in the page to mark where we are up to.”

I pass him the leaflet I was given in the playground, all shiny nails and lips, too daring for me. I think even Suki would not like these bold designs. Mandeep hardly glances at the glossy colours. Why should a boy show interest in such mysteries?

My grandson reading does not pause for breath, and I think he should go more slowly or speak in different voices for I can decipher very little. There seems to be no beginning, no good or bad or special happenings, and soon, comfy on the velvet sofa in the warmth, I have closed my eyes and only hear one phrase: "*Fee fi fo fum*". It comes again and back again.

"*Fee fi fo fum*," I copy. It's a pleasure to feel the shape of the words in my mouth and push my lips wide, high, tight. Behind my closed eyelids I sense the lazy orange sun shining through the front window, as my mouth forms the sounds like a chant and forces them into the dry air.

Mandeep looks up. "That's not right, Bibi." His voice is sharp. "It's *fe-e-e fi fo fum*, then it goes on *I smell the blood of an English MUN.*"

"Oh, these do not sound nice words to me, Mandeep-ji. It means they are killing English people, in your story?"

Mandeep snorts. "It doesn't matter what it means, they just said I have to read it."

With my poor English, I can do so little to help Mandeep become more interested in his school work. His father and brother did not resist learning in this way he has, they would lap it up and ask for more, but this youngest child, to be truthful we can only call him lazy.

"Mandeep, I am sure it does matter. The person who is telling his story put everything there for a reason, you know. Even the blood, no, I think especially the blood."

My grandson's feet on the rug go thump!

"Why don't you stick to *Fee fi fo fum*? Don't worry about the blood bit."

My husband would tell him it is rude, to speak to me so. But I have to confess, until I can puzzle the book out for myself, he is right to imply I am no use to him.

And so I take his advice. Through the late afternoon and evening, I keep the words in my silent mouth; I roll them, bulge them and whisper them as in the shining kitchen, I marinate the chicken and stuff the pakoras, and even while I massage my husband's swollen feet. But I do not know what they mean.

Fe-e-e-e, fi, fo fum ...

Alka Mehta

I can't find anyone who wants to read my book with me. Dad's not back, Mum's watching old *Hotel Inspectors* on TV, enjoying the dust and dirty habits people have even when they're running a hotel people pay to stay in. *Would you believe it?* she tuts.

When I read to Sunil he butts in with fuss and questions. I don't want to be clever older sister all the time. So after supper I go into the tepee in the garden. I read to the butterflies on the purple flowers Mummy said are called buddleia and the friendly blackbirds. I can just see them past the tent flap; the man smart in his black coat and his wife getting the food, worms and seeds, to make her husband sing sweetly. They're a happy family so I like them listening. I try to make it fun for them, with a high chirpy voice for the princess and booming for the men, but quiet so they aren't frightened away. I make Kalpita come for a while but she's worse than Sunil so I make her go away.

The sun begins going down. There's no pretty pink glow in the sky tonight. I mark the page with one of Mummy's bright flyers. The tired bees journey from one flower to another. They nudge right inside till I can't see them at all, then wriggle out backwards.

There's a shadow where the tent opens and Dad's standing there in his shirtsleeves, face turned up for the scent of the white flowers called jasmine. Does he know I'm here? His phone rings. He sighs and digs inside his pocket. When he sees the caller ID he makes a snorting noise and his voice sounds in a temper. It's fast, mixing Indian and business words. I'm trapped in the tent because I know he wouldn't want me to overhear. Oh! Those words are bad! He never swore in front of us like that.

The phone call lasts ages, long enough for the light to leave the garden. If only I was inside ... Dad's pacing round the grass shouting and the neighbour bangs her window closed like she's shocked too. That stops him; with the phone pressed against his ear he runs in

banging the French doors behind him. Quick like a photo I can't stop someone taking I see him lifting the inside handles, wrenching them against each other to lock them tight.

I'm left outside. Wind makes the tepee walls shiver and I'm shivering too, and my crossed legs shake so *Rapunzel's* surprised in my lap. Outside the tent the sky's dark grey. Dad's gone through to the front. He didn't turn on the back-room lights. The birds are silent and there are no more busy bees. Now I want Kalpita but she won't come.

In the tepee it's chilly and damp with strange shadows on the cloth walls. I know the shapes are only the wind blowing Mum's fluffy pampas grass but from inside they look massive, like frowning trees looming. Or terrifying birds with enormous wings ... they'll swoop down any minute! Their huge beaks will slash the tent, three swipes enough to gobble up a little girl who foolishly stayed in the garden at night, when shapes change and kind animals go cruel and insects bite and sting hard enough to kill, if you can't get quickly to a pill or find your asthma pump.

What time is it? The bathroom light doesn't go on for Sunil's bath. The tepee's a trap – be brave, break free! Leave the flaps tied shut so nothing goes there in the night. We don't want another trembling hedgehog covered in white blobs, like the one the animal welfare people took away when I was six.

I hammer on the thick glass of the French doors. Nobody comes. The kitchen door's locked too, with the side gate padlocked because it's not bin day. Someone must miss me! They're all inside; soon Mum will be bathing Sunil, then calling for me to have my hair brushed. Huddled on the steps I press my face against the glass but it's so cold ... I breathe and the smudge of my breath on the window warms me up a bit and I can draw pictures with my finger. I'm not allowed. But it serves the adults right, leaving me out here so cold and alone ... Shouts, THUD! from the front hall or the front room! I'm ten times more scared now! Something bad's happening in there and I can't reach anyone to make them stop.

Shut my eyes ... put my fingers in my ears. My brain's crashing against my skull thinking what to do. Miss Patel says I'm sensible. She gave me a sticker for finding the answer to problems in books. The book I have today is inside the tepee. Only a few steps away, but in the blackness where it's too scary to move to find anything. Still, I remember: the story was also about a girl on her own; a girl shut in, not shut out. How did she escape? She was in a tower: I expect it was tall and round with only one small window high up. No electricity in the old days, just candles if someone gave her some. She too had a friendly bird that visited. She could just reach to lean out the window and someone might see her from the waist up. (She was very thin, like Mummy is now, and maybe like Mummy she wore silver bangles that'd clink against the glass.) The bird came in daylight but Miss Patel said we could change our stories: perhaps if she needed it badly enough the bird would come at night? It would tell the pampas birds to hush, and make sure no one pecked or gulped and it would keep me friendly company like Kalpita on a good day? Until someone comes?

In the story the princess was bored, not frightened. She was so bored the only thing to do was brush her hair and plait it, brush and plait, undo, plait again. I can use my fingers for a brush and do my own hair ... then at least when they find me I'll have saved them one before bed task and they might be less cross. I pull my fingers through my thick black tresses. "Tresses" is a new word from my story. The pictures show golden hair, but mine is much thicker and shinier than any white girl's. I think "tresses" was invented for Indian hair. Already I can make a plait so thick you have to make a fist to get your hand round it.

The bird in the story told the princess (called Rapunzel but that's ugly so I'll give her my own name, Alka, which means the girl with lovely hair – I wonder if Miss Patel knew that when she gave out the stories?) – the bird told Alka to make a rope of her hair and let it down from the window. Then when the prince rode by on his white horse he could climb up and save her and they could ride away with her behind and live happy ever after.

My thin fingers are five sticks, not a brush, and the ones on the hand I don't write with are useless. I need hundreds of bristles like on Mummy's brush from India. Even if I can make a rope plait, there's no prince riding by. How would he get in through the locked side gate? A prince would be taller than me. He could look over the garden fence to next door to see if there's a light or someone to call, but I can only reach the tiny holes Dad said are called knotholes. No one will see me through them.

So quiet out here now. It's gone quiet inside too, but if I press my ear against the cold glass and really strain I may hear something. There are two grownups and Sunil in there, I know, Sunil probably asleep by now with his round nappy sticking out like the bee bums in the blossoms and his thumb in his mouth making snuggly sounds. Mum says he should be out of nappies by now but at night it saves her changing the sheets every few hours, and it can wait ... my father says *that's disgusting my son should be trained* and Mum says *I don't see you trying*. In the daytime even baby Sunil seems quite grown up, now he's in uniform for nursery school, sitting on a proper chair to eat. I like him being in nappies at night. It shows how different we are, me grown up and sensible and him just a cuddly baby.

But if I wasn't grown up and sensible, I'd have been tucked safely up inside like Sunil. I wouldn't know anything was wrong. I wouldn't be out here thinking I must try and do something to put it right.

Two clicks, the latch of the front door a long way away, and the remote click for the car door. When my dad got this new car he said what he liked best was the quiet engine. Now I almost don't hear it glide away from the house before the sound is gone.

Have they all gone? It's hard to think, with this frightened feeling big like choking. One long howl forces past the huge lump in my throat. I'm screaming my fear. I'm shaking with cold.

Nothing. We're used to sounds at night, foxes and cats and car alarms. No one ever looks. But making noise has unfrozen me. I can move now. I know what to do. I'll make more and more noise until someone, somewhere, does something.

I'm more used to seeing in the dark now. I find a stick. I start tapping gently on the French windows, but you have to hit the glass hard for a sound to go through. So I find a stone. I don't dare throw it – even though I'm angry! How could my parents leave me like this? I'm a child, they should be looking after me! I crouch and tap louder, nearly banging, then REALLY banging, staring through to try and see something. Inside the house is strange, darker than the garden now, nothing moving, no shapes even of the furniture that must be there, the long sofa and the old wooden chair we have to keep for Nana's bad back although it spoils the look of the room.

Tap, tap, TAP.

Bang, bang, BANG!

Between taps and bangs I press my nose against the glass. Aaah! A shape shows up close to mine, separated only by the thickness of the glass, I know what it is but at the same time I don't know; it's a face, my mother's face, torn, bleeding, she's screaming too and I hear Sunil wailing and Mummy's face comes close to mine, her teeth look like the horrible dog across the road and her eyes are white and her skin's glowing pale in the blank dark and then she lies down still and it looks all wrong the way she's lying ...

It can't be my mum. It doesn't look like Mummy. I jerk away from the window. I'm stumbling back to hide from her terrible face. I rip the tepee cloth open and crouch inside, grabbing my book to protect my head from the thing that's hurt my mother. The thing may hurt me next.

My heart thumps so hard it feels bigger than I am. The thing'll hear it ...

Somebody crashes against the gate on the other side – once – again and the wood rips off the posts – Dad will be even crosser! The somebody grabs me and holds me against slippery shiny material with a cold sharp strip of zip against my face and says “Don’t worry, it's going to be all right!”

Sky’s mum from next door. It’s her voice, from inside a cigarette-smell hug. She’s never done that before. I’m trapped inside the strongest, longest, hug I've ever known. I won't get out till she decides. Is she the thing that did that to Mum?

Tuesday 13th September

Safiya Ahmed

“Mummy, you’re not making food, are you?”

Xoriyo puffs out her tummy, gazing down with worry on her face. Each family visit for Eid-ul-Adha yesterday offered more goodies we couldn’t refuse. By the time we got home my stomach felt like a bag hung round my neck on weights and Xoriyo, who normally scampers everywhere, could only just drag herself along.

“No, my love, don’t fret. Let’s look at your beautiful book from school instead.”

We settle to the story of a flying carpet, its jewelled weave thick and heavy. Our old sofa becomes a nest of luxurious cushions blotting out the landlord’s dingy room.

“Wow, look at all these colours ...!”

Tufts of orange and ruby weave through the carpet, turquoise shading into sapphire and jade green into pine and colours running away from my eyes. Below the carpet scenes stretch to the horizon at the edge of the page, hills, valleys, isolated farms and crowded towns, minarets and domes. Xoriyo traces a winding river to the sea, then jabs her finger back on the carpet.

“Pretend we’re there too!”

“Yes! Imagine you’re swooping up and down, gliding, falling, rising ...”

“Ooof.” She makes a face and holds her stomach.

“Oh, don’t worry. Look, if the gusts become too hard the carpet calms the wind.

‘Wind,’ the carpet says, ‘Go and play with the trees or flirt with the waves’.”

On the page Xoriyo prods the tassels. The carpet is flat in the smooth air, flying calmly to the best destination. Xoriyo wonders at the landscapes spread across the double pages. She’s enchanted by shadowed pink clouds that ride between the carpet and the ground. The pictures and the lulling words draw me on board with her. We’re passengers, peeping

over the edge, bathing our faces with pure droplets of iced water and, because it is a story, we feel no pain from the sharp cold.

Xoriyo's enchanted, but the altitude sums up my darker memories of a journey when I was younger than she is now, a journey she must never make. Nobody told my school, or even me, I was going away, but suddenly one day we were on a plane, all hard edges and pale grey plastic, cold metal hurtling through the sky until I was a day older, with films I might not watch. It was dull on the outward flight and painful like serpents inside me on the return, and I have only hazy notions of what happened in between, while we were away.

I remember turbulence: stewardesses whipping things away, passengers tensed and braced, even the fat businessmen no longer nonchalant, everyone lurching and gasping in the air.

On Xoriyo's magic carpet there are no such problems. No seatbelts, no metal trolleys, no pain inside, no weary ladies in lipstick and high heels with fake smiles like that mum with the leaflets in the playground.

"Let's invite guests on the carpet, Mummy. We'll offer them food and drink, like yesterday."

"Some of your new friends from the new school, would you like that?"

"No ... o, ... just people we make up."

Her talking voice, different from her reading voice, reinforces her imagined world. I snap my fingers and a genie appears, balancing a tray on one finger like the Cat in the Hat, with decorated glasses streaked with gold and magic bubbles.

"There's sherbert," Xoriyo suggests, "or hot chocolate ..."

The genie has ruby juices and golden drinks like honey, sorbets and cocktails and warming winter syrups that glow through your body.

On the magic carpet with Xoriyo I'm a child again, whooping with joy and laughter, swooshing, swirling, fearless of the height. We're children together, but also wise: we know the languages of the places we see, our homeland and those of others. We can communicate with any of our fellow travellers ... Xoriyo sees curving blue rivers far below and she knows they are called meanders; she sees oxbow lakes, murrains and wadis and she knows what all these are too. On the magic carpet we understand all people we meet: the goatherd, the engineer, and his toddling twins. We may choose to wear whatever we like from abayas to swimsuits. We are confident in our choices and violence and ignorance can do us no harm.

Really there is no reason my daughter should not make friends at this school, new friends, who can take this journey with us through fresh places and new joys. We can have every passport and none, here; we can belong and invite others to belong with us.

On the magic carpet we are free.