

# Ashes of Hope



Malika Gandhi

I am a mother of two boys. I began to write when I was at university, and I have not stopped since then.

I have attended a creative writing class, and went to the Annual Writer's conference that takes place in Winchester (United Kingdom) every year. It was the most exciting writing experience I have had.

I would love to travel widely, and to write as my main job.

Email: [malika\\_c\\_gandhi@hotmail.com](mailto:malika_c_gandhi@hotmail.com)

*Editor's note: This contribution is historical fiction.*

## Chapter One

26<sup>th</sup> January 1943

Chottu,

*I don't know where to start this letter; maybe by saying I am sorry. Sorry, to not have been there when you needed me most, sorry to have got myself in this situation, and sorry to cause you, Ma, and Babuji much sadness and grief.*

*This is my last letter to you and I just want to say a few things. Maybe it will make it clear to you, and hopefully, in time, you will forgive me. I don't know how much I am allowed to tell you here...it is risky...but it needs to be said.*

*We had a good life once, we were happy. But it all started to go wrong when the Raj raised the tax. Dadu was a good farmer and he was an honest man. He worked day and sometimes, late into the evening on the field. Babuji, would leave his books and help him when the work got too much. I remember Ba would be ready with hot chai and food, when they came home. Ma didn't interfere in these affairs, but I could tell she was concerned.*

*Dadu became unwell after a while and he was told to rest. Babuji stopped school and began to work instead. Times were hard. Babuji pleaded with the tax collector to take less, but was only laughed at. The crops that were taken meant that we didn't have enough left to feed, and clothe us all. With hardly anything to sell, Babuji came home with very little money.*

*Dadu grew thinner and he became increasingly worried. A few years passed and we struggled on. Then the Raj raised the tax again, this time a lot higher. Dadu couldn't take it, and he had a heart attack. He didn't survive...I will never forget Babuji's heartbreak. Dadu was everything to him and he cried for days. Ba was a lot stronger, she and Ma put a brave face on things and encouraged Babuji to look ahead.*

*Babuji spent a lot of time thinking after Dadu's death and one day he made his decision: he would sell the crop farm and move to Bombay for new work. You were only three when this happened, but I was a lot older. I will never forgive the Raj for what they did to our family, and our lives.*

*And I suppose, this is why I am here. Chottu, Don't be sad. I have made good friends here.*

*I am leaving the letter here; I can hear someone coming.*

*Remember Chottu, I love you and I will always be with you.*

*Jai Hind!*

Bhai

### ***The Basement***

16 August 1942, Villlage of Rajkot.

State of Gujarat, India

Dev walked behind his elder brother, excitement building up inside him. This time, he was actually allowed to come. After months and months of waiting, Rakesh had relented and said, 'yes!' Wrapping his arms around himself, he walked closer.

'Bhai, where are we going?' Dev asked.

'I'll tell you in good time, Chottu. All in good time,' said Rakesh. His face was tense and hard in concentration.

'Do you believe India will have her Independence?' Dev asked as they trudged along silently in the night.

'Yes, I believe she will.'

'What are we going to talk about at the meeting? Who else will be there?'

‘So many questions! Chottu, listen to me,’ Rakesh stopped walking and turned round to face his brother. ‘I can’t say anything here. If someone overhears our conversation, there is bound to be trouble. I want to make one thing clear: this is serious, if word gets out what we are going to do; we could be arrested or maybe worse. I will answer any questions when we get there, for now, be silent.’

Rakesh was nervous but kept calm in front of Dev. He didn’t know why Dilip had wanted to see him so urgently. He was cross, surely it could wait. It was difficult to leave the house and he didn’t like to lie to Ma. His behaviour didn’t help either, he knew he had become moody and didn’t talk as much like he used to. His parents were bound to notice something was not right here.

And then there was Dev. Always inquisitive. It was becoming difficult to distract him away from these affairs but Dev was relentless. Well, he hoped he had made the right choice in allowing Dev to come along.

The brothers trudged pass the village houses; which glowed faintly inside, their oil lamps slowly dying out. A few cows made some noise as they approached the cow house, but no one was around. Rakesh was relieved. The river whispered its greetings - it was peaceful and Rakesh enjoyed the moon’s reflected light which bounced off it.

The darkness became dense, like a heavy curtain had fallen on them but still, Rakesh could not light the oil lamp he was carrying. With the help of the moonlight, Rakesh was able to see the road, although faintly.

Dev was beginning to feel cold and tired, and rubbed his arms. He wished he had brought something warm with him. They were out of the village now, and had entered a long stretch of road. Here, there was no barking from wild dogs, no baying from silly goats and no shouting. Only the river accompanied them, as it ran alongside.

Another hour passed and finally, a house came into view. It was derelict; the windows were boarded up and the roof was in a bad state of much needed repair. The building was made of stone but the white paint was now black with dust and neglect.

‘The entrance is at the back. Keep low,’ Rakesh whispered. He looked left and right, and then disappeared behind the house. Dev followed. Rakesh pushed the door and it creaked open, he brushed passed it causing red flakes of paint to fall on his white kurti. He headed straight towards another

room. Dev could see nothing when he came into the house. He let his eyes adjust to the gloom inside, and found a blank room. He followed Rakesh to the second room.

‘How long has this house been empty?’ asked Dev.

‘For twenty years. They say the people moved away.’

‘Why?’

‘They said it gave them bad luck. So, now no one is willing to live here, which is good for us.’

‘Who else is coming?’ Dev said once again.

‘Dilip. He said he will meet us in the basement,’ Rakesh checked the time.

‘Where is it?’

‘What?’ Rakesh was distracted.

‘The basement.’

‘Oh. The basement should be here.’

Rakesh pointed to a trap door, which Dev was standing on. Stepping back, Dev peered down. Volumes of dust covered it; he was surprised to see it at all. Rakesh opened it, and then lit the oil lamp. Carefully, they climbed down.

‘Two chairs, a table, a pack of playing cards and empty beer bottles. Bhai, was this place used to gamble?’ Dev said loudly, taking the cards, and shuffling them.

‘Dev! Not so loud. Didn’t I say, keep low. And put that down.’

‘Sorry.’

‘This basement has been a meeting place for quite some time now. It’s a refuge, and it must be used with discretion. It is not like home, or an office or school, where you can come and go as you please. Everything needs to be planned and monitored at all times.’

‘How?’ asked Dev.

‘We have other people on the lookout.’

‘Even now?’

‘Yes.’

Rakesh was part of a non-violent, freedom group. Alongside Dilip, there were two others who played an important part: Manoj and Namdev. Two very good friends who were excellent for the jobs that needed doing. The four did everything together, from planning to action. Dilip was the ring leader, Rakesh was in charge of printing materials, Manoj dealt with surveillance and Namdev supplied materials needed for explosives and other things.

‘Manoj and Namdev are already watching this house. If police are seen coming our way, they will alert us with a wail, or they will hoot. We stay here until the way is clear.’

‘Do you...are you scared, Bhai?’

‘We are always scared.’ Rakesh increased the flame a little.

They both head a noise upstairs.

‘Chottu, did you hear that?’

‘Yes, do you think it was the police?’

‘No, it can’t be. They would make a lot more noise than that. May have been a mouse.’

Dev released his grip on his brother. He tried to suppress a yawn, Dilip was surely taking his time.

‘Maybe you shouldn’t have come,’ Rakesh said looking at Dev’s tired face.

‘I wanted to.’

‘It was reckless of me, bringing you along.’

‘I am nineteen!’

‘Nineteen, and still young.’

They heard a different kind of noise this time. They froze.

‘Is that Dilip?’ said Dev, his heart pounding.

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘I think we should leave. Something is wrong, I can feel it, Bhai.’

‘Shh. Let’s wait and see. Dilip said he will be here, and so he shall.’ There was an edge in Rakesh’s voice.

Time ticked on. Dev glanced at his watch. It was past midnight now.

‘Do you think Ma knows we are not at home?’ Dev asked.

‘We will be home before dawn, she will not awake until then.’

The trap door opened and Dilip appeared.

‘Good. You two are here. Sorry I am late,’ Dilip said climbing down.

‘We have been here for over an hour, Dilip. Where were you? We heard a noise upstairs! We thought it was the police!’ Rakesh hissed.

‘Look, I said I was sorry. I got held up. It’s difficult getting away when you have a wife and three children.’

‘I suppose. Anyway, what was the urgency?’

‘This.’ Dilip took out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and laid it out on the table. He blew away the dust and brought the lamp nearer, illuminating the writing. Suddenly, it looked all too serious for Dev.

‘How many know about this?’ Rakesh asked.

‘So far, just us.’

‘What is it?’ Dev asked.

‘It’s a pamphlet. To do with the Quit India campaign,’ said Dilip.

Dev had seen a lot of these ‘pamphlets’ circulating the village already...the full impact of what Rakesh was doing, hit him hard.

‘Don’t do it, Bhai. You will be arrested.’ There was a quiver in Dev’s voice.

‘I told you Chottu, I have to.’

Dilip looked at Rakesh in surprise. ‘I thought you said he was ready for this?’

‘I thought he was,’ said Rakesh.

Dilip turned to Dev. ‘You shouldn’t have come. This is too much for you to handle. Rakesh, I think we should not include Dev in this.’

‘No, no. I will...I can do it,’ said Dev.

‘If you are not confident, I don’t want you to get involved. This is important work which must be completed in discretion. It is risky and only if you are able to, you should help. Personally, I don’t think you are ready for such a commitment,’ said Dilip.

Dev turned red. ‘I am not a coward.’

Dilip beckoned Rakesh away, and began to whisper. Dev knew they were talking about him. Pretending not to notice, he snatched the pamphlet off the table and began to read.

Students: Fellow Indians

Be Indian in both culture and life

Boycott schools and colleges

Send foreigners away

Boycott all national newspapers

Organise the freedom movement in towns and villages

Educate the children and the public

Paralyse Raj services

Persuade Raj servants to quit their jobs

Damage lorries carrying troops and war goods

Cut communication wires and remove rails.

JAI HIND!

Dev finished reading before his brother and Dilip came back.

‘You know the risks. I need you to be one hundred percent sure of this Dev, you can’t back out when you want to. We need help in getting this material around colleges and you are the link. Your brother tells me you are connected with the right crowd? If so, this will be very easy for you,’ Dilip said. ‘You will need to start off with people who you can trust and who will give you support. No one must be connected to the authorities of any kind - no teachers, politicians, police or official servants of the Raj.

If this,’ Dilip waved the pamphlet in the air, ‘reaches the wrong hands...well, you know what could happen. Jail is definite. You cannot afford to be careless and you must be on your guard at all times. Will you be able to handle this? I need to be sure.’

‘Yes,’ Dev said confidently.

‘In that case, Rakesh – take this to Khan and get two hundred printed for now. I will need to see you in private tomorrow, not here...I will tell you when I find a place. We have other things to do.’

‘What other things. Can I come too?’ asked Dev, eager to please.

‘No,’ Dilip said curtly.

‘But-’

‘Enough Dev,’ said Rakesh.

‘It’s time to leave. Wait here, I will look if it is safe to go,’ Dilip opened the trap door. After his signal, Rakesh and Dev followed.

Lost in their own thoughts, no one noticed how quickly they reached the village.

They bade goodbye to each other and went home, Rakesh and Dev in one direction, Dilip in the other.

---

© Malika Gandhi 2009