

Faction

'I am Leaving Now'

*Speak softly to the silence
The word you are looking for is Love
Keep the word*
John Stokes

Brij V. Lal

The day Devi committed suicide, she took her two young children, seven and five, to her estranged husband's house a few kilometres down the road from where she lived. A violent argument ensued between the two about the money he, Dinesh, owed her. 'If you ever come here again, I will cut you up like meat and throw it in the sea for the fishes to feed on,' Dinesh said menacingly. Devi dashed to her car, retrieved a vegetable paring knife she always carried in the glove compartment, and stabbed it several times on the kitchen table, demanding the money. 'Nothing will stop me now,' she shouted through gritted teeth. 'I don't care anymore.' Devi was hysterical, as if possessed, in a mental state when anything could have happened.

Dinesh sprinted into the bedroom, locking the door behind him and called the police, who arrived within minutes. Devi was then driven to the local police station, interviewed, charged, fingerprinted and released. The details of the conversation are patchy, but the police noted her very disturbed, agitated frame of mind, her incoherent recollection of events leading to the altercation. They warned her not to contact Dinesh nor visit his residence until further notice. They then called Devi's sister, Sushila, who picked her up and took her to her house. Devi was sobbing uncontrollably as she sat down with a cup of tea. 'I cannot go on like this, Jij,' Sushila recalled Devi saying, deeply humiliated to be in this state in front of her two young children. 'What future will I be giving them,' she asked. 'I've done so much for this man and he has just given me over to the police. Why?'

Devi could not be left on her own, Sushila realized, and asked her to stay at her house for a few days until things calmed down. She drove Devi to her house to pick up clothing for the two children and her anti-

depressants and pain killers for her migraines. While Sushila was in the bedroom comforting the children and getting their clothes packed, Devi quietly disappeared into the kitchen, shutting the door behind her.

Noticing the silence, Sushila called out for Devi. When there was no immediate response, she rushed into the kitchen, and saw her sister with 'copious amounts of multi-coloured tablets,' gulping them down with glasses of water. As Sushila tried to snatch the pills Devi was holding in her hands, Devi fainted and fell to the kitchen floor. Sushila immediately called for an ambulance, which arrived about half an hour later. It didn't occur to her to drive her to the hospital herself. Devi was still conscious, but only just, as she was lifted into the ambulance. In a faint voice, she said to Sushila, 'I am very sorry, Jij' Devi said to Sushila in a voice faint with pain. 'I am leaving now. Please look after my children for me.' By the time the ambulance arrived at the hospital, Devi's condition had deteriorated. She died three hours later, without gaining consciousness.

I went to her funeral. Only a handful of people, mostly friendly neighbours and a few colleagues from work, turned up for the funeral. Suicide can have such a traumatic, haunting, effect on people, a sudden, unnatural act of despair that they prefer to stay away from saying the final goodbye. And Devi was too young to go, only in her late thirties, with two young children. People said polite things, as they do on these occasions, remembering a shy, withdrawn woman, slight and prematurely aged with furrowed forehead; but beyond that, there was very little. There was nothing to say.

Dr Linkletter, the local coroner, was more forthcoming when I saw him at the Lakeside Hospital the day after the funeral. 'Dopthlepin toxicity, self-inflicted,' he said, when I enquired about the cause of death. 'In layman's language, Doc' I pleaded. 'Drug overdose,' he replied. Devi knew about drugs: she was a nursing aid. 'Any clues, tell-tale signs of the impending end,' I wanted to know. Dr. Linkletter pointed to a thin brown file on his desk. 'It's all there, in black and white.' 'Can I see it?' I asked. 'No, absolutely not,' Dr Linkletter said emphatically. 'Confidential information, as you should know.'

I had travelled a long way for the funeral, and I was family. Dr Linkletter – I never found out his first name – read my mind and relented. 'You can take notes, if you want, as I summarise the situation for you.' I nodded agreement. It is a very thorough report. The immediate preceding chain of events is neatly, clinically, chronicled. It sounds all so improbable, unbelievable almost, this story of desperate, persistent hope against despair, of treachery and betrayal, of dreams gone sour, of a person fal-

ling by the wayside with no helping hand in sight.

But, sadly, it is also true, as true as the documents say they are. Truth can, indeed, be stranger than fiction, and Devi's gradual, unnoticed descent into hell that would finally claim her life would have to be among the strangest accounts of human misery I have ever encountered. I have very little to go on except bits and pieces of paper and conversations with a few who knew her, though not intimately. Yet, I have a deep urge to find out as much as I can, not only because Devi was distant family but also because her story adds a discomfiting note, a reality check, to the otherwise triumphal narratives of immigrant experience that are so commonplace in our society, especially among our people, the Indo-Fijians. The Devi I found in the records, deeply insecure, in turmoil, clutching at every passing straw, unable to reach out, is not the Devi I knew: warm, affectionate, loving. But I knew her only from a distance, and I now realize only very superficially.

I thanked Dr Linkletter for his help. In his late middle age, he seemed a serious man, with a sense of authority and purpose. 'So sad, so unnecessary, poor children,' he said to me as he prepared to leave. 'Is this sort of thing a common occurrence here,' I asked. 'Not common, I would say, but not uncommon either,' Dr Linkletter shook his head as he tapped me gently on my shoulder before leaving to attend to another casualty somewhere, another 'unnecessary incident. I realized later that suicide and general self-harm were not as uncommon in this rough part of town full of tough types and drug peddlers and recently arrived immigrants living in overcrowded government housing. I could imagine how it would be very easy to lose one's way in this labyrinth, to become dysfunctional.

A picture was forming in my mind of a woman broken by circumstances, full of suffering and quiet desperation, fearful of losing face, of dreams gone awry. I had read often enough about suicides among rural Indo-Fijian families, especially among young women, who go to excruciating deaths through drinking paraquat over failed love or extramarital affairs, accidental pregnancies, failure in exams. Suicide in Fiji I could understand because of the scarcity of hope and opportunity there and the overwhelming feeling of being caught in a permanent cul-de-sac of despair, and it is part of our heritage: Fiji had the highest suicide rate of all the Indian labour importing colonies at the turn of the 20th century. But in Australia?

I went to the police station the next day to see the police report of the death. The factual narrative based on the evidence of witnesses who 'knew the deceased,' told me what had happened. Devi had been separated from Dinesh for about two years, after a long marriage. The rupture

had shaken her to the core. She began to suffer from acute attacks of migraine and bouts of depression, exacerbated by Dinesh's 'continual long absences and affairs,' as the police report put it. In her moments of deep distress, Devi turned to her uncle and aunt for emotional support, which was always there, solid and unending. Childless themselves, they regarded Devi as their own daughter.

But then tragedy struck. Sometime in the 1990s, Aunty Ram Piyari died of cancer and two years later, Uncle Ram Jiwan passed away from complications following an unsuccessful heart surgery and long years of heavy smoking. Both knew of Devi's precarious health and the wayward ways of her husband, which is why they willed all that they had to pass as inheritance to her. With their death, Devi's social circle shrank. Sushila, her younger sister, was the only one left in Sydney for her.

Dinesh continued to prey on Devi's mind despite the separation. Devi thought she could 'induce' Dinesh back into the marriage with the inheritance that had come her way unexpectedly. Perhaps love and family life could be restored in a new form, she hoped. Dinesh judged the situation perfectly and seized the opportunity with both hands. He promised to return to the family as soon as he had established his car repair business which he was just starting. For the moment, though, could Devi please lend him money, ten thousand dollars, to buy two good second hand cars? She did, but why it is difficult to ascertain except perhaps the desperate hope of eventual reunion. Later, talking to people generally, I better understood Devi's predicament.

Divorced women and single mothers were often mocked and ostracised, viewed as sexual objects by men in the community. They needed the 'protection' of men to go about their normal lives, a man said to me. That was the natural order of things from time immemorial. The community had no place for 'rudderless vessels,' a prominent social matron pronounced. 'What kind of role model will they be for our girls?' And Devi had two young children to think of as well. But Dinesh had no desire to return to the marriage fold. He 'remained uncommitted,' as the police report put it. Devi became suicidal as her persistence hit the proverbial brick wall. 'She had been under counselling and on anti-depressants ever since' the police noted after Dinesh 'confirmed that he didn't want her.'

In October 1999, the divorce papers came through and one could reasonably suppose that the saga might end there. It did not. 'Inexplicably,' the police noted, Devi's 'ex-husband renewed his contact with her.' Dinesh was starting another new 'grooming' business and needed money to pay the down payment. He talked Devi into giving him four thousand dollars, using her car as collateral for the rest of money Dinesh borrowed

from the bank. He would return to the family as soon as he was able to, but just now, he was travelling for business and would be out of state for some time. Devi bought the story. But Dinesh, being Dinesh, did not keep up his payments, and the bank began pressing Devi on the loan. The notices began arriving around Christmas time, which accentuated Devi's depression. Christmas had always been a happy time for her when she bought lots of gifts for her children. Now there was hardly any money to buy even food. Not happiness or joy but survival, discomfort and hunger filled her days. This was when despair and desperation reached a climax, from which Devi would never recover.

I cannot say that I knew Devi well. We were in irregular contact over the years, punctuated inevitably by long absences, immediate family obligations and professional preoccupations. But especially after I returned to live in Australia, we talked regularly. Devi always remembered to send greeting cards during Christmas, Diwali, Holi, and Raksha Bandhan. This festival seemed especially important to Devi. This is the annual festival of renewal of love and support between brothers and sisters symbolized by the tying of a special string band around the brother's wrist. Devi had no brothers and I had no sisters, which deepened our relationship. She always spoke proudly to everyone about 'her brother in Canberra,' who was doing great things, was going places. She would always ring me after she saw me on television commenting on Fijian politics. In the quintessential Labasa way, she never addressed me by my name. I was always 'Bhaiya,' 'Brother,' and she was always Munki to me, the 'Little One.' Only a month before she died, she had sent me a Raksha Bandhan card and a wrist band. 'Bhaiya, I hope I will see you soon,' she had written.

Devi was Uncle Ram Prasad's eldest daughter. They lived in Tabia about two farms away from our home. She was much younger than me, entering the Tabia Sanatan Dharam Primary School just as I was finishing Grade 8 and preparing to leave for Labasa Secondary. Devi spent her weekends with us, spoilt by everyone as the only girl in the family. I helped her with her homework, and she would always accompany me to the hills nearby to fetch firewood for cooking. At home we played rounders and *gullidanda*. She was always around to accompany us on our early morning raids during the mango fruiting season. This routine was not unique; it was probably the same routine in every extended family in the village.

But things changed when I left home to go to high school in town: new place, new friends, infrequent return home visits. Mentally and emotionally, I was getting more and more removed from the place of my

childhood, exploring the world of books and ideas closed to those who remained behind. The break was almost complete when I left for university in Suva, and then overseas for further education. Upon each return, I found things had changed beyond recognition. Many old folk had moved on. Children I had terrorised as School Captain were grown-ups now, some with children of their own who called me 'Aja,' grandfather. Some new people had moved into the village, from where I had no idea. And many family members had also moved out, some to unknown parts of Viti Levu and others scattered around remote parts of Labasa, wherever land could be leased. The old settled village, with predictable habits of thought and behaviour, was almost gone.

Devi was among those who had left the village. Life had been cruel to her. Devi was not allowed to complete her secondary school, bright girl though she was, invariably near the top of her class. Ram Prasad had suffered a stroke and was bed-ridden for a long while before he died. The family was in dire financial straits. Aunty Rukmani did the odd chores in the village to earn whatever she could: washing and ironing clothes in one household, tending a vegetable garden in another, minding young children somewhere else. There was never enough in the house to go around. Paying Devi's school fees became an unbearable burden. After a year or two at home, she managed to get a trainee seamstress' job at the North Apparel Factory in town. The money wasn't much, but every little bit helped.

Then, a man, a childless widower from Waiqele, moved in with Aunty Rukmani. How this came about no one knew; he might have been someone's relative in the village. He was a no-hoper, a layabout, addicted to kava. Devi was the sole wage earner in the family, and the pressure on her increased. It was one thing to look after her mother and younger sister and quite another to take care of the needs of this new man too. It was time to move out. Devi pleaded with her boss for a job in the company's Suva factory. But there was a price to pay for the favour. Devi had to surrender herself to the boss, like so many women from broken homes who worked in the factory or as house help in the town. Devi drew a veil on that period of her life and never looked back. She had bigger things on her mind, and Suva was the place for to be.

After the coup of 1987, everyone wanted to get out of Fiji. Aging men from overseas were the prized catches for women from the garment factories. The tourists would contact the factory bosses and assess the women who worked there. If any caught their fancy, they would take her out for dinner at their hotel and spend the night with her. In many cases, that would be the first step of a long unknown journey to another destina-

tion. So many of Devi's friends had managed to escape through these 'marriages,' and those who did were constantly on the lookout for partners for their friends back in Fiji. Devi got lucky. One of her friends in Sydney had arranged for a Sri Lankan man, in his late fifties, to meet her in Suva. That 'meeting' in a Suva motel bore fruit. A few months later, Devi was on her way to Australia.

The man, George (I never found out his surname), had retired as an employee for one of the telephone companies. What George was really looking for was not a wife, a sexual partner, or a companion, but a house maid: someone to cook and clean for him, do his laundry and shopping and other such chores. Soon after marrying Devi and bringing her to Sydney, George returned to his favourite old habit of hitting the bottle hard. He was a kind man though, I learnt later, who kept a good house, but he was bored with himself and with the life around him, too bored to introduce Devi to the highlights of the city he had explored with such gusto as a new migrant. He had no interest in starting a new family with Devi; he had grown up children from his previous marriage. He was still making divorce payments to his former wife who was living a few streets down from him.

Devi was trapped. She could not escape: she knew no one in Sydney; she had no money of her own, and her citizenship papers had not come through yet. Returning to Fiji crossed her mind once or twice, but it was idle thought. She would have no face to show to her friends and former colleagues at the factory. She knew no one who had ever returned to Fiji empty-handed, and she did not want to be called a loser. Patience in the end will triumph over despair, Devi hoped. It did. Drinking did George in. His liver gave up and he died suddenly, leaving her some money and the rented apartment.

Devi returned to Fiji for a holiday a year later. It was then that she met Dinesh through one of her friends at the factory. The irony of it all was not lost on Devi. She had left Fiji as a 'factory bride,' and was now returning in search of a 'factory groom.' Dinesh was a smooth man from Ba now living and working in Suva as a taxi driver. Always on the lookout for an opportunity to escape, he saw an opening in Devi. He lavished attention on her, driving her around Suva, having coffee at the Raintree Lodge in Colo-i-Suva, lunching at the Singh's Curry Shop in central Suva. Stylishly dressed, he was knowledgeable and entertaining, a man about town. Within a week or so, he had Devi in the palms of his hands. He was full of ideas for businesses he could start in Sydney, just like that, how they would travel the world together, have a family. Their future would be an open road. Devi was hooked.

They had a quiet civil ceremony and Dinesh joined Devi in Sydney six months later. It was around then that I met him for the first time. Devi seemed very proud of him, talking up projects Dinesh was going to start soon. He was a man on the move, with big plans on his mind. He seemed to know many people around town, former friends and family who had settled in the sprawling suburbs of Western Sydney. But there was something about him that I found vaguely unendearing. Was it his affected thick Australian accent ('miite,' 'yeeah') that put me off or was it his shifty eyes, or his I-know-it-all attitude, I cannot say, but he was not my type. I had to be careful, though. What mattered most to me was Devi, and if she was happy with him, it was fine with me.

Once or twice I had asked Devi about how she was getting on, and her cryptic response was '*Kushi to accha cheez hai, Bhaiya. Sabe ke taqdeer men nahin hai.*' Happiness is a nice thing but not everyone is fortunate enough to have it.' Children came, Rohit and Rita. They visited us once or twice in Canberra, but mostly it was phone calls from Devi that kept us in touch. In truth, she was the only one in that family I cared for. On my occasional visits to Sydney, I would take her out to lunch and buy her a salwar kamiz or two at one of the Indian shops in Liverpool. It was through these meetings that I would catch up on family gossip about who was not talking to whom, who was having affairs where, whose marriage was on the rocks, whose children had flown the coop or gone off the rails, much to the puzzled amusement of my family who thought I was completely uninterested in these things.

Invariably, Devi would remind me that as the eldest living male in the entire extended family, I was her pillar and beacon, that I had obligations and responsibilities I simply could not ignore, especially to the next generation for whom I was often nothing more than a name, a voice on the radio, an image on the television screen. '*Ab hum log ke tum hi sab kutch hai.*' It was only after her death, and getting glimpses into the corner's and the police reports and talking to Sushila, that I discovered how desperately sad Devi was, how she had created a thick wall of silence to hide her mounting depression. Dinesh was straying, boasting about his 'conquests' to anyone who would listen. He made lurid passes at Indian women at social events and weddings. 'Can't you keep your husband in control', women would taunt Devi. 'Why, aren't you good enough for him? They would say. 'Tell your husband to keep his trousers zipped or we will zip it for him for good.'

Devi's sense of shame deepened at Dinesh's brazen acts of betrayal, but there was nothing she could do about it, no one she could turn to. Her remonstrations were dismissed out of hand as nothing more than jealous

emotions of an inadequate woman beyond her 'use-by date.' *Phuta pataka.*' He was only getting what he could not get at home, Dinesh would say.

It was around then that Devi's health took a turn for the worse from which she would not recover. Not that any of this mattered to Dinesh who began distancing himself from Devi and the children by staying away from home in a rented unit nearby. Now that he had Australian permanent residence, many options became available to him. On the top of his list was his old girlfriend, Radha, in Samabula. She too had been in a sham marriage which had come to a grief.

Through all these years of marriage with Devi, Dinesh and Radha had kept their love affair alive through his periodic visits to Fiji and hers to Australia on the excuse of visiting relatives. From the very beginning it was understood that Devi was nothing more than a means to an end, to be discarded as soon as Radha and Dinesh settled in Australia. That is what happened. Sadly, this kind of tragedy is not as uncommon these days as we might think. I remembered Dr Linkletter's words. Desperation runs in our veins, I suppose. Our ancestors left India in desperation in search of a better home, and our people are doing the same now.

How Devi had descended to such depths of despair and how we did not notice it. That is the question I keep asking myself. Was I too selfishly absorbed in my own world not to pick up any tell-tale signs of the impending disaster during our regular conversations? Could I have done something, anything? Was I not taking my responsibilities as the eldest surviving member of the extended family seriously enough? These unanswered questions will remain with me. Sushila was devastated. Devi had done so much for her: brought her to Australia, put her through TAFE, helped her settle down, and yet she knew so little about the turmoil in her elder sister's life. She blamed herself for Devi's death. She knew that things were awry in her marriage but had no idea how bad they really were. How much misery and pain could a human being endure? I wondered. What has become of us as a people that we don't extend a helping hand to those in need?

'If you are successful, everyone wants to be your friend,' Sushila said. 'No one wants to know failure, especially our people. We are supposed to be a model community, fluent in Australian language and culture, hardworking, highly motivated. What could possibly be wrong with us? What if you fall by the wayside? Australians have their church groups and social clubs, their extended family network, but what do we have? And we are too proud to ask for help. It will be a sign of failure.' That, in the end, is why Devi was so desperately keen to resume her relationship

with Dinesh, despite all the hurt and pain because then they would be a 'whole family' with a recognizable face in the community. Pressure on women to conform to patriarchal social norms is far greater, even in Australia, than we often realise. It dawned on me then that it was not so much that Devi wanted to die; it was the fear of living ostracized and unwanted on the margins that she could not bear to contemplate, could not share with anyone. Schopenhauer was right. 'It will generally be found that as soon as the terrors of life reach the point where they outweigh the terrors of death, a man would put an end to his life.'

*I am going now,
You said. I'll not be late.
I have given everything.*
John Stokes

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