

1 *March 1967:* *The Guava Tree*

THE GUAVA TREE was short and spare. Its trunk twisted. As though a *dhobi* tired at the end of the day had not had enough energy to give the wash a final vigorous airing after wringing it free of moisture. It also did not bear fruit every year. For some reason, the guava tree bore fruit only every few years. Sometimes years passed by and there was nothing. Till one fine morning—in any given season—you might wake up to see tiny green berries hanging from the branches. Tiny green berries crowned with tiny white flowers. There was really nothing quite like the smell of the guava tree in bloom. After the rains it was even better. Then, the fresh young leaves unfurled their tight spiral. And burst open. Eager to participate in everything.

The neighborhood children had a strange bond with the guava tree. Though there were flowers and vines and grass in the garden, they only noticed the guava tree. Just like the sparrows that jockeyed for position on its delicate branches.

peck peck peck

The children delighted in sneaking into the yard and cutting into the delicately veined, light-green, tiny leaves and the tiny pouch-shaped buds. One by one the children dug deep with their jagged and dirty little nails till they tore through the surface, a satisfying dirty green beneath the nails with remaining fiber and pigment sticking to their hands. Mmm, it was fresh, that smell. It was a

miracle of course that any buds survived these attacks at all. In time, however, the surviving buds became bigger, changing color from a soft green to a darker green hardened, nut-like substance till they turned a soft, voluptuous yellow. Then, everyone agreed that, though drooping with weight, the guava tree was a magnificent sight.

That was in the daytime; at night, it was another story. Unlike the pipal tree at the end of the road whose adventitious roots, huge trunk, and dense dark leaves were said to house *djinns* and *bhoots*, there were no such stories attached to the little guava tree. Nonetheless, in the dark, the children swore they could see faces lurking between its branches. The silvery gray moon, on a clear night bright and shiny like a freshly minted coin or behind the shadows of a heavy gray cloud lying dull, seemed to invite interpretation. Just like the clouds at night could terrorize with their floating shapes across the sky, so could this little guava tree. This nature call was even darker and more mysterious during certain times of the year. On a full moon night, the giant ball hung in the sky like a drunken paper moon draping the backdrop of the local *nautanki* theater curtain—a dull, red-gold disk a little mysterious, very unreal—and threw an extra penetrating ray of burnished molten copper through the jigsaw of branches and leaves. During *amavas*, the moon disappeared to play hide-and-seek with the children. This was worse. A known enemy is easier to handle than an unknown one. The darkness, relieved only by ill-lit streets, added fresh faces in the tree. At all times, if you looked hard enough you could find the shapes of people you knew in the shapes of the leaves. As the breeze blew, these shapes swayed and spoke. The brisker the breeze, the more the branches leaned forward to whisper and sigh secret messages into the children's ears. The shapes of the dead from afar did not bother the children; it was the shapes of the people they had known that scared them more. They had heard stories of how these spirits—if angered—could inhabit *their* bodies and take over their lives. So they were afraid.

The low front walls of houses as well as the open windows created an imperfect boundary between the houses and the street. So that

everywhere there were voices. Tears and laughter. Voices raised in anger or gentled in love. And there were smells. Pungent and sweet. Sour like a sudden burp after eating *chaat* or aromatic like the incense sticks burning at an altar. Every day, the competing sounds and smells of food being cooked in kitchens (of the piercing quality of the pressure cooker's periodic whistle or the first surprised searing of slightly moist vegetables as they were dipped into hot oil) and grown-ups standing around in groups and little girls jumping rope or playing hopscotch and little boys working on their batting averages and balloon sellers and the Kwaliti ice cream man and the Gaylord ice cream man and the *chaat* wallah and the *paan* wallah and the *dhobi* and the meandering vegetable and fruit sellers and shoe menders and the stray cats and dogs and the (large number of) dogs and (hardly any) cats that were not stray and cows (dropping dung cakes) that had been brought (dragged) in to sanctify a new home and cows that had no business to be there and the occasional squealing pig who had made a rash and foolish bid to escape the butcher's block and bicycles with three wheels and bicycles with two wheels and bicycles that had no wheels at all but were yet dragged around by one end of a handle like a prized trophy and motor vehicles going at a stately pace and over the residential speed limit and birds and jets swooping and swirling (dropping small black cones or splats of thick green with white centers), all melted into a carnival in the street. A little less at times, a little more at others.

And so the grown-ups did not really know of the fears or the separate little sub-life the children seemed to live playing till late under the flickering yellow light of the streetlamp with its inebriated metal hat waving madly in the wind. If they had known, perhaps the fears could have been nipped in the bud. As it was, the secret had survived among the children for a long time and was not likely to be dispersed in any great hurry.

The guava tree grew in the front yard of the Chaddha house. It was the last house on the street; the street, a cul-de-sac. The street turned on itself and led to another row of houses around the right corner. Here, there was a huge public park in front where mem-

bers of the RSS held their *shakha* every morning at dawn in long khaki shorts to perform light exercises. Their thin, hairy legs and knobby knees peeked cheekily over long socks and uncomfortable shoes.

The park was surrounded by a fence of short, vertical metal spikes that stood firmly in cement broken only in two places. The local government had tried to make fancy, U-shaped cement curves in the gaps to control traffic, but somehow these never stayed intact. There was no formal gate anymore; to new residents, the jagged concrete on the ground over which people stumbled at the entry was a mystery. Situated in the middle of one length of the park was a bald, square face with two lidless eyeballs and a single ear. Two times during the day, at dawn and in the late afternoon, the ear flapped open and the eyeballs rolled forward to thrust glass bottles—branded hollowly by DMS, brimful of milk squeezed into them, and protected only by a fine, silvery-blue foil—toward the noisy lines of people who appeared out of nowhere in the neighborhood only to disappear a few hours later. All around the park, on the inside of the metal fence, was dense shrubbery. On one side, however, from time to time, laborers would dig holes as though preparing the ground for fresh planting. A few weeks later, they replaced the mud. Then the process began all over again.

When the rains filled the holes with muddy water, the excited children rushed out to sail their paper boats. But, more hindered less encouraged by spindly wooden stems, the boats usually sank before reaching the other side. When the rare boat, soaked and sinking, managed to get to the other side, the park rang with the cry of victory.

It was a good location for a house. The school-bus stop could be seen from their front veranda. They would be able to see their children playing games like *langri-taang* before boarding the school bus every morning. It was a nice little neighborhood and reasonably affordable. That had been the extent of their concerns when the Chaddhas agreed to purchase the modest, two-bedroom house in Bengali Market, an up-and-coming quiet neighborhood tucked neatly behind Connaught Place. As for the guava tree, they

had inherited it from the previous owner. At first they had considered cutting it down to prevent it from blocking the view from the drawing-room window, but somehow they had never got around to doing that. Soon, it became as much a part of their household as any other member and it became unthinkable to get rid of it.

For the seven-year-old Amardeep, the guava tree became a powerful tool in his frequent battles with his sister, Amrita. Having discovered her susceptibility to suggestion, he learned to use that knowledge wisely and to his advantage. In fact, it was he who introduced her to the people who lived in the tree. First, there was “Witchni,” the woman who lived at the other end of their street. She was unfailingly mean to the caroling children every *lohri*. The moment she heard sounds of *Sunder munder i-e ho*, she double-barred her doors, shut her windows, and screamed to the children to stop making a racket and get out. Then, there was “Midwife,” who lived two blocks away. She was not really a midwife; she was a housewife who could be seen daily striding (chest out, shoulders straight, hair only slightly askew) to the temple—carrying a covered plate and a tiny, child’s basket made of woven strands of plastic and full of roughly plucked marigold petals. But one year a mistake had been made by the local housing association in their printing of the residents’ names and occupations in the directory. It could be said that the neighbors did not try very hard to rectify their mistake. In any case, the name had stuck. Everyone knew that she too never let go of an opportunity to scream at and abuse the children. While the grown-ups were not unaware of these anti-social neighbors, there was little they could do to correct them. So the children took the matter in their own hands. One night they made rough effigies of their enemies and carried a procession around the park shouting slogans against them. “Witchni *hai hai*, Midwife *hai hai*.” Though the procession did not last long and almost all of the children got into trouble for their behavior, the children had succeeded where no grown-up had. They had successfully relegated their terror, while still alive, into the tree.

“Look, Amu, did you see that?” Amardeep asked his sister one night as both of them sat on the floor in the drawing room finishing

their homework. It was nine thirty at night and, according to custom, their parents were out taking a walk.

“What is it?” Amrita did not look up from her careful task of tracing a human skeleton for a General Science class.

“Look quick-ly or you might missit—like all important things.”

This crack got her attention as Amardeep knew it would. “I do **NOT** miss...,” Amrita raised her head and voice to answer her brother and successfully lost her place on paper. Irritated more than ever, she turned on him. “Now look what you’ve made me do.” Her hair, constricted briefly on top of her head within the twists of a red rubber band that had glittering golden thread around it, flowed down in a thick ponytail like the Ganga from the confines of Shiva’s twisted locks. Each time she moved her head, her hair moved with her in double emphasis.

“I didn’t do anything. You did it yourself. Anyway, it’s only a stupid trace, you can do it a-gain.” And Amardeep pulled her ponytail. It was Ganga rushing down madly from the mountaintop.

“Don’t do *that*.” Amrita reached her five-stemmed hand to his leg before he could move away. A red-laned highway immediately linked the ankle to the knee. She continued, “Not before Mummy-Papa get back, I can’t.” With this she returned to her homework for Mrs. Simons’ class.

The time for procrastination was obviously over. Amardeep knew that he had to get his prey with the element of surprise if he wanted to have the right impact. Their parents were expected back home soon. So it had to be now. “There are faces in the tree,” he blurted without any finesse.

“Ev-eryone knows that.”

“I’m not talking of the pipal tree, youninny.”

“Which tree then? Not ours?” Just that afternoon she had been playing under the tree and she did not like the suggestion her brother was making. So her reaction was immediate as he knew it would be. He had to pursue his advantage.

“Of course ours.”

“No there aren’t. I asked MummyPapa.”

“You didn’t. Anyway, they don’t know ev-erything.”

“They do.”

“They don’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Look, see for yourself. That shape in the right corner. Come, look at it from my seat,” he generously offered.

Langoors. Angoors. Like laburnums.

Peering through the green-painted, horizontal, metal grille of the drawing-room window, at first Amrita just saw a dark mass, which she knew to be a cluster of leaves. But egged on by Amardeep, under his direction and by squinting hard and long, sure enough Amrita soon found a shape lurking in the shadows. As she saw something move, right in front of her the dark mass began taking a recognizable shape. She wondered how she hadn’t noticed it before.

“It looks a bit like...”

“Yes, I know.” There was no need to complete the sentence. They both knew who that shape resembled.

“Can it hear us?” Amrita asked.

Brother and sister talked with the confidence of childhood. Snatching at life to peek into the eye of fear. And giving it a name. For language was their secret friend. It was young like them with round eyes, round mouths, round planes, and edges of words yet in awe of discovering their form and round with the expectation of meaning.

They played along.

History lay splattered like chewed betel-nut leaves. Memory lay close, curled under the guava tree in moonlight. And hard hats hung with cricket hats, up on the hook or on heads not around hearts. For love and hate had not yet differentiated themselves by a garb of blood.

But Amardeep hadn’t really thought his plan through beyond scaring his sister a little bit. He should have known that he couldn’t really win. Though they were only eleven months apart, he was always expected to be protective of and responsible for his sister. It had something to do with the fact that he was a boy. Mummy-Papa had told him that. And Guptauncle. And, who else...? For a

moment he let his mind wander till he realized that almost every grown-up had told him so. Somehow, despite the many lectures, he had never quite grasped the concept; he of course understood that that was something he must never share with any adult. For another fleeting moment he allowed himself to wonder who was supposed to look after him? But no, only sissies worried about that, and he was not a sissy. Now, once again, he would have to pay for not fulfilling his father's expectations. Meanwhile, separate from Amardeep's fears, Amrita continued to look for and find even more faces in the tree. When Amardeep tried to change the subject he found Amrita would not let him. He hadn't bargained for this kind of success. It had backfired of course.

In the days to follow, while he was able to use this fear to get Amrita to do little tasks for him, he, in turn, had to take over the role of Amrita's escort and guardian. Like a shadow. More truly, a shadow double. Formed by the split graphite point of an imperfectly sharpened pencil. At first, only apprehensive alone around the pipal tree, now, she grew to be afraid of all trees. She could not or would not go anywhere alone after dark. (Everyone knew that in the daytime the people dwelling in the trees had no power.)

In any case, the guava tree brought brother and sister close together in partnership.

2 *June 1985: And Justice for All*

WHEN GURMEHAR AND Kundan returned to the house, Gurmehar rushed straight into their bedroom to change his clothes. Kundan rushed after him, stopping only briefly to pick up the day's mail. Getting into a comfortable *kurta pajama*, Gurmehar turned almost listlessly to Kundan.

"Anything important?"

"Just this from the insurance company," and she handed Gurmehar an envelope.

"Hmm."

"What is it?"

"They are processing the information about the accident. They have received all the details, policy numbers, et cetera, et cetera... you know...to check for the third-party insurance and all that, of the buses. It's just that there are so many accidents of this kind that they have to double-check the authenticity of each claim. Recent violence has aggravated the issue. Increasingly, insurance companies are becoming wary of false claims and big payments so they have their own team of lawyers check out everything." Dealing daily with such claims himself, Gurmehar knew well how difficult it could be, and how long, for the aggrieved party to receive reimbursement.

Putting the envelope down, he said, "I think I'll go for a little walk—alone."

“Now?” Kundan moved forward, placing her palm on his shoulder. When he looked at her, she continued, “Don’t do this to yourself.”

“I can’t help it. I just can’t.” Gurmehar could feel his blood begin to boil. “Maybe a walk will help.”

“You can’t know everything,” Kundan pressed her palm over Gurmehar’s shoulder. But feeling him tense, she let him go. “Okay. But don’t be too long. I’ll wait tea for you.”

It was early evening and the streets belonged to the children at this time. Dodging ill-aimed cricket balls, Gurmehar paced up and down the streets of the neighborhood, replaying in his mind the verdict he had just heard: “In the absence of sufficient proof, the court declares the Defense not guilty.” Sufficient proof? Hadn’t they gone over the details? Weren’t they self-evident? The case had been so clear-cut. Something was not right. Vikas Khanna’s presentation of the case had been less than strong. He didn’t argue for very long and he hardly cross-examined the witnesses. But even before that...something had not seemed right for a while. What was it...? Khanna had been acting furtively, as though not entirely sharing everything. Very suspicious. What about that day when Khanna had called him to his office? He had seemed ill at ease. He kept talking of an out-of-court settlement. What did that have to do with him? Khanna’s proposition was ridiculous, but he never doubted his integrity. And what about the fire at the Police Station? Some records were lost, the Inspector said. But nothing important, he insisted. They still had witnesses. And who were those two witnesses who claimed they had seen Amrita laughing and chatting with some men at the bus stop? Saying that she had been focusing on looking and waving at them when she got on the bus and not paying attention to safety. When he left the courthouse with Kundan, Amrita was waiting alone in her wheelchair. Looking sideways at the Inspector standing aloof in the shadows. Hand cupped in a tight fist like a funnel, he was inhaling the cigarette smoke in long drags, exhaling it through his nose in a rush. What will happen to Amrita?

Suddenly, Gurmehar felt a shooting pain in his right leg, just above the knee. He stopped for a moment to see if he had stepped

over something. But there was nothing. Rubbing his hand gently over his calf to ease the pain, he continued his walk.

Till now Gurmehar had never had to work with lawyers, and so when he heard Vikas Khanna, the Public Prosecutor, had the right credentials and the right number of years of experience working with criminal cases, he had felt relieved.

Now they had just lost their case. The Metropolitan Magistrate had announced that as they had been unable to establish the burden of responsibility upon the Defense, the Defense was absolved of all charges.

Was Vikas Khanna influenced by the Defense? And the Police Inspector? Neither of them sounded convincing in their reports, Gurmehar mentally flagellated himself for the hundredth time.

Once again he remembered his visit to Khanna’s office.

Gurmehar had been waiting outside Vikas Khanna’s office for fifteen minutes. Khanna’s office was located in one of the older buildings on a side street. It was the standard yellow of government buildings. Though the color was not really discernible where the west corner was covered with huge *jamun* trees that dripped rain water and leaves and bird shit that all ran down the side in a greenish-black slime. Two rusty, iron gutter pipes ran down the side of the building. Where there were tiny holes in the pipes, the unsuspecting passerby was sprayed by a thin coating of dark froth and occasional flakes of rotted iron. The pipes led into a metal-grille-covered trough in the ground. The gap between the gutters and the trough caused the water to splash all around, creating a puddle of still water coated by a floating mass of green scum with its very own population of mosquitoes and flies.

There was no boundary wall and no gate to the building. A few scooters and motorcycles could be seen parked in the back at a little distance from a happy-red Maruti and a pouty-white Ambassador with the Government of India plates. Looking at the Maruti, Gurmehar closed his eyes momentarily as he felt a sudden darkness descend upon him. Like a blackout. At a forced vasectomy. Almost imperceptibly he winced, raising his left leg in front of him