Paro

FIVE MINUTES, SANA was to think later. Five minutes, no more. Possibly less. That was all it had taken.

'I'll take Sana with me,' her mother's elder sister had said. 'One week. She'll get to see Guwahati. And she can help with her cousin's wedding.' She had looked out over the green fields and lowering clouds, the shimmering expanse of the Brahmaputra. 'And she will get gifts. Saris and beads, perhaps even gold.'

That had been an eyewash. But to a naïve thirteen-year-old, and to her equally naïve mother, it had sounded irresistible.

'But we'll have to hurry,' her aunt had added. 'We mustn't miss the ferry.'

They had hurried. There had not been much to pack. What would a paddy farmer's daughter—the third in a string of daughters—possess? A pitiful bundle it was, three cotton saris and a pair of earrings of bamboo fibre and wire.

They had been delayed because of the extended farewells: her mother, tearful; her little sisters, envious; her father, back from the fields, incredulous yet relieved. There had been admonitions, warnings, good wishes. Then, just as they were setting out for the ferry, Mariam had

come running with the news that their cow had gone into labour.

It was a small matter. Small, yet large. It had delayed them for that vital five minutes, while Sana's mother tried to persuade her husband to go help. Sana's aunt had shifted restlessly. They had dithered, and Sana's father had finally followed Mariam back to her hut, while Sana and her aunt had gone their way.

When they got to the churned mud of the bank, the ferry was nearly mid-river. They would have to go the next day.

The rains came that night. Torrents, crashing and thundering, the wind tearing at the roofs, threatening to blow away everything the water did not sweep away.

They had not slept, not a wink. Not even the littlest of the girls. Instead, they had all huddled together, shivering, praying that the hut would stand fast against the rising waters. Knowing it would not. Sometime during the night, Sana's father had stepped out to see how things were, and had hurried back to urge his family up onto the roof. The river was rising rapidly, its banks already half-submerged. Another hour, and the waters would come rushing, drowning everything in their way.

They had climbed up, taking whatever they could, and waited out the long night on the rickety roof. Dawn had brought little relief, just a scene of horrifying devastation: neighbours up on rooftops, the rain still pouring, drowned cattle floating by.

Relief—or what passed for relief—had begun to arrive by the end of the day, with one lone helicopter whirring overhead, letting down meagre supplies. Another night had gone by, another day had dawned. The rain had lessened, stopped. In the afternoon had come more helicopters, more relief. And Usman Bhai.

He called himself Usman Ali. Or Mohammad Khan. Ram Charan. Whatever was needed. It didn't matter to him, I think, because his only religion was money. Shia, Sunni, Hindu—it was all the same to him, and chameleon-like, he could change himself, his look, his accent, his mannerisms, even that instinctive-seeming touching of a taaveez. Or of his forehead and his lips when he passed a temple. The important thing was that the people he met should believe him. Believe he was of their community, a man to be trusted. A man who truly sympathized with them, felt for them. Could, as he promised, get their daughters married? Here, in this place of devastation? Oh, no, where were the men to marry here? No, he would take the girl to Delhi, far though it was. He had the perfect groom in mind.

Five thousand rupees was the price Usman offered. It was more than Sana's father could imagine. Even without looking at the ruins of his home and his life, he knew he could not say no.

Sana's bundle, already packed, was given over into Usman Bhai's capable hands. So was Sana. Her mother cried. Her sisters were bewildered. Her aunt looked torn between envy and mistrust, but it was not her affair.

The train journey to Delhi was long, tedious. Sana had never been in a train—she had never seen so many people, never been jostled and stared at like this. She huddled against the window, an old woman's bony elbow digging into her ribs on one side, the many bundles and bedrolls of her fellow passengers forcing her to sit with her legs tucked up.

So many years have passed, but I still remember Usman. I remember, too, the man who presided at our wedding. An old man, teeth half-rotted, but invested with the authority

of solemnizing a marriage. It was done quickly. I remember the man's eyes, indifferent and dull. I remember another pair of eyes, large, brown. Eyes that have remained the same, all these years, though the look in them has changed.

Delhi overwhelmed Sana, terrified her. Usman took her to a smelly little house where she was made to sit while Usman went to fetch her groom. The room was windowless, its blue-painted walls peeling. Sana wondered what her husband would be like. Handsome, she hoped. Perhaps—considering this was Delhi, and everybody knew people in Delhi were well-off—even rich. Rich enough that she would not have to work in the fields. Not that Delhi seemed to have fields.

Her heart leapt when Usman returned. The man who stepped over the threshold behind him was not bad-looking. In his mid-twenties, clean-shaven and broad-shouldered. His grey-eyed gaze swept over her. 'She doesn't look strong,' he said to Usman when he had finished that cursory inspection. 'Too thin. And she's dark.'

'What do you expect for ten thousand?' Usman had snapped back. 'Madhuri Dixit?'

Sana did not know what they were talking about. Who was Madhuri Dixit? And it wasn't ten thousand, it was five. She remembered that distinctly. She remembered Usman handing the money over to her father, her father counting out each hundred-rupee note.

By the end of the day, she had still not discovered who Madhuri Dixit was—she never would—but she had discovered a lot more. The young man was not her groom. He was merely a go-between, another Usman. The man *he* brought, an hour later, and who was married to Sana that afternoon, was potbellied and thin-limbed. His name

was Basheer. His hair was dyed henna-orange, his mouth dripped paan. He was older than her father.

But he did not treat her like her father did. Not that Sana's father had been a doting man, a devoted father—he had not had the time for that. But he had never been like this. He would never be like this, could not be, thought Sana as she lugged a bucketful of water up the staircase for her husband's bath.

Husband. Yes, husband he was, as he did not hesitate to remind her. As he had emphasized, on that first day, when he had pulled her clothes off and shoved himself into her, heedless of her cries, her shame and confusion. He had left her torn and bleeding, whimpering as she huddled into the evil-smelling sheet. 'I am going out,' he rasped. 'When I get back, I expect to see this place clean and dinner ready.' He spat, leaving a splatter of paan-stained saliva all over the floor. 'Pray that you're a better cook than a cunt, you fool. Otherwise.'

Her cooking did not please Basheer. He sniffed at the pitika, the dish every Assamese mother taught her daughter how to make, before flinging it across the room. 'Boiled potato with mustard oil? Raw mustard oil?' The meat curry he did not comment upon, but he grabbed her hand and pushed it down into the little patila of boiled rice, still steaming. 'Rice? Was that all you could think of? Chappatis, do you hear? I hate rice!'

Her hand blistered, her knees trembling, Sana had crept away, wondering where she would learn how to make chappatis.

Not from the neighbours, who stayed in the other rooms scattered around the shared courtyard of this derelict old haveli. They stared at her with undisguised hostility. She,

the outsider. The one who looked different. The one who cooked differently. The one who was alone, rootless and bootless.

A week later, Basheer brought another man home. A burly man, bearded and with streaks of grey in his beard and hair. He looked wordlessly at Sana as she served him tea. When he left, Sana heaved a sigh of relief. There was something unsettling about the man, something even more frightening than the blind raging of her husband.

The next morning, Basheer had sold her off to the man and she was now *his* wife.

Things would have been different if Basheer had realized that treating a new bride the way he did would only lead to misery… I would not be in this condition, lying on this bed, feeling every sagging rope of it digging into my aching body.

A shadow flits by, crossing the doorway. I am not blind yet, nor deaf, though I cannot speak. I shift, making the bed creak. The shadow stops. Turns, approaches. My eldest, Abdul. 'Yes?' he says. Curt, clipped. Too busy doing nothing. Too busy for a crippled parent. This is what I have come to.

Sana did not understand it at first. Not when she was asked if she would accept the other man—his name was Sajid—as her husband. Not when she was made to nod. Not even when she was given ten minutes to gather her belongings. And then Sajid was taking her away, striding through the galis so fast she had to run to keep up. In a local bus, then into a bus depot, stinking of piss, fuel and fumes. Into a ramshackle bus that whisked them away from Delhi. Three hours' drive, four. Through fields, into villages of mud walls and thorn scrub.

Sana felt a surge—a small but definite surge—of relief.

The city had frightened her. The land, though nothing like the moist, verdant countryside of her home, was not the city. This land, even though it was unfamiliar, was like a stranger waiting to be befriended. She alighted from the bus, bruised and burnt from the past week, but hopeful.

That illusion lasted for a day. Not even that. Because Sajid, she found, was not a man to give her time to settle in. He did not care to wait, could not be patient.

He had three brothers, each with his own brood of children. There were hands aplenty to work in the fields and the house. Sajid did not need to go out to work if he was not in the mood to do so. If he felt like it, he could spend all day lolling on his charpai, sucking at his hookah. Drinking chai. Gossiping with passersby.

Or, now that he had a bride, teaching her to be a wife, a slave.

He was brutal. If she did not please him—and she never did—he would hit her, wrap her plait around his arm and pull, while he held her body down with his other hand. There would be curses. Burning beedis stubbed out on her thighs, her tiny girl-breasts. And if his body betrayed him, proving it did find her attractive, there would still be curses. Sana wondered, in a haze of pain and humiliation, why women married if this was what married life was like.

His extended family, all of them inhabiting the same sprawling set of rooms, were no family at all, not to her. 'Paro,' they called her. Not Sana, not bhabhi. Paro. Initially, Sana had been confused. Paro had been the pet name of one of her old childhood friends, Parvati.

'My—my name is Sana,' she finally said one day, while she was helping Sajid's eldest sister-in-law draw water. 'Not Paro.'

The woman was so amused, she let go of the rope. The bucket, heavy with water, went crashing into the depths of the well, carrying the rope with it. Racing through Sana's fingers, leaving a rope burn so fierce it brought tears to her eyes.

'You are a fool,' the woman had said, in an almost awed voice, as if marvelling at Sana's stupidity. 'Don't you know what a paro is? A stolen woman, a bought bride. That's what you are. Little better than a whore. Don't forget it.' And with one vicious tug at the pulley, she had started to haul up the bucket. 'What are you staring at? You're here to work, not gape.'

And work she did. Sweeping and washing, cooking and cleaning. Milking the goats, cutting fodder for the buffalo, doing the million tasks—each more backbreaking, more tedious and filthy than the last—the house and fields entailed. She mended clothes, collected dung and mixed it with chaff to form into thin cakes for fuel. She looked after Sajid's nephews and nieces, and massaged their mothers' legs after lunch, so that the women could have a siesta. She weeded and harvested. She watched Sajid flirt with a passing girl. She tried not to flinch when he saw her watching him and pounced on her. 'Who do you think you're staring at?' She cried when he snatched up the sickle and raked it across her forearm before dragging her to the kitchen to rub salt into the wound.

By the time she was twenty and mother to three children, Sana had stopped crying. Sajid had not stopped hitting her, his relatives had not stopped wounding her in every way they could, but she had hardened. Motherhood had frozen her, down to the core, because she had realized that if her children saw her crying, their distress was too much for

her to bear. Their crying also angered Sajid. 'Why is Abdul crying? Can't you keep him quiet? What's wrong with you?'

You. You are the one who has blighted my life, made me what I am today. If I lie in bed, still and useless, my limbs no longer capable of anything, it is because of you. I was wrong when I blamed it on the old man, Basheer—he was just the start of it. I cannot even blame it on Usman, really, who was the first link in the chain. It is all because of you. My helplessness, the anger that gnaws into me. God damn you.

And she had realized she would never go back to the village by the Brahmaputra. For those first few years, even as she sweated and bled her life into the dusty earth of Sajid's village, there had been a glimmer of hope. Some vague dream that one day she would have enough money to buy a train ticket—no, four tickets, for she could not leave her children—to her home.

That dream had faded with time. She had grown up, had realized that it would never happen. When Sajid did not give her enough money even for her to buy a handful of peanuts for the children, when the only clothes he had bought for her in five years was just one salwar-kurta, the rest all cast-offs—how could she hope for money to go home? So she settled in, her body scarred and battered, her being centred on one thing alone: to bring up her children the right way.

I remember the day my sons ganged up on me. The eldest was—what? Thirteen? The youngest not more than eight. Thin, rangy village boys, tough, ruthless. My boys. I had felt pride. This was the way I had wanted my boys to be, not bowing to authority. Fearless.

I had not imagined it would be my authority they would

defy. I had said to the eldest, 'Where are you three off to? Always running off when you're needed.' I had held out a hand to the youngest, and he had jerked it away. I had not, then, thought it serious, so I had merely said, 'Very well. You two,'—the two younger ones—'Go into the fields and fetch me six bhuttas. I want the corn nice and ripe, make sure you don't get me hard kernels. And you, Abdul, go to Rahim Tau's and tell him I want Rehana to come and press my legs.'

'Press your legs yourself.'

I had been so infuriated, I had hit out at him with anything that came to hand. My fists, a shoe, a stick that stood propped against a nearby wall to chase away dogs. I opened a gash in his cheek where my ring hit him. I left bruises on his thin body. I should have killed him.

If I had killed him then, he would not be treating me like this now.

The day I collapsed on the stairs and came to, only to find I could not speak or move, I had thought my condition would make my sons change their minds. That it would be a reconciliation. After all, a parent is a parent.

I was wrong. And you, Sana, the vile mother of these vile sons of mine, the perpetrator of these crimes against your own husband: you are the one who has brought them up to hate me, their father. I rue the day I bought you from Basheer. I rue the day Usman told me about you. Paro, indeed. I gave fifteen thousand for you, and look what you have brought me. Nothing but pain.

Abdul turns, walks away. I hear his laughter, light and happy, as he talks to his mother in the courtyard. Sana's voice is faint, but I can hear the triumph in it. The ease, the sense of entitlement. She thinks of herself no longer

as my wife, but as the mother of Abdul and Yusuf and Mohammad. And to them, she is the only parent.

I am nothing.

Author's note: An estimated 10 lakh trafficked brides, known as 'paros' or 'molkis', are believed to live in the states surrounding Delhi. Nearly all share stories similar to Sana's.